MartIn Vs. Pittsburgh and Lake Erie R. Co.

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SooperKanoon Citation : sooperkanoon.com/90040

Court : US Supreme Court

Decided On : Dec-03-1906

Appeal No. : 203 U.S. 284

Appellant : Martin

Respondent : Pittsburgh and Lake Erie R. Co.

Judgement :

Martin v. Pittsburgh & Lake Erie R. Co. - 203 U.S. 284 (1906)
U.S. Supreme Court Martin v. Pittsburgh & Lake Erie R. Co., 203 U.S. 284 (1906)

Martin v. Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad Company

No. 6

Argued October 26, 29, 1906

Decided December 3, 1906

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ERROR TO THE, SUPREME COURT

OF THE STATE OF OHIO

SYLLABUS

In the absence of action by Congress, a state may by statute determine and either augment or lessen a carrier's liability, and such a statute limiting the right of recovery of certain classes of persons does not deprive a person injured thereafter of a vested right of property. *Pennsylvania Railroad Co. v. Hughes,* 191 U. S. 477 .

Although a citizen of the United States has a right to travel from one state to another, in the absence of Congressional action, he does not possess as an incident of such travel the right to exert in a state in which he may be injured a right of recovery not given by the laws thereof, although that right may be given by the laws of other states, including the one in which suit is brought. A classification with a railroad company's employees of all persons, including railway postal clerks, not passengers, but so employed in and about the railroad as to be subject to greater peril than passengers, is not so arbitrary as to deprive the railway postal clerk of the equal protection of the laws within the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Pennsylvania statute of April 4, 1868, P.L. 58, providing that any person, not a passenger, employed in and about a railroad but not an employee, shall in case of injury or loss of life have only the same right of recovery as though he were an employee is not void either because contrary to the power delegated to Congress to establish post offices and post roads, or because repugnant to the commerce clause of the Constitution, or in conflict with the due process or equal protection clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment, or because it abridges the privileges and immunities of citizens of the United States.

Whether a railway postal clerk is a passenger or whether his right of recovery is limited by such statute is not a federal question.

72 Ohio St. 659 affirmed.

Reuben L. Martin brought this action to recover compensation for personal injuries. At the time Martin was injured, he was on a train of the railroad company,

in the employ of the United States as a railway postal clerk on a route extending from Cleveland, Ohio, to Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. The

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injuries arose from the derailing in Pennsylvania of the train by the negligence of the crew of a work train in permitting a switch leading to a side track to be open. Among other defenses, the company pleaded a law of Pennsylvania passed April 4, 1868 (P.L. 58), which, it alleged, was applicable, and relieved from responsibility. In reply, the plaintiff denied the existence and applicability of the statute, moreover, and defended on the ground that the statute, if existing and applicable, was void, first because contrary to the power delegated to Congress to establish post offices and post roads; second, because repugnant to the commerce clause of the Constitution; and third because in conflict with the equal protection and due process clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment, and also the clause prohibiting a state from making or enforcing any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States.

On trial before a jury, the court held the statute in question to be applicable and valid, and hence operative to defeat a recovery. A verdict and judgment in favor of the railroad company was severally affirmed by the circuit court and by the Supreme Court of the State of Ohio.

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MR. JUSTICE WHITE, after making the foregoing statement, delivered the opinion of the Court.

We quote the Pennsylvania statute of April 4, 1868, upon which the case turns:

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"Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the Pennsylvania, in General Assembly met, and it is hereby enacted by the authority of the same

that, when any person shall sustain personal injury or loss of life while lawfully engaged or employed on or about the roads, works, depots, and premises of a railroad company, or in or about any train or car therein or thereon, of which company such person is not an employee, the right of action and recovery in all such cases against the company shall be such only as would exist if such person were an employee, provided that this section shall not apply to passengers."

As the application of the statute, if valid, presents no federal question, we are unconcerned with that matter, although it may be observed in passing that it is conceded in the argument at bar that, under the settled construction given to the statute by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, the plaintiff, as a railway postal clerk, was not a passenger, and had no greater rights in the event of being injured in the course of his employment than would have had an employee of the railroad company.

Was the application of the statute thus construed to a railway postal clerk of the United States in conflict with the power of Congress to establish post offices and post roads?

In *Price v. Pennsylvania Railroad Co.* 113 U. S. 221 , this question was in effect foreclosed against the plaintiff in error. That case was brought to this Court from a judgment of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, 96 Pa. 258, holding that a railway postal clerk was not a passenger within the meaning of the Pennsylvania act, and hence had no right to recover for injuries suffered by him in consequence of the negligence of an employee of the company. The federal ground there relied upon was substantially the one here asserted -- that is, the power of the government of the United States to establish post offices and post roads, and the effect of the legislation of Congress and the act of the Postmaster General in appointing mail clerks thereunder. After fully considering the subject, the case

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was dismissed because no substantial federal ground was involved, the Court saying (113 U.S. 113 U. S. 221):

"The person thus to be carried with the mail matter, without extra charge, is no more a passenger because he is in charge of the mail, nor because no other compensation is made for his transportation, than if he had no such charge; nor does the fact that he is in the employment of the United States and that defendant is bound by contract with the government to carry him affect the question. It would be just the same if the company had contracted with any other person who had charge of freight on the train to carry him without additional compensation. The statutes of the United States which authorize this employment and direct this service do not therefore make the person so engaged a passenger, or deprive him of that character, in construing the Pennsylvania statute. Nor does it give to persons so employed any *right,* as against the railroad company, which would not belong to any other person in a similar employment, by others than the United States."

