

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE EIGHTH CIRCUIT

Coley v. Clinton

635 F.2d 1364 (8th Cir. 1980) · Decided December 16, 1980

SUMMARY

Former inmates of an Arkansas state hospital challenged the procedures for commitment and release of criminal defendants found incompetent to stand trial or acquitted by reason of insanity, as well as their automatic confinement in a maximum-security unit. The Eighth Circuit affirmed abstention regarding the commitment and release procedures, modified limited relief, and vacated the district court's rulings concerning the constitutionality of the confinement conditions and class certification. The case was remanded for further proceedings.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit
WRITING FOR THE COURT	McMillian
JURISDICTION	Federal
DECIDED	December 16, 1980
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Appeal from the district court's dismissal of constitutional claims, refusal to certify a plaintiff class, and grant of limited interim relief in a proposed civil-rights class action concerning commitment procedures and conditions of confinement at the Arkansas state hospital.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Abstention decisions are reviewed for abuse of discretion, while class-certification decisions are also subject to substantial district-court discretion limited by the criteria of Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 23.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published precedential federal appellate opinion
PARTIES	Floyd F. Coley, Ralph Steed v. Clinton, State officials

TOPICS

- civil rights
- due process
- equal protection
- federalism
- appellate procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the district court properly abstained from deciding constitutional challenges to Arkansas commitment and release procedures.
2. Whether Pullman abstention applied to the constitutional challenge to the administrative assignment and conditions of confinement at Rogers Hall.
3. Whether the district court properly retained jurisdiction over claims subject to Pullman abstention rather than dismissing them.
4. Whether the district court erred in refusing to certify the proposed civil-rights class under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 23(b)(2).
5. Whether the district court's interim annual-report orders should be continued or modified pending abstention and further proceedings.

HOLDINGS

1. Younger abstention required dismissal without prejudice of the federal constitutional claims challenging commitment and release procedures conducted in or closely related to pending Arkansas criminal proceedings, absent bad faith, exceptional circumstances, or another recognized exception.
2. Pullman abstention was appropriate for constitutional challenges to administrative commitment and release procedures because Arkansas law was unsettled, involved important state interests, and could be interpreted in a manner avoiding or altering the federal constitutional questions.
3. The district court erred by deciding the constitutional challenge to Rogers Hall without first abstaining under Pullman and allowing Arkansas courts to determine whether the Arkansas patients'-rights statute applied to criminal defendants confined there.
4. After Pullman abstention, the district court must retain jurisdiction over the federal claims pending state-court resolution of the unsettled state-law questions.
5. The district court erred in refusing to certify the proposed class because the Rule 23(a) prerequisites were met, common legal questions existed, and the action sought declaratory and injunctive relief appropriate for a Rule 23(b)(2) civil-rights class action.
6. The annual-report orders were permissible interim relief designed to reduce the impact of abstention on the plaintiffs' constitutional rights, but they had to be expressly characterized as temporary and remained subject to the district court's discretion concerning continuing need and classwide application.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Because disposition of the federal constitutional claims presented by appellants depends to a large degree upon how the Arkansas “patients’ rights” statute is interpreted, and in the circumstances of this case considerations of federalism strongly favor interpretation of the statute by state authorities, we hold that the district court should have abstained from deciding this part of the case.” (1376)

“Therefore, the proper procedure after Pullman-type abstention is for the district court to retain jurisdiction.” (1377)

“The case therefore may be maintained in federal court as a class action.” (1379)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Coley was acquitted of a felony by reason of insanity and committed to the Arkansas state hospital; Steed was found incompetent to stand trial and likewise committed. Criminal defendants committed through the criminal courts were automatically assigned to Rogers Hall, a maximum-security facility with substantially greater restrictions than those imposed on patients in open wards. The plaintiffs alleged that the commitment and release procedures and the differential confinement conditions violated due process and equal protection.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Former inmates committed to the Arkansas state hospital brought a putative class action against state officials, challenging commitment and release procedures and the automatic assignment of criminal defendants to restrictive Rogers Hall. The district court abstained from deciding the commitment and release claims, rejected the constitutional challenge to Rogers Hall conditions, denied class certification, and ordered annual reports concerning the named plaintiffs. The Eighth Circuit affirmed abstention as to state circuit-court commitment proceedings, held that Pullman abstention also applied to administrative procedures and Rogers Hall conditions, reversed the class-certification decision, modified the interim-report order, vacated the merits ruling on Rogers Hall, and remanded.

DISPOSITION

other

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

Dismiss without prejudice the Younger-related claims concerning Arkansas circuit-court commitment proceedings; retain jurisdiction over claims subject to Pullman abstention; abstain from deciding the Rogers Hall constitutional claims pending state-court interpretation of Arkansas law; reconsider the continuing need and scope of the annual-report orders as temporary relief; and proceed with the class action consistent with the opinion.

CASES CITED

- *Younger v. Harris*, 401 U.S. 37 (1971)
- *Moore v. Sims*, 442 U.S. 415 (1979)
- *Huffman v. Pursue, Ltd.*, 420 U.S. 592 (1975)
- *Kugler v. Helfant*, 421 U.S. 117 (1975)
- *Dombrowski v. Pfister*, 380 U.S. 479 (1965)
- *Babbitt v. United Farm Workers*, 442 U.S. 289 (1979)
- *Harrison v. NAACP*, 360 U.S. 167 (1959)

- George v. Parratt, 602 F.2d 818 (8th Cir. 1979)
- Railroad Commission v. Pullman Co., 312 U.S. 496 (1941)
- Lake Carriers' Ass'n v. MacMullen, 406 U.S. 498 (1972)
- Gibson v. Berryhill, 411 U.S. 564 (1973)
- England v. Louisiana State Board of Medical Examiners, 375 U.S. 411 (1964)
- United States Parole Commission v. Geraghty, 445 U.S. 388 (1980)
- Like v. Carter, 448 F.2d 798 (8th Cir. 1971)
- Kirby v. Colony Furniture Co., 613 F.2d 696 (8th Cir. 1980)
- Halderman v. Pennhurst State School & Hospital, 612 F.2d 84 (3d Cir. 1979) (en banc)
- Wright v. Stone Container Corp., 524 F.2d 1058 (8th Cir. 1975)
- Livesay v. Punta Gorda Isles, Inc., 550 F.2d 1106 (8th Cir. 1977), rev'd on other grounds, 437 U.S. 463 (1978)
- Ahrens v. Thomas, 570 F.2d 286 (8th Cir. 1978)
- King v. Kansas City Southern Industries, Inc., 519 F.2d 20 (7th Cir. 1975)
- Caldwell v. Camp, 594 F.2d 705 (8th Cir. 1979)
- Mears v. Arkansas State Hospital, 581 S.W.2d 339 (Ark. 1979)