

SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK, APPELLATE DIVISION,
THIRD DEPARTMENT

Claim of Smith v. Consolidated Edison Co. of New York, Inc.

68 A.D.3d 1299 (N.Y. App. Div. 2009) · Decided December 10, 2009

SUMMARY

The New York Appellate Division, Third Department, reversed a Workers’ Compensation Board determination awarding reduced earnings benefits to an employee who retired after developing reactive airway disease from workplace dust exposure following the September 11 attacks. The court held that, after voluntarily retiring, the claimant had to show that his reduced earning capacity resulted from his disability rather than age, economic conditions, or other factors, and remitted the matter for further proceedings.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of the State of New York, Appellate Division, Third Department
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Kavanagh, J.; Cardona, E.J.; Mercure, J.; Spain, J.; Malone Jr., J.
JURISDICTION	New York
DECIDED	December 10, 2009
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The employer and its claims administrator appealed the Workers' Compensation Board's decision awarding claimant reduced earnings benefits.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Whether the Board's determination was supported by substantial evidence.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published
PARTIES	Consolidated Edison Company of New York, Inc., its claims administrator v. Claimant Smith

TOPICS

- workers compensation
- employment law

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether a voluntarily retired claimant seeking a reduced earnings award must demonstrate that he attempted to obtain employment consistent with his disability-related restrictions.
2. Whether claimant established that his reduced earnings resulted from his disability rather than age, economic conditions, employer needs, or other unrelated factors.
3. Whether the Workers' Compensation Board's reduced earnings award was supported by substantial evidence.

HOLDINGS

1. A claimant who voluntarily retires must, before receiving a reduced earnings award, demonstrate that he attempted to obtain employment that accommodated the restrictions caused by his disability and that the disability adversely affected his earning capacity and ability to obtain comparable employment.
2. A claimant is not entitled to a reduced earnings award without evidence that the reduction in earnings is attributable to the disability rather than age, economic conditions, employer needs, or other unrelated factors.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Since claimant had voluntarily retired from his position with Consolidated Edison in February 2007, he was obligated, before obtaining a reduced earnings award, to demonstrate that he had attempted to obtain employment that took into account the restrictions caused by his disability” (68 A.D.3d at 1299)

“As a result, the Board’s decision that he is entitled to a reduced earnings award is not supported by substantial evidence.” (68 A.D.3d at 1301)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Claimant was exposed to dust while working for Consolidated Edison in lower Manhattan after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and was later diagnosed with reactive airway disease. Although his workers' compensation claim was established, he had no compensable lost time and continued working until retiring on February 1, 2007. He later worked two to three hours per week as a school crossing guard and sought a reduced earnings award, but acknowledged that his limited schedule was dictated by his employer's needs rather than his disability and that he had not told prospective employers that he was disabled.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Claimant's workers' compensation claim for reactive airway disease was established in 2004. After claimant retired and later began part-time work as a school crossing guard, a Workers' Compensation Law Judge awarded him a reduced earnings award, excluding the first seven months after retirement. The Workers' Compensation Board affirmed, and the employer and claims administrator appealed. The Appellate Division reversed and remitted the matter to the Board.

DISPOSITION

reversed_and_remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

Remanded to the Workers' Compensation Board for further proceedings not inconsistent with the Appellate Division's decision.

CASES CITED

- Matter of Mills v. J.C. Penney, 59 A.D.3d 755, 756 (2009)
- Matter of Peck v. James Sq. Nursing Home, 34 A.D.3d 1033, 1034 (2006)
- Matter of Rothe v. United Med. Assoc., 18 A.D.3d 1093, 1094 (2005)
- Matter of Hare v. Champion Intl., 303 A.D.2d 799, 800 (2003)
- Matter of Petrillo v. Cooke, 60 A.D.3d 1115, 1116 (2009)
- Matter of Thompson v. Saucke Bros. Constr. Co., 2 A.D.3d 993, 993-994 (2003), leave to appeal denied, 2 N.Y.3d 703 (2004)
- Matter of Turetzky-Santaniello v. Vassar Bros. Hosp., 302 A.D.2d 706, 707-708 (2003)

OPINION

KAVANAGH, J.

Kavanagh, J. In the course of his employment with Consolidated Edison Company of New York, Inc., claimant was exposed to dust while working in lower Manhattan following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. While claimant was subsequently diagnosed with reactive airway disease and his claim for workers' compensation benefits was established in 2004, he sustained no compensable lost time and continued to work until he retired on February 1, 2007.

At that time, hearings on his claim for workers' compensation benefits were held and a Workers' Compensation Law Judge determined that claimant was not entitled to a reduced earnings award because, even though permanently partially disabled, he had voluntarily withdrawn from the labor market due to his refusal to accept a light duty assignment.

In September 2007, claimant began working two to three hours each week as a school crossing guard and submitted a request for further action on his claim for workers' compensation benefits. After a hearing, the Workers' Compensation Law Judge ruled that claimant had demonstrated that he was entitled to a reduced earnings award, excluding the seven-month period immediately following his retirement from Consolidated Edison before he began his part-time employment as a school crossing guard.

The Workers' Compensation Board affirmed that determination, prompting this appeal by the employer and its claims administrator. We reverse. Since claimant had voluntarily retired from his

position with Consolidated Edison in February 2007, he was obligated, before obtaining a reduced earnings award, to demonstrate that he had attempted to obtain employment that took into account the restrictions caused by his disability (see *Matter of Mills v J.C.*

Penney, 59 AD3d 755, 756 [2009]; *Matter of Peck v James Sq. Nursing Home*, 34 AD3d 1033, 1034 [2006]). In particular, he was required to demonstrate that his earning capacity and his ability to find comparable employment had been adversely affected by his disability (see *Matter of Rothe v United Med. Assoc.*, 18 AD3d 1093, 1094 [2005]; *Matter of Hare v Champion Intl.*, 303 AD2d 799, 800 [2003]).

In that regard, claimant presented no evidence that his ability to earn an income had been reduced because he was disabled (see *Matter of Petrillo v Cooke*, 60 AD3d 1115, 1116 [2009]; *Matter of Thompson v Saucke Bros. Constr. Co.*, 2 AD3d 993, 993-994 [2003], lv denied *13012 NY3d 703 [2004]).

In fact, he failed to demonstrate that other factors totally unrelated to his disability did not have an adverse affect on his earning capacity, and acknowledged that his limited work schedule is dictated by his employer's needs and not by his disability (see *Matter of Turetzky-Santaniello v Vassar Bros. Hosp.*, 302 AD2d 706, 707-708 [2003]). Claimant also testified that, since his retirement, he submitted numerous applications for both part-time and full-time employment, and that one of those positions involved work similar to that which he performed while employed by Consolidated Edison.

Significantly, claimant admits that he has not informed any of these prospective employers that he is disabled or that his ability to work is in any way impaired by his disability. Accordingly, claimant has failed to meet his burden of establishing that his reduced earnings are attributable to his disability, as opposed to age, existing economic conditions, or other factors that are not in any way related to his disability (see *Matter of Turetzky-Santaniello v Vassar Bros. Hosp.*, 302 AD2d at 707-708).

As a result, the Board's decision that he is entitled to a reduced earnings award is not supported by substantial evidence. Cardona, EJ., Mercure, Spain and Malone Jr., JJ., concur. Ordered that the decision is reversed, without costs, and matter remitted to the Workers' Compensation Board for further proceedings not inconsistent with this Court's decision.