

**IOWA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE APPEALS BUREAU**

MATHEW W COFFIN
Claimant

APPEAL 19A-UI-03026-SC-T

**ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
DECISION**

MONARCH MATERIALS GROUP INC
Employer

**OC: 03/17/19
Claimant: Respondent (1-R)**

Iowa Code § 96.5(2)a – Discharge for Misconduct
Iowa Code § 96.5(1) – Voluntary Quitting
Iowa Code § 96.3(7) – Recovery of Benefit Overpayment
Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.10 – Employer/Representative Participation Fact-finding Interview

STATEMENT OF THE CASE:

On April 11, 2019, Monarch Materials Group, Inc. (employer) filed an appeal from the April 8, 2019, reference 01, unemployment insurance decision that allowed benefits based upon the determination Mathew W. Coffin (claimant) was discharged for excessive absences that were properly reported and due to illness. The parties were properly notified about the hearing. A telephone hearing was held on May 1, 2019. The claimant did not answer when called at the number registered for the hearing and did not participate. The employer participated through HR Generalist Nancy Clemenson, Manufacturing Supervisor Jason Bruan, and Director of Operations Lee Reynolds. The Employer's Exhibits 1 through 3 were admitted into the record.

ISSUES:

Was the claimant discharged for disqualifying job-related misconduct?
Has the claimant been overpaid unemployment insurance benefits and, if so, can the repayment of those benefits to the agency be waived?
Can charges to the employer's account be waived?

FINDINGS OF FACT:

Having reviewed all of the evidence in the record, the administrative law judge finds: The claimant was employed full-time as an Assembler beginning on November 7, 2016, and was separated from employment on March 18, 2019, when he was discharged.

The employer has a no-fault attendance policy that allows for eight attendance points in a 12-month rolling calendar. On January 31, 2019, the claimant reached eight points when he missed work because his kids' school was closed. The employer gave him a final written warning on February 5 and told him any further absences would result in his discharge.

On Sunday, March 17, the claimant notified his supervisor Steve Crow that he was at the hospital receiving treatment for a back injury. On Monday, March 18, the claimant notified Crow

before the start of his shift that he would not be at work due to the back injury. The claimant's wife also delivered a doctor's note to the employer. HR Generalist Nancy Clemenson and Manufacturing Supervisor Jason Bruan called the claimant to notify him that he was discharged for violation of the attendance policy.

The claimant filed his claim for unemployment insurance benefits effective March 17, 2019. The administrative record reflects that the claimant has received unemployment benefits in the amount of \$2,376.00 for the six weeks beginning March 17, 2019 through the week ending April 27, 2019. The administrative record also establishes that the employer did participate in the fact-finding interview.

Whether the claimant is able to and available for work as the result of his back injury has not yet been investigated or adjudicated by the Benefits Bureau of Iowa Workforce Development (IWD).

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

For the reasons that follow, the administrative law judge concludes the claimant was discharged from employment for no disqualifying reason. Benefits are allowed.

Iowa Code section 96.5(2)a provides:

An individual shall be disqualified for benefits, regardless of the source of the individual's wage credits:

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 disqualification shall continue 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.

Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32 provides, in relevant part:

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.

...

(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.

(8) Past acts of misconduct. While past acts and warnings can be used to determine the magnitude of a current act of misconduct, a discharge for misconduct cannot be based on such past act or acts. The termination of employment must be based on a current act.

This definition of misconduct has been accepted by the Iowa Supreme Court as accurately reflecting the intent of the legislature. *Huntoon v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 275 N.W.2d 445, 448 (Iowa 1979).

The employer has the burden to prove the claimant was discharged for work-connected misconduct as defined by the unemployment insurance law. *Cosper v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 321 N.W.2d 6 (Iowa 1982). The issue is not whether the employer made a correct decision in separating the claimant, but whether the claimant is entitled to unemployment insurance benefits. *Infante v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 364 N.W.2d 262 (Iowa Ct. App. 1984). What constitutes misconduct justifying termination of an employee and what misconduct warrants denial of unemployment insurance benefits are two separate decisions. *Pierce v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 425 N.W.2d 679 (Iowa Ct. App. 1988). The law limits disqualifying misconduct to substantial and willful wrongdoing or repeated carelessness or negligence that equals willful misconduct in culpability. *Lee v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 616 N.W.2d 661 (Iowa 2000). 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. Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(7) (emphasis added); see *Higgins v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 350 N.W.2d 187, 190, n. 1 (Iowa 1984) holding "rule [2]4.32(7)...accurately states the law."

The requirements for a finding of misconduct based on absences are twofold. First, the absences must be excessive. *Sallis v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 437 N.W.2d 895 (Iowa 1989). The determination of whether unexcused absenteeism is excessive necessarily requires consideration of past acts and warnings. *Higgins* at 192. Second, the absences must be unexcused. *Cosper* at 10. The requirement of "unexcused" can be satisfied in two ways. An absence can be unexcused either because it was not for "reasonable grounds," *Higgins* at 191, or because it was not "properly reported," holding excused absences are those "with appropriate notice." *Cosper* at 10. Absences related to issues of personal responsibility such as transportation, lack of childcare, and oversleeping are not considered excused. *Higgins, supra*.

An employer's attendance policy is not dispositive of the issue of qualification for unemployment insurance benefits. A properly reported absence related to illness or injury is excused for the purpose of the Iowa Employment Security Act. Excessive absences are not necessarily unexcused. Absences must be both excessive and unexcused to result in a finding of misconduct.

The employer has not established that the claimant had excessive absences which would be considered unexcused for purposes of unemployment insurance eligibility. Because his last absence after the final written warning was related to properly reported illness or other

reasonable grounds, no final or current incident of unexcused absenteeism occurred which establishes work-connected misconduct. Since the employer has not established a current or final act of misconduct, the history of other incidents need not be examined. Accordingly, benefits are allowed.

As benefits are allowed, the issue of overpayment is moot and charges to the employer's account cannot be waived.

The issue of whether the claimant is able to and available for work due to his back injury is remanded to the Benefits Bureau of IWD for a fact-finding interview with the claimant and employer and an unemployment insurance decision issued to both parties.

DECISION:

The April 8, 2019, reference 01, unemployment insurance decision is affirmed. The claimant was discharged from employment for no disqualifying reason. Benefits are allowed, provided the claimant is otherwise eligible. As benefits are allowed, the issue of overpayment is moot and charges to the employer's account cannot be waived.

REMAND:

The issue of whether the claimant is able to and available for work due to his back injury is remanded to the Benefits Bureau of IWD for a fact-finding interview with the claimant and employer and an unemployment insurance decision issued to both parties.

Stephanie R. Callahan
Administrative Law Judge

Decision Dated and Mailed

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