

IOWA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
Unemployment Insurance Appeals Section
1000 East Grand—Des Moines, Iowa 50319
DECISION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
68-0157 (7-97) – 3091078 - EI

CELSA LOPEZ
608½ E STATE
MARSHALLTOWN IA 50158

SWIFT & COMPANY
c/o EMPLOYERS UNITY INC
PO BOX 749000
ARVADA CO 80006-9000

Appeal Number: 05A-UI-02487-DT
OC: 01/30/05 R: 02
Claimant: Respondent (1)

This Decision Shall Become Final, unless within fifteen (15) days from the date below, you or any interested party appeal to the Employment Appeal Board by submitting either a signed letter or a signed written Notice of Appeal, directly to the **Employment Appeal Board, 4th Floor—Lucas Building, Des Moines, Iowa 50319.**

The appeal period will be extended to the next business day if the last day to appeal falls on a weekend or a legal holiday.

STATE CLEARLY

1. The name, address and social security number of the claimant.
2. A reference to the decision from which the appeal is taken.
3. That an appeal from such decision is being made and such appeal is signed.
4. The grounds upon which such appeal is based.

YOU MAY REPRESENT yourself in this appeal or you may obtain a lawyer or other interested party to do so provided there is no expense to Workforce Development. If you wish to be represented by a lawyer, you may obtain the services of either a private attorney or one whose services are paid for with public funds. It is important that you file your claim as directed, while this appeal is pending, to protect your continuing right to benefits.

(Administrative Law Judge)

(Decision Dated & Mailed)

Section 96.5-2-a – Discharge

STATEMENT OF THE CASE:

Swift & Company (employer) appealed a representative's March 1, 2005 decision (reference 01) that concluded Celsa Lopez (claimant) was qualified to receive unemployment insurance benefits after a separation from employment. After hearing notices were mailed to the parties' last-known addresses of record, a telephone hearing was held on March 28, 2005. The claimant participated in the hearing. Jeremy Cook appeared on the employer's behalf. Rosemary Paramo-Ricoy served as interpreter. Based on the evidence, the arguments of the parties, and the law, the administrative law judge enters the following findings of fact, reasoning and conclusions of law, and decision.

ISSUE:

Was the claimant discharged for work-connected misconduct?

FINDINGS OF FACT:

The claimant started working for the employer on July 30, 2002. She worked full time as a production worker in the employer's Marshalltown, Iowa, pork processing facility. Her last day of work was January 21, 2005. The employer discharged her effective January 25, 2005. The reason asserted for the discharge was excessive absenteeism.

The claimant had had three unexcused absences between September 29, 2003 and September 13, 2004; therefore, on September 15, 2005, the employer placed the claimant on a last-chance probation contract under which the claimant could have no absences for 90 days, through December 15, 2004. The employer concluded the claimant had an attendance occurrence on December 6, 2004, and it extended the claimant's 90-day probation for another 90 days, through March 8, 2005. The employer asserted that the claimant had been notified of the extension; however, the claimant denied having an attendance occurrence in December and denied knowledge of an extension to the probation. Given the resolution of this case on the final occurrence, it is not necessary to make a final determination as to whether there was or was not a December occurrence and as to whether the claimant was or was not informed of the probation extension.

The claimant called in sick on January 24, 2005. She again called in sick on January 25, 2005. A staff person in the employer's human resources department called the claimant back later on January 25, 2005 and instructed the claimant that she needed to come in that day and talk to Mr. Cook, the human resources manager, regarding her absences. The claimant refused, stating that she was sick and could not even get out of bed and walk around due to her illness. She had symptoms of bronchitis and flu. The employer then informed the union that it was terminating the claimant's employment.

The claimant continued to call in daily absences, and on January 31, 2005 she attempted to return to work, presenting a doctor's excuse. However, the employer informed her that her position was terminated.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

The issue in this case is whether the employer discharged the claimant for reasons establishing work-connected misconduct as defined by the unemployment insurance law. The issue is not whether the employer was right to terminate the claimant's employment, but whether the claimant is entitled to unemployment insurance benefits. Infante v. IDJS, 364 N.W.2d 262 (Iowa App. 1984). What constitutes misconduct justifying termination of an employee and what is misconduct that warrants denial of unemployment insurance benefits are two separate decisions. Pierce v. IDJS, 425 N.W.2d 679 (Iowa App. 1988).

A claimant is not qualified to receive unemployment insurance benefits if an employer has discharged the claimant for reasons constituting work-connected misconduct. Iowa Code §96.5-2-a. Before a claimant can be denied unemployment insurance benefits, the employer has the burden to establish the claimant was discharged for work-connected misconduct. Cosper v. IDJS, 321 N.W.2d 6 (Iowa 1982).

Iowa Code section 96.5-2-a provides:

An individual shall be disqualified for benefits:

2. Discharge for misconduct. If the department finds that the individual has been discharged for misconduct in connection with the individual's employment:

a. The individual shall be disqualified for benefits until the individual has worked in and has been paid wages for insured work equal to ten times the individual's weekly benefit amount, provided the individual is otherwise eligible.

871 IAC 24.32(1)a, (7) provide:

Discharge for misconduct.

(1) Definition.

a. "Misconduct" is defined as a deliberate act or omission by a worker which constitutes a material breach of the duties and obligations arising out of such worker's contract of employment. Misconduct as the term is used in the disqualification provision as being limited to conduct evincing such willful or wanton disregard of an employer's interest as is found in deliberate violation or disregard of standards of behavior which the employer has the right to expect of employees, or in carelessness or negligence of such degree of recurrence as to manifest equal culpability, wrongful intent or evil design, or to show an intentional and substantial disregard of the employer's interests or of the employee's duties and obligations to the employer. On the other hand mere inefficiency, unsatisfactory conduct, failure in good performance as the result of inability or incapacity, inadvertencies or ordinary negligence in isolated instances, or good faith errors in judgment or discretion are not to be deemed misconduct within the meaning of the statute.

This definition has been accepted by the Iowa Supreme Court as accurately reflecting the intent of the legislature. Huntoon v. Iowa Department of Job Service, 275 N.W.2d 445, 448 (Iowa 1979).

(7) Excessive unexcused absenteeism. Excessive unexcused absenteeism is an intentional disregard of the duty owed by the claimant to the employer and shall be considered misconduct except for illness or other reasonable grounds for which the employee was absent and that were properly reported to the employer.

Absenteeism can constitute misconduct, however, to be misconduct, absences must be both excessive and unexcused. A determination as to whether an absence is excused or unexcused does not rest solely on the interpretation or application of the employer's attendance policy. Absences due to properly reported illness cannot constitute work-connected misconduct since they are not volitional, even if the employer was fully within its rights to assess points or impose discipline for the absence under its attendance policy and even if the claimant was on a last-chance probation contract. Cosper, supra. Because the final absence was related to properly reported illness or other reasonable grounds, no final or current incident of unexcused absenteeism occurred which establishes work-connected misconduct and no disqualification is imposed. The employer has failed to meet its burden to establish misconduct. Cosper, supra. The claimant's actions were not misconduct within the meaning of the statute, and the claimant is not disqualified from benefits.

DECISION:

The representative's March 1, 2005 decision (reference 01) is affirmed. The employer did discharge the claimant but not for disqualifying reasons. The claimant is qualified to receive unemployment insurance benefits, if she is otherwise eligible.

ld/tjc