

SUPREME COURT OF PENNSYLVANIA

Geary v. United States Steel Corporation

Geary v. United States Steel Corp., 456 Pa. 171 (1974) · Decided March 25, 1974

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania affirmed dismissal of an at-will employee's wrongful-discharge complaint. The court declined to recognize a nonstatutory cause of action on the pleaded facts, holding that an employee has no action where the complaint discloses a plausible and legitimate reason for termination and no clear public policy mandate is violated. The dissent argued that the discharge for reporting a potentially dangerous product supported a public-policy-based wrongful-discharge claim.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Pennsylvania
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Justice Pomeroy; Chief Justice Jones; Justice Eagen; Justice O'Brien; Justice Roberts; Justice Nix; Justice Mand erino
JURISDICTION	Pennsylvania
DECIDED	March 25, 1974
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Appeal from an order sustaining preliminary objections in the nature of a demurrer and dismissing with prejudice an amended complaint in trespass alleging wrongful discharge from at-will employment. The Superior Court affirmed per curiam, and the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania granted allocatur.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	On preliminary objections in the nature of a demurrer, properly pleaded facts and reasonable inferences are accepted as true, but conclusions of law are not. The question is whether the complaint states a claim upon which relief can be granted.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Pennsylvania Supreme Court majority opinion; binding precedent at the time of decision.
PARTIES	George B. Geary v. United States Steel Corporation

TOPICS

- wrongful termination
- employment at-will
- employment law
- appellate procedure
- standard of review

PRACTICE AREAS

Employment law

Torts

Appellate procedure

Remedies

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Pennsylvania should recognize a nonstatutory tort cause of action for wrongful discharge of an at-will employee based on the employer's alleged malicious, abusive, or retaliatory motive.
2. Whether Geary's amended complaint stated a claim based on public policy because he was allegedly discharged after raising safety concerns about a company product.
3. Whether the amended complaint sufficiently alleged specific intent to harm or accomplish an ulterior, proscribed purpose.

HOLDINGS

1. Where the complaint itself discloses a plausible and legitimate reason for terminating an at-will employment relationship and no clear mandate of public policy is violated, an at-will employee has no cause of action against the employer for wrongful discharge.
2. The complaint failed to state a claim because its allegations did not establish that United States Steel specifically intended to harm Geary, coerce him to violate the law, or accomplish another proscribed purpose.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"We hold only that where the complaint itself discloses a plausible and legitimate reason for terminating an at-will employment relationship and no clear mandate of public policy is violated thereby, an employee at will has no right of action against his employer for wrongful discharge." (456 Pa. at 184-85)

"The most natural inference from the chain of events recited in the complaint is that Geary had made a nuisance of himself, and the company discharged him to preserve administrative order in its own house." (456 Pa. at 180)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

George B. Geary worked for United States Steel Corporation from 1953 until July 13, 1967, as a salesperson of tubular products for the oil and gas industry. His employment was at will. He alleged that he repeatedly objected to the sale of a high-pressure tubular casing because he believed it was inadequately tested and dangerous; after the product was reevaluated and withdrawn, he was summarily discharged. He sought compensatory and punitive damages for reputational injury, mental anguish, and financial harm.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas dismissed Geary's amended complaint with prejudice after sustaining United States Steel's preliminary objections in the nature of a demurrer. The Superior Court affirmed without opinion. The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania granted allocatur and affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- *Balsbaugh v. Rowland*, 447 Pa. 423, 290 A.2d 85 (1972)
- *Engel v. Parkway Co.*, 439 Pa. 559, 266 A.2d 685 (1970)
- *Fawcett v. Monongahela R. Co.*, 391 Pa. 134, 137 A.2d 768 (1958)
- *Henry v. Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad Co.*, 139 Pa. 289, 21 A. 157 (1891)
- *McKinney v. Armco Steel Corp.*, 270 F. Supp. 360 (W.D. Pa. 1967)
- *Dorrington v. Manning*, 135 Pa. Super. 194, 4 A.2d 886 (1939)
- *Padden v. Local 90 United Ass'n of Journeymen Plumbers*, 168 Pa. Super. 611, 82 A.2d 327 (1951)
- *Glenn v. Point Park College*, 441 Pa. 474, 272 A.2d 895 (1971)
- *American Bank & Trust Co. v. Federal Reserve Bank*, 256 U.S. 350 (1921)
- *Niederman v. Brodsky*, 436 Pa. 401, 261 A.2d 84 (1970)
- *Behrend v. Yellow Cab Co.*, 441 Pa. 105, 271 A.2d 241 (1971)
- *Petermann v. International Brotherhood of Teamsters*, 174 Cal. App. 2d 184, 344 P.2d 25 (1959)
- *Frampton v. Central Indiana Gas Co.*, 297 N.E.2d 425 (Ind. 1973)
- *Lincoln Federal Labor Union v. Northwestern Iron & Metal Co.*, 335 U.S. 525 (1949)
- *Adair v. United States*, 208 U.S. 161 (1908)
- *Coppage v. Kansas*, 236 U.S. 1 (1915)
- *Burne v. Franklin Life Insurance Co.*, 451 Pa. 218, 301 A.2d 799 (1973)
- *Reardon v. Wilbur*, 441 Pa. 551, 272 A.2d 888 (1971)
- *Clevenstein v. Rizzuto*, 439 Pa. 397, 266 A.2d 623 (1970)
- *Hoffman v. Misericordia Hospital*, 439 Pa. 501, 267 A.2d 867 (1970)