

**IOWA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE APPEALS**

68-0157 (9-06) - 3091078 - EI

KRISTI L GREGG

Claimant

APPEAL NO: 07A-UI-04350-DT

**ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
DECISION**

PILOT TRAVEL CENTERS LLC

Employer

**OC: 04/01/07 R: 04
Claimant: Respondent (1)**

Section 96.5-2-a – Discharge

STATEMENT OF THE CASE:

Pilot Travel Centers, L.L.C. (employer) appealed a representative's April 20, 2007 decision (reference 01) that concluded Kristi L. Gregg (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 May 15, 2007. The claimant participated in the hearing. Judd Huff appeared on the employer's behalf. 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 17, 2006. She worked full time (approximately 32 hours per week) as a cashier in the employer's truck stop. Her last day of work was January 20, 2007. The employer considered her employment ended as of approximately January 23, 2007. The reason asserted for the separation was excessive absenteeism.

The claimant had been hospitalized on some prior occasions including through January 18 due to a liver biopsy on January 17. She was released from the hospital on January 19 and went into the workplace to have a discussion regarding her schedule. When released from the hospital she was given a doctor's instruction not to return to work until she was seen again and released for work. However, in the January 19 discussion the claimant was told it was necessary that she work on January 20, so she did. She was on the schedule to work again on January 21 but she called in to an assistant manager to indicate that due to not feeling well and still being under doctor's orders not to return to work, she would not be in that day or any other day until she was released. She was subsequently released by the doctor as being able to return to work on January 30. However, the employer had already determined to terminate the claimant from the system as of January 23, which she learned when she contacted the employer on that date.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

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). The question 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 matters. Pierce v. IDJS, 425 N.W.2d 679 (Iowa App. 1988).

Iowa Code § 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 provides:

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).

871 IAC 24.32(7) provides:

(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 up to or including discharge for the absence under its attendance policy. Cosper, supra. Here, the employer knew or should have known that the claimant would be absent for an extended period of time because she had not been released to return to work. Floyd v. Iowa Dept. of Job Service, 338 N.W.2d 536 (Iowa App. 1986). The fact the claimant agreed to work one day even though not released does not render the following days of absence unexcused. 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 April 20, 2007 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.

Lynette A. F. Donner
Administrative Law Judge

Decision Dated and Mailed

ld/pjs