

**WORKERS' COMPENSATION APPEALS BOARD
STATE OF CALIFORNIA**

LOWELL FORD, *Applicant*

vs.

**SOURCE ONE BUILDING MAINTENANCE INC.; PALOMAR SPECIALTY
INSURANCE COMPANY, administered by OMAHA NATIONAL, *Defendants***

**Adjudication Number: ADJ1218145 (VNO 0530606)
Los Angeles District Office**

**OPINION AND ORDER
DENYING PETITION
FOR DISQUALIFICATION
GRANTING REMOVAL
AND DECISION AFTER REMOVAL**

Applicant seeks disqualification of the workers' compensation administrative law judge (WCJ) based upon the general allegation that the WCJ is biased.

We have not received an answer from defendant. The WCJ filed a Report and Recommendation on Petition for Disqualification (Report) recommending that we deny disqualification.

We have considered the allegations of the Petition for Disqualification and the contents of the WCJ's Report. Based on our review of the record and based upon the WCJ's analysis of the merits contained in the WCJ's Report, we will deny disqualification. However, upon review of the record, this case presents a rare instance where it would appear that the parties may benefit from reassignment of the trial judge. Accordingly, we will grant removal on motion of the Appeals Board and as the Decision After Removal of the Workers' Compensation Appeals Board, we will return this matter to the presiding judge to first consider applicant's petition for change of venue, and absent a change of venue, to reassign this matter to another WCJ.

Labor Code¹ section 5311 provides that a party may seek to disqualify a WCJ upon any one or more of the grounds specified in Code of Civil Procedure section 641. (§ 5311; see also

¹ All future references are to the Labor Code unless noted.

Code Civ. Proc., § 641.) Among the grounds for disqualification under section 641 are that the WCJ has “formed or expressed an unqualified opinion or belief as to the merits of the action” (Code Civ. Proc., § 641(f)) or that the WCJ has demonstrated “[t]he existence of a state of mind ... evincing enmity against or bias toward either party.” (Code Civ. Proc., § 641(g)).

Under WCAB Rule 10960, proceedings to disqualify a WCJ “shall be initiated by the filing of a petition for disqualification supported by an affidavit or declaration under penalty of perjury *stating in detail facts* establishing one or more of the grounds for disqualification” (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 8, § 10960, italics added.) It has long been recognized that “[t]he allegations in a statement charging bias and prejudice of a judge must set forth specifically the facts on which the charge is predicated,” that “[a] statement containing nothing but conclusions and setting forth no facts constituting a ground for disqualification may be ignored,” and that “[w]here no facts are set forth in the statement there is no issue of fact to be determined.” (*Mackie v. Dyer* (1957) 154 Cal.App.2d 395, 399.)

Next, petitions for disqualification must be timely filed: “If the workers' compensation judge assigned to hear the matter and the grounds for disqualification are known, the petition for disqualification shall be filed not more than 10 days after service of notice of hearing or after grounds for disqualification are known.” (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 8, § 10960.)

Furthermore, even if detailed and verified allegations of fact have been made, it is settled law that a WCJ is not subject to disqualification under section 641(f) if, prior to rendering a decision, the WCJ expresses an opinion regarding a legal or factual issue but the petitioner fails to show that this opinion is a fixed one that could not be changed upon the production of evidence and the presentation of arguments at or after further hearing. (*Taylor v. Industrial Acc. Com. (Thomas)* (1940) 38 Cal.App.2d 75, 79–80 [5 Cal.Comp.Cases 61].) Additionally, even if the WCJ expresses an unqualified opinion on the merits, the WCJ is not subject to disqualification under section 641(f) if that opinion is “based upon the evidence then before [the WCJ] and upon the [WCJ's] conception of the law as applied to such evidence.” (*Id.*; cf. *Kreling v. Superior Court* (1944) 25 Cal.2d 305, 312 [“It is [a judge's] duty to consider and pass upon the evidence produced before him, and when the evidence is in conflict, to resolve that conflict in favor of the party whose evidence outweighs that of the opposing party.”].)

