

Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) – Meals and Rest Breaks

Overview

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) does not require employees be given meal or rest breaks. However, if employers do offer short breaks (lasting about five to 20 minutes), federal law considers these short breaks time for which employees must be compensated. Bona fide meal periods (typically lasting at least 30 minutes), serve a different purpose than short rest or snack breaks and, thus, are generally not time for which employees must be compensated. The FLSA is administered and enforced by the Wage and Hour Division of the Employment Standards Administration.

Rest Periods

Rest periods of short duration, running from 5 minutes to about 20 minutes, are common in industry. They promote the efficiency of the employee and are customarily paid for as working time. They must be counted as hours worked. Compensable time of rest periods may not be offset against other working time such as compensable waiting time or on-call time. (Mitchell v. Greinetz, 235 F. 2d 621, 13 W.H. Cases 3 (C.A. 10, 1956); Ballard v. Consolidated Steel Corp., Ltd., 61 F. Supp. 996 (S.D. Cal. 1945))

Meal Periods

Bona fide meal periods do not include coffee breaks or time for snacks. These are rest periods. The employee must be completely relieved from duty for the purposes of eating regular meals. Ordinarily 30 minutes or more is long enough for a bona fide meal period. A shorter period may be long enough under special conditions. The employee is not relieved if he is required to perform any duties, whether active or inactive, while eating. For example, an office employee who is required to eat at his desk or a factory worker who is required to be at his machine is working while eating. (Culkin v. Glenn L. Martin, Nebraska Co., 97 F. Supp. 661 (D. Neb. 1951), aff'd 197 F. 2d 981 (C.A. 8, 1952), cert. denied 344 U.S. 888 (1952); Thompson v. Stock & Sons, Inc., 93 F. Supp. 213 (E.D. Mich 1950), aff'd 194 F. 2d 493 (C.A. 6, 1952); Biggs v. Joshua Hendy Corp., 183 F. 2d 515 (C. A. 9, 1950), 187 F. 2d 447 (C.A. 9, 1951); Walling v. Dunbar Transfer & Storage Co., 3 W.H. Cases 284; 7 Labor Cases para. 61.565 (W.D. Tenn. 1943); Lofton v. Seneca Coal and Coke Co., 2 W.H. Cases 669; 6 Labor Cases para. 61,271 (N.D. Okla. 1942); aff'd 136 F. 2d 359 (C.A. 10, 1943); cert. denied 320 U.S. 772 (1943); Mitchell v. Tampa Cigar Co., 36 Labor Cases para. 65, 198, 14 W.H. Cases 38 (S.D. Fla. 1959); Douglass v. Hurwitz Co., 145 F. Supp. 29, 13 W.H. Cases (E.D. Pa. 1956))

It is not necessary that an employee be permitted to leave the premises if he is otherwise completely freed from duties during the meal period.