

United States Supreme Court Reports

GLUS v. BROOKLYN EASTERN TERMINAL, 359 U.S. 231 (1959)

79 S.Ct. 760

GLUS v. BROOKLYN EASTERN DISTRICT TERMINAL.

CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE SECOND CIRCUIT.

No. 446.

Argued March 2, 1959.

Decided April 20, 1959.

Claiming that respondent was estopped from pleading the statute of limitations because it had induced delay by representing to petitioner that he had seven years in which to sue, petitioner brought action against respondent in a Federal District Court under the Federal Employers' Liability Act, after expiration of the three-year statutory period of limitation, to recover damages for an industrial disease he allegedly contracted while working for respondent. *Held*: If petitioner can prove that respondent's responsible agents conducted themselves in such a way that he was justifiably misled into a good-faith belief that he could begin his action at any time within seven years after it accrued, he is entitled to have his case tried on the merits, and the District Court erred in dismissing the case on the ground that it was barred by the three-year limitation. Pp. 231-235.

[253 F.2d 957](#), reversed.

Seymour Schwartz argued the cause for petitioner.
With him on the brief was *John J. Seffern*.

William C. Mattison argued the cause for respondent.
With him on the brief was *John J. Kennelly*.

MR. JUSTICE BLACK delivered the opinion of the Court.

In 1957 petitioner brought this action under the Federal Employers' Liability Act to recover damages for an industrial disease he allegedly contracted in 1952 while working for respondent. [\[fn1\]](#) Although § 6 of the Act provides that "No action shall be maintained under this chapter unless commenced within three years from the day the cause of action accrued," petitioner claimed that respondent was estopped from raising this limitation because it had

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induced the delay by representing to petitioner that he had seven years in which to sue. [\[fn2\]](#) Respondent contended that while estoppel often prevents defendants from relying on statutes of limitations it can have no such effect in FELA cases for there the time limitation is an integral part of a new cause of action and that cause is irretrievably lost at the end of the statutory period. The District Court, after discussing two lines of cases "in sharp conflict," one supporting respondent [\[fn3\]](#) and one supporting

petitioner, [fn4] concluded with apparent reluctance that it was required by prior decisions of the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit to dismiss petitioner's suit. [fn5] The Court of Appeals affirmed, saying "For the reasons well stated by [the District Court] we should not attempt to retrace our footsteps now, but may well await resolution of the conflict by the Supreme Court." [253 F.2d 957, 958](#). Since the question is important and recurring we granted certiorari. [358 U.S. 814](#).

To decide the case we need look no further than the maxim that no man may take advantage of his own wrong. Deeply rooted in our jurisprudence this principle has been applied in many diverse classes of cases by both **Page 233**

law and equity courts [fn6] and has frequently been employed to bar inequitable reliance on statutes of limitations. [fn7] In *Schroeder v. Young*, [161 U.S. 334](#), this Court allowed a debtor to redeem property sold to satisfy a judgment, after the statutory time for redemption had expired although the statute granting the right to redeem also limited that right as to time. [fn8] The Court held that the purchasers could not rely on the limitation because one of them had told the debtor "that he would not be pushed, that the statutory time to redeem would not be insisted upon, and [the debtor] believed and relied upon such assurance." The Court pointed out that in "such circumstances the courts have held with great unanimity that the purchaser is estopped to insist upon the statutory period, notwithstanding the assurances were not in writing and were made without consideration, upon the ground that the debtor was lulled into a false security." [161 U.S., at 344](#). [fn9] As Mr. Justice Miller expressed it in *Insurance Co. v. Wilkinson*, 13 Wall. 222, 233, "The principle is that where one party has by his representations or his conduct induced the other party to a transaction to give him an advantage which it would be against equity and good conscience for him to assert, he would not in a court of justice be permitted to avail himself of that advantage. And although the cases to which this principle is to be applied are not as well defined as could be wished, the general doctrine is well understood and is applied by courts of law as well as equity where the technical advantage thus obtained is set up and relied on to defeat the ends of justice or establish a dishonest claim."

We have been shown nothing in the language or history of the Federal Employers' Liability Act to indicate that this principle of law, older than the country itself, was not to apply in suits arising under that statute. [fn10] Nor has counsel made any convincing arguments which might lead us to make an exception to the doctrine of estoppel in this case. To be sure language in some decisions of this Court can be taken as supporting such an exception. [fn11] **Page 235**

But that language is in dicta and is neither binding nor persuasive. Accordingly, we hold that it was error to dismiss this case. Despite the delay in filing his suit petitioner is entitled to have his cause tried on the merits if he can prove that respondent's responsible agents, agents

with some authority in the particular matter, conducted themselves in such a way that petitioner was justifiably misled into a good-faith belief that he could begin his action at any time within seven years after it had accrued.

