

U.S. Supreme Court

Griffin v. Oceanic Contractors, Inc., 458 U.S. 564 (1982)

Griffin v. Oceanic Contractors, Inc.

No. 81-614

Argued April 26, 1982

Decided June 30, 1982

458 U.S. 564

Syllabus

Title 46 U.S.C. § 596, after obligating the master or owner of a vessel making coasting or foreign voyages to pay a seaman's unpaid wages within specified periods after his discharge, provides that a master or owner who fails to make such payment "without sufficient cause shall pay to the seaman a sum equal to two days' pay for each and every day during which payment is delayed beyond the respective periods."

Petitioner, who was injured while working aboard respondent's vessel in foreign waters, brought suit under the Jones Act and general maritime law in Federal District Court after respondent refused to pay his medical expenses and to furnish transportation back to the United States. In addition to damages, petitioner sought to recover penalty wages under § 596 for respondent's failure to pay \$412.50 in earned wages allegedly due upon discharge. The court found, *inter alia*, that petitioner had been discharged from respondent's employ on the day of the injury, and that respondent's failure to pay petitioner the \$412.50 was "without sufficient cause." In assessing the penalty wages at \$6,881.60, the court held that

"[t]he period during which the penalty runs is to be determined by the sound discretion of the district court, and depends on the equities of the case."

It determined that the appropriate penalty period was the 34-day period from the date of discharge through the date when petitioner began work for another company. Petitioner appealed the award of damages as inadequate, but the Court of Appeals affirmed.

Held: The district courts have no discretion to limit the period during which the wage penalty is assessed. Imposition of the penalty is mandatory for each day that payment is withheld in violation of § 596. Pp. 458 U. S. 569-577.

(a) The words chosen by Congress, given their plain meaning, leave no room for the exercise of discretion either in deciding whether to exact payment or in choosing the period of days by which the payment is to be calculated. After the District Court found that respondent had refused to pay petitioner the balance of his earned wages promptly after discharge and that its refusal was "without sufficient cause," nothing in § 596's language vested the court with discretion to limit the penalty assessment to the period of petitioner's unemployment. Pp. 458 U. S. 569-571.

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(b) This is not the type of case where literal application of a statute would thwart its obvious purpose. Section 596's "evident purpose" is

"to secure prompt payment of seamen's wages . . . , and thus to protect them from the harsh consequences of arbitrary and unscrupulous action of their employers, to which, as a class, they are peculiarly exposed."

Collie v. Fergusson, 281 U. S. 52, 281 U. S. 55. Although the statute's purpose is remedial, Congress has chosen to secure that purpose through the use of potentially punitive sanctions designed to deter negligent or arbitrary delays in payment. The legislative history confirms that Congress intended the statute to mean exactly what its plain language says. Pp. 458 U. S. 571-574.

(c) Nor is literal application of § 596 in this case precluded on the asserted ground that it would produce an absurd and unjust result which Congress could not have intended. Even though the penalty for respondent's failure to promptly pay the \$412.50 in wages -- if computed on the basis of the period from petitioner's discharge until the date respondent actually paid the wages by satisfying the District Court's judgment -- would be over \$300,000, awards made under § 596 were not intended to be merely compensatory. Since the District Court found that respondent's refusal to pay petitioner following his discharge was without sufficient cause, and since it made no finding that respondent's continuing delay in payment beyond the period petitioner was unable to work was for sufficient cause, its decision to limit the penalty was error. *Pacific Mail S.S. Co. v. Schmidt*, 241 U. S. 245. Pp. 458 U. S. 574-577.

664 F.2d 36, reversed and remanded.

REHNQUIST, J., delivered the opinion of the Court, in which BURGER, C.J., and BRENNAN, WHITE, MARSHALL, POWELL, and O'CONNOR, JJ., joined. STEVENS, J., filed a dissenting opinion, in which BLACKMUN, J., joined, *post*, p. 458 U. S. 577.

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