

CPLR 7502(b): Court Refers Time-Limitations Objection to Arbitration

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first was no defense inasmuch as the income executions specified two different employers.

ARTICLE 75 — ARBITRATION

CPLR 7502(b): Court refers time-limitations objection to arbitrator.

In *City of Auburn v. Nash*¹⁴¹ the Appellate Division, Fourth Department, was called upon to determine whether it is the arbitrator or the court who should decide an objection addressed to the timeliness of a demand for arbitration. The case arose under a collective bargaining agreement involving city employees. Special term found that although the employee had fully complied with the prescribed grievance procedures, a substantial issue was presented regarding the timeliness of the employee's demand for arbitration. Accordingly, an order was entered which permanently stayed the arbitration.

The appellate division reversed on the ground that questions of "procedural arbitrability" are properly decided by the arbitrator. The court compared the contract before it with one wherein compliance with time limitations is made a condition precedent to arbitration and concluded that, in the latter instance, the issue of timeliness is for the courts;¹⁴² whereas in the former circumstance the issue is for the arbitrators.¹⁴³ As support for this proposition the court pointed to the presumption of arbitrability in labor arbitration cases,¹⁴⁴ particularly when no language evidencing a contrary intent is discernible.

In reaching this conclusion no mention was made of CPLR 7502 (b).¹⁴⁵ This section concerns statutes of limitations and reasonable time limitations which are created by contracting parties.¹⁴⁶ In either instance, the issue of compliance with a time limitation is deemed a "threshold" question¹⁴⁷ to be decided by the court. As such, the petitioner who makes a timely application for a stay of arbitration is entitled to judicial review. Moreover, a preliminary determination regarding the proper forum in which to decide the issue is of critical importance inasmuch as a court's determination that the arbitration is

¹⁴¹ 34 App. Div. 2d 345, 312 N.Y.S.2d 700 (4th Dep't 1970).

¹⁴² *Id.* at 347, 312 N.Y.S.2d at 702, citing Matter of Bd. of Educ. (Heckler Elec. Co.), 7 N.Y.2d 476, 166 N.E.2d 666, 199 N.Y.S.2d 649 (1960).

¹⁴³ 34 App. Div. 2d at 347, 312 N.Y.S.2d at 702, citing Long Island Lumber Co. v. Martin, 15 N.Y.2d 380, 207 N.E.2d 190, 259 N.Y.S.2d 142 (1965).

¹⁴⁴ See 7B MCKINNEY'S CPLR 7503, *supp. commentary* at 136 (1966).

¹⁴⁵ CPLR 7502(b) provides: "If . . . the claim sought to be arbitrated would have been barred by limitation of time had it been asserted in a court of the state, a party may assert the limitation . . . to the court . . ."

¹⁴⁶ CPLR 201; see River Brand Rice Mills, Inc. v. Latrobe Brewing Co., 305 N.Y. 36, 110 N.E.2d 545 (1953).

¹⁴⁷ 7B MCKINNEY'S CPLR 7503, *commentary* at 488 (1963).

not time-barred is appealable,¹⁴⁸ whereas a similar conclusion by the arbitrator is not reviewable.¹⁴⁹

The outcome in *City of Auburn* cannot be explained solely on the ground that there is a presumption of arbitrability in labor arbitration cases. A result similar to *City of Auburn* issued in *In re Textiles, Inc.*,¹⁵⁰ a commercial arbitration case. The only distinction between the cases is that the *Textiles* court relied on the freedom of contracting parties to choose a forum in which to settle their disputes.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, although it is often stated that there is a vast difference between commercial arbitration and labor arbitration,¹⁵² the differences do not appear so pronounced under the CPLR.¹⁵³ In fact, as between *Textiles* and *City of Auburn* it is the former which presents better arguments for permitting the arbitrator to decide the time objection since in *Textiles* difficult questions requiring a precise knowledge of the textile industry were presented. Thus, an experienced arbitrator was in a better position to determine whether certain defects in the materials had been discovered and objected to within a reasonable time.

The conclusion, therefore, is that in both commercial and labor arbitration cases the issue of timeliness of a demand for arbitration has been referred to the arbitrator. Such a result is supportable for at least four reasons. First, although the time-limitation objection is deemed a "threshold" one, it may also be raised before the arbitrator should the parties so choose.¹⁵⁴ Thus, there is no legislative mandate that the objection must always be decided by a court. This observation is fortified by the second ground in favor of *City of Auburn*: the issue raised does not involve public policy and there is no practical reason why the arbi-

¹⁴⁸ See 8 WK&M ¶ 7502.08.

¹⁴⁹ See CPLR 7511; see also 8 WK&M ¶ 7502.12.

¹⁵⁰ 164 N.Y.L.J. 18, July 27, 1970, at 2, col. 2 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County), discussed in *The Quarterly Survey*, 45 ST. JOHN'S L. REV. 342, 367-69 (1970).