It is no answer to say, as respondent does, that the representations alleged were of law and not of fact and therefore could not justifiably be relied on by petitioner. Whether they could or could not depends on who made them and the circumstances in which they were made. See *Scarborough v. Atlantic Coast Line R. Co.*, [190 F.2d 935](#). Such questions cannot be decided at this stage of the proceedings.

It may well be that petitioner's complaint as now drawn is too vague, but that is no ground for dismissing his action. Cf. *Conley v. Gibson*, [355 U.S. 41](#), [47-48](#). His allegations are sufficient for the present. Whether petitioner can in fact make out a case calling for application of the doctrine of estoppel must await trial.

Reversed.

[fn1] Page 231

35 Stat. 65, as amended, [45 U.S.C. § 51](#)-60.

[fn2] Page 232

Paragraph 9 of petitioner's complaint states, "Subsequent thereto defendant's agents, servants and employees fraudulently or unintentionally misstated to plaintiff that he had seven years within which to bring an action against said defendant as a result of his industrial disease and in reliance thereon plaintiff withheld suit until the present time."

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American R. Co. v. Coronas, 230 F. 545; *Bell v. Wabash R. Co.*, [58 F.2d 569](#); *Damiano v. Pennsylvania R. Co.*, [161 F.2d 534](#); *Ahern v. South Buffalo R. Co.*, [303 N.Y. 545](#), [563](#), [104 N.E.2d 898](#), [908](#), aff'd on other grounds, [344 U.S. 367](#).

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Scarborough v. Atlantic Coast Line R. Co., [178 F.2d 253](#), [190 F.2d 935](#), [202 F.2d 84](#); *Fravel v. Pennsylvania R. Co.*, [104 F. Supp. 84](#); *Toran v. New York, N. H. & H.R. Co.*, [108 F. Supp. 564](#).

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The District Court noted, "The reasoning of [petitioner's] cases is not unpersuasive. But I feel that I am bound by the decisions of the Court of Appeals of this Circuit" [154 F. Supp. 863](#), [866](#).

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See, e. g., *The Arrogante Barcelones*, 7 Wheat. 496, 519; *Sprigg v. Bank of Mount Pleasant*, 10 Pet. 257, 264-265; *Van Rensselaer v. Kearney*, 11 How. 297, 322-329; *Gregg v. Von Phul*, 1 Wall. 274, 280-281; *Morgan v. Railroad Co.*, [96 U.S. 716](#), [720-722](#); *Reynolds v. United States*, [98 U.S. 145](#), [158-160](#); *Dickerson v. Colgrove*, [100 U.S. 578](#);

Kirk v. Hamilton, [102 U.S. 68](#), [76-79](#); *Daniels v. Tearney*,
[102 U.S. 415](#), [420-422](#).

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See, e. g., *Howard v. West Jersey & S. R. Co.*, [102 N.J. Eq. 517](#),
[141 A. 755](#), aff'd on opinion below, [104 N.J. Eq. 201](#), [144 A. 919](#). See
also Dawson, Estoppel and Statutes of Limitation, 34 Mich. L. Rev. 1;
cases collected in 77 A. L. R. 1044; 130 A. L. R. 8; 15 A. L. R.2d 500;
24 A. L. R.2d 1413.

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Compare 2 Utah Comp. Laws (1888), Tit. IX, §§ 3442-3445
(derived from Act of Feb. 1870, Utah Laws 1870, p. 17, §§ 229-232)
with 2 Utah Comp. Laws (1888), Tit. II, §§ 3129-3168. See also Act
of Jan. 18, 1867, Utah Laws 1867, p. 32.

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See also *Graffam v. Burgess*, [117 U.S. 180](#), where a judgment
debtor who had been deceived by his creditors was allowed to redeem
land sold on execution even though the time limitation on redemptions
had expired and despite a dissent which argued that it was "of the
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utmost importance . . . that the right thus granted should be strictly
exercised according to the statute. For . . . the favor of allowing
the debtor one year more to save his land . . . only adds to his
obligation to exercise the right thus granted in strict accordance with
its terms." *Id.*, at 196.

[fn10] Page 234

See *Dickerson v. Colgrove*, [100 U.S. 578](#), [582](#) (citing discussions
of the doctrine by Coke and Littleton). See also *Sprigg v. Bank of
Mount Pleasant*, 10 Pet. 257, 265; *Van Rensselaer v. Kearney*, 11
How. 297, 322-325.

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See, e. g., *Phillips Co. v. Grand Trunk W. R. Co.*, [236 U.S. 662](#),
[666-668](#); *Atlantic Coast Line R. Co. v. Burnette*, [239 U.S. 199](#);
Danzer & Co. v. Gulf & S. I. R. Co., [268 U.S. 633](#), [637](#). But cf. *The
Harrisburg*, [119 U.S. 199](#), [214](#), "The liability and the remedy are
created by the same statutes, and the limitations of the remedy are,
therefore, to be treated as limitations of the right. No question arises
in this case as to the power of a court of admiralty to allow an equitable
excuse for delay in suing, because no excuse of any kind has
been shown."

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