Also, it is “well settled ... that the expressions of opinion uttered by a judge, in what he conceives to be a discharge of his official duties, are not evidence of bias or prejudice” under

section 641(g) (*Kreling, supra*, 25 Cal.2d at pp. 310–311; accord: *Mackie, supra*, 154 Cal.App.2d at p. 400) and that “[e]rroneous rulings against a litigant, even when numerous and continuous, form no ground for a charge of bias or prejudice, especially when they are subject to review.” (*McEwen v. Occidental Life Ins. Co.* (1916) 172 Cal. 6, 11; accord: *Mackie, supra*, 154 Cal.App.2d at p. 400 (emphasis added).) Similarly, “when the state of mind of the trial judge appears to be adverse to one of the parties but is based upon actual observance of the witnesses and the evidence given during the trial of an action, it does not amount to that prejudice against a litigant which disqualifies” the judge under section 641(g). (*Kreling, supra*, 25 Cal.2d at p. 312; see also *Moulton Niguel Water Dist. v. Colombo* (2003) 111 Cal.App.4th 1210, 1219 [“When making a ruling, a judge interprets the evidence, weighs credibility, and makes findings. In doing so, the judge necessarily makes and expresses determinations in favor of and against parties. How could it be otherwise? We will not hold that every statement a judge makes to explain his or her reasons for ruling against a party constitutes evidence of judicial bias.”].)

Under no circumstances may a party’s unilateral and subjective perception of bias afford a basis for disqualification. (*Haas v. County of San Bernardino* (2002) 27 Cal.4th 1017, 1034; *Robbins v. Sharp Healthcare* (2006) 71 Cal.Comp.Cases 1291, 1310–1311 (Significant Panel Decision).)

Here, and based upon the analysis contained in the WCJ’s Report, we deny the Petition for Disqualification. However, and notwithstanding the fact that the technical requirements for disqualification were not established, the Appeals Board has the power to “appoint one or more workers’ compensation administrative law judges in any proceeding, as it may deem necessary or advisable, and may refer, remove to itself, or transfer to a workers’ compensation administrative law judge the proceedings on any claim.” (§ 5310.) The Appeals Board has a constitutional mandate to “ensure substantial justice in all cases.” (*Kuykendall v. Workers’ Comp. Appeals Bd.* (2000) 79 Cal.App.4th 396, 403 [65 Cal.Comp.Cases 264].) The Appeals Board has in rare cases exercised the power to reassign cases where it appears that doing so would further the interests of expediting proceedings and/or achieving substantial justice. This case warrants such reassignment.

Here, the WCJ, in consultation with the presiding judge, has utilized California Highway Patrol (CHP) in the courtroom during applicant’s hearings. We make no judgment on the current record whether the use of CHP has been appropriate. Instead, and in the interests of justice, it would simply appear that this matter would benefit from a fresh start with a new WCJ. In the

future, the WCJ may wish to consider remote proceedings, which may address applicant's concerns of bias or intimidation.

In reviewing the file, it appears that applicant is seeking to change venue of this matter. Upon return, the presiding judge should first determine whether change of venue is appropriate. If so, the issue of reassignment of a WCJ is moot and assignment of a WCJ would fall upon the new venue. If venue remains at the current district office, the presiding judge should reassign this matter to another WCJ.

Accordingly, we deny applicant's petition for disqualification, grant removal on motion of the Appeals Board and as the Decision After Removal of the Workers' Compensation Appeals Board, we will return this matter to the presiding judge to first consider applicant's petition for change of venue, and absent a change of venue, to reassign this matter to another WCJ.

IT IS ORDERED that applicant's Petition for Disqualification of the WCJ filed on February 17, 2021, is **DENIED**.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED on motion of the Workers' Compensation Appeals Board that removal of this case is **GRANTED**.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED as the Decision After Removal of the Workers' Compensation Appeals Board that this matter is **RETURNED** to the presiding judge who shall first rule upon applicant's petition for change of venue, and absent a change of venue, the presiding judge shall reassign this matter to another workers' compensation judge.

WORKERS' COMPENSATION APPEALS BOARD

/s/ CRAIG L. SNELLINGS, COMMISSIONER

I CONCUR,

/s/ JOSEPH V. CAPURRO, COMMISSIONER

/s/ JOSÉ H. RAZO, COMMISSIONER



DATED AND FILED AT SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

FEBRUARY 3, 2026

SERVICE MADE ON THE ABOVE DATE ON THE PERSONS LISTED BELOW AT THEIR ADDRESSES SHOWN ON THE CURRENT OFFICIAL ADDRESS RECORD.

**LOWELL FORD
LAW OFFICES OF MIKE V. DURICH, JR.
MALTER LAW CORPORATION
TOBIN LUCKS LLP**

EDL/mt

I certify that I affixed the official seal of
the Workers' Compensation Appeals
Board to this original decision on this date.
CS