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Another “Nuclear” Verdict Against A California Employer — $52 Million!

California Employment Law Update on **February 5, 2026**

Barely a month into 2026, and a California jury has delivered another massive verdict in an employment case, awarding $52 million to five former employees following a whistleblower retaliation trial in Los Angeles. (*Williams et al. v. Sysco Riverside, Inc.*)

The plaintiffs, primarily drivers and yard personnel, worked for a global foodservice distributor. They alleged that they raised concerns during their employment regarding workplace safety and food-handling practices. According to the plaintiffs, those concerns included being required to exceed speed limits while on company property, load perishable food onto trucks at hazardous temperatures, and circumvent proper safety checks. The employees further alleged that after raising these issues, the employer subjected them to hostile treatment that caused them to quit or, if they didn’t resign, fired them for pretextual reasons.

The employer denied the allegations and maintained that all disciplinary and employment decisions were based on the employees’ poor performance and misconduct, such as sleeping on the job, smoking while handling food, and theft of company time. Apparently, the jury was unconvinced and awarded approximately $31 million in compensatory damages for lost pay and emotional distress and $21 million in punitive damages.

As we have previously reported time and again (here, here, here, here, and here), verdicts like this are a further reminder of the significant exposure employers face when juries weigh in on employment-related claims like these.

The only real antidote to such catastrophic outcomes is an enforceable arbitration agreement. And while arbitration certainly has its downsides, we can’t help but be reminded of Churchill’s famous critique of democracy: “It’s the worst system in the world – except for all the others.” The same is true for arbitration!

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