This brings us to the second contention -- the the repugnancy of the Pennsylvania statute to the commerce clause of the Constitution. It is apparent from the decision in the *Price* case, just previously referred to, that, in deciding that question, we must determine the application of the statute to the plaintiff in error wholly irrespective of the fact that, at the time he was injured, he was a railway postal clerk. In other words, the validity or invalidity of the statute is to be adjudged precisely as if the plaintiff was, at the time of the injury, serving for hire in the employment of a private individual or corporation.

Under the circumstances we have stated, the case of *Pennsylvania Railroad Co. v. Hughes,* 191 U. S. 477 , clearly establishes the unsoundness of the contention that the Pennsylvania statute in question was void because in conflict with the commerce clause. In that case, a horse was shipped from a point in the State of New York to a point in the State of Pennsylvania under a bill of lading which limited the right of

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recovery to not exceeding $100 for any injury which might be occasioned to the animal during the transit. The horse was hurt within the State of Pennsylvania

through the negligence of a connecting carrier. In the courts of Pennsylvania, applying the Pennsylvania doctrine which denies the right of a common carrier to limit its liability for injuries resulting from negligence, a recovery was had in the sum of $10,000, the value of the animal. On writ of error from this Court, the judgment of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania was affirmed, it being held that, at least in the absence of legislation by Congress on the subject, the effect of the commerce clause of the Constitution was not to deprive the State of Pennsylvania of authority to legislate as to those within its jurisdiction concerning the liability of common carriers, although such legislation might to some extent indirectly affect interstate commerce. The ruling in the *Hughes* case in effect but reiterated the principle adopted and applied in *Chicago, Milwaukee &c.; Ry. Co. v. Solan,* 169 U. S. 133 , where an Iowa statute forbidding a common carrier from contracting to exempt itself from liability was sustained as to a person who was injured during an interstate transportation.

The contention that because, in the cases referred to, the operation of the state laws which were sustained was to augment the liability of a carrier, therefore the rulings are inapposite here, where the consequence of the application of the state statute may be to lessen the carrier's liability, rests upon a distinction without a difference. The result of the previous rulings was to recognize, in the absence of action by Congress, the power of the states to legislate, and of course this power involved the authority to regulate as the state might deem best for the public good without reference to whether the effect of the legislation might be to limit or broaden the responsibility of the carrier. In other words, the assertion of federal right is disposed of when we determine the question of power, and doing so does not involve considering the wisdom

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with which the lawful power may have been, under stated conditions, exerted.

And the views previously stated are adequate to dispose of the assertion that the Pennsylvania statute is void for repugnancy to the Fourteenth Amendment. If it be conceded, as contended, that the plaintiff in error could have recovered but for the

statute, it does not follow that the Legislature of Pennsylvania, in preventing a recovery, took away a vested right or a right of property. As the accident from which the cause of action is asserted to have arisen occurred long after the passage of the statute, it is difficult to grasp the contention that the statute deprived the plaintiff in error of the rights just stated. Such a contention, in reason, must rest upon the proposition that the State of Pennsylvania was without power to legislate on the subject -- a proposition which we have adversely disposed of. This must be, since it would clearly follow, if the argument relied upon were maintained, that the state would be without power on the subject. For it cannot be said that the state had authority in the premises if that authority did not even extend to prescribing a rule which would be applicable to conditions wholly arising in the future.

The contention that, because plaintiff in error, as a citizen of the United States, had a constitutional right to travel from one state to another, he was entitled, as the result of an accident happening in Pennsylvania, to a cause of action not allowed by the laws of that state, is in a different form to reiterate that the Pennsylvania statute was repugnant to the commerce clause of the Constitution of the United States. Conceding, if the accident had happened in Ohio, there would have been a right to recover, that fact did not deprive the State of Pennsylvania of its authority to legislate so as to affect persons and things within its borders. The commerce clause not being controlling in the absence of legislation by Congress, it follows of necessity that the plaintiff in error, as an incident of his right to travel from state to state, did not possess the privilege, as to an accident happening in Pennsylvania, to exert a cause

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of action not given by the laws of that state, and had no immunity exempting him from the control of the state legislation.

The proposition that the statute denied to the plaintiff in error the equal protection of the laws because it "capriciously, arbitrarily, and unnaturally," by the classification made, deprived railway mail clerks of the rights of passengers, which

they might have enjoyed if the statute had not been enacted, is without merit. The classification made by the statute does not alone embrace railway mail clerks, but places in a class by themselves such clerks and others whose employment in and about a railroad subjects them to greater peril than passengers in the strictest sense. This general difference renders it impossible in reason to say, within the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment, that the legislature of Pennsylvania, in classifying passengers in the strict sense in one class and those who are subject to greater risks, including railway mail clerks, in another, acted so arbitrarily as to violate the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Judgment affirmed.