¹⁵¹ See *Exercycle Corp. v. Maratta*, 9 N.Y.2d 329, 174 N.E.2d 463, 214 N.Y.S.2d 353 (1961).

¹⁵² See, e.g., *United Steelworkers of America v. Warrior & Gulf Navigation Co.*, 363 U.S. 574, 578 (1960): "In the commercial case, arbitration is the substitute for litigation, [in labor cases] arbitration is the substitute for industrial strife. . . . Arbitration of labor disputes has quite different functions from arbitration under an ordinary commercial agreement."

¹⁵³ See 7B MCKINNEY'S CPLR 7503, supp. commentary at 136 (1966). For example, it was the law that a party could defeat arbitration by demonstrating that there was no "bona fide" dispute. *International Ass'n of Machinists v. Cutler-Hammer, Inc.*, 297 N.Y. 519, 74 N.E.2d 464 (1947). Such reasoning was dispelled in labor arbitration cases inasmuch as "[t]he agreement is to submit all grievances to arbitration, not merely those that a court may deem to be meritorious." *United Steelworkers of America v. American Mfg. Co.*, 363 U.S. 564, 567 (1960). Nonetheless, when the CPLR was enacted, it abrogated the Cutler-Hammer doctrine in all types of arbitration cases. 8 WK&M ¶ 7501.

¹⁵⁴ It should be noted, however, that CPLR 7502(b) permits the arbitrator to refuse to decide the limitations issue.

trator should not be allowed to decide it.¹⁵⁵ Third, the arbitrator's experience in a particular field makes him better able to rule on technical issues than the court. Finally, *City of Auburn* relieves the court of its duty to determine threshold questions and, as a calendar-clearing device, is much more palatable than an oppressive ten-day statute of limitations.¹⁵⁶ Nonetheless, the legislature has identified the time-limitations objection as a threshold one to be decided by the courts upon a timely application for a stay of arbitration. Particularly in view of the variance in scope of review between the court's decision and the arbitrator's determination, CPLR 7502(b) should not be abrogated by judicial fiat.

CPLR 7503(c): Nonsignatory of arbitration agreement is not precluded by the failure to apply for a stay of arbitration within ten days.

The recipient of a properly drafted¹⁵⁷ notice of intention to arbitrate will be foreclosed from raising certain threshold questions¹⁵⁸ in court¹⁵⁹ unless he applies for a stay of arbitration within ten days.¹⁶⁰ This ten-day period has been construed as a statute of limitations.¹⁶¹ Such an interpretation is onerous when applied to a signatory of an arbitration agreement; if applied to a nonsignatory it would be even more oppressive. This was the conclusion reached by the Appellate Division, Second Department, in *Glasser v. Price*.¹⁶²

The petitioners entered into a leasing agreement with the individual respondents, Price, Kligher and Tobin. The contract contained a clause whereby the parties agreed to arbitrate any and all disputes arising thereunder. Respondent, Premier Estate Planners, Inc. (Premier), which was not a party to the leasing agreement, notified peti-

¹⁵⁵ Cf. *Aimcee Wholesale Corp. v. Tomar Prods., Inc.*, 21 N.Y.2d 621, 237 N.E.2d 223, 289 N.Y.S.2d 968 (1968); *Agur v. Agur*, 32 App. Div. 2d 16, 298 N.Y.S.2d 772 (2d Dep't 1969).

¹⁵⁶ CPLR 7503(c), as construed in *Jonathan Logan, Inc. v. Stillwater Worsted Mills, Inc.*, 24 N.Y.2d 898, 249 N.E.2d 477, 301 N.Y.S.2d 636 (1969).

¹⁵⁷ The notice of intention to arbitrate must contain the name and address of the claimant and must specify the agreement pursuant to which arbitration is sought. Also, notice must be given the recipient that unless an application is made within ten days after such service, he will be precluded from raising the "threshold questions." CPLR 7503(c).

¹⁵⁸ Under CPLR 7503(c) the threshold questions are: (1) whether a valid agreement to arbitrate was made; (2) whether it was complied with; (3) whether the claim sought to be arbitrated is barred by a limitation of time.

¹⁵⁹ The recipient may nonetheless present before the arbitrator the objection that the arbitration is barred by a limitation of time. However, the latter may refuse to consider it. CPLR 7502(b).

¹⁶⁰ CPLR 7503(c).

¹⁶¹ *Jonathan Logan, Inc. v. Stillwater Worsted Mills, Inc.*, 24 N.Y.2d 898, 249 N.E.2d 477, 301 N.Y.S.2d 636 (1969), discussed in *The Quarterly Survey*, 44 St. JOHN'S L. REV. 758, 760 (1970).

¹⁶² 35 App. Div. 2d 98, 313 N.Y.S.2d 1 (2d Dep't 1970).