



## DEMAND/SETTLEMENT NEGOTIATIONS BOOKLET

[www.JohnBales.com](http://www.JohnBales.com)

Bradenton	(941) 758-9100
Bushnell	(352) 793-7365
Citrus County	(352) 341-0555
Clearwater/Tarpon Springs	(727) 461-9100
Dade City	(352) 458-9200
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Sarasota	(941) 951-9100
Spring Hill	(352) 683-9727
St. Petersburg	(727) 823-9100
Tampa	(813) 224-9100
Winter Haven	(863) 325-9100

Toll Free  
**1-800-CALL-JOHN**  
(1-800-225-5564)

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Facsimile  
St. Petersburg: (727) 579-9109  
Tampa: (813) 224-9109

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### **DEMAND/SETTLEMENT NEGOTIATIONS BOOKLET**

The following provides a short overview of responses to some of the questions our clients ask about the demand and settlement negotiations in their case. Each case has its own set of facts that makes it virtually impossible for there to be only one answer applicable to all cases. However, the below may give you some insight into how your case may proceed. Of course, we want all of your questions to be answered and encourage you to call us, if you want to discuss your particular case.

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#### **I. DEMAND LETTER**

Settlement negotiations usually start when we send on your behalf the demand letter ("Demand Letter"), which commonly includes a Lost Wages ("Spreadsheet") to Employer that makes a settlement offer for resolving your claims against Employer. Most often Employer will challenge the facts in the Demand Letter and Spreadsheet. Employer will make an investigation to find documents, records, and witnesses that will dispute the facts we present to them. Please make sure we are aware of all facts, information, documents, and witnesses whether good or bad for your case.

The Demand Letter will include the initial settlement offer to resolve your case and represents the potential recovery you may receive if a jury at trial ultimately awards that

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amount. As discussed, you should not view the amount of the initial offer as the amount you will recover in your case because it usually is not. Instead, it is a negotiation tool meant to assist in our efforts to maximize your recovery by giving you the “room” to negotiate with Employer. The reasonable settlement amount for your case will likely be less because, as in all cases, there are pros and cons, including the following:

**A. Based On Facts Most Favorable To You**

The initial offer is based on the facts, records, and documents you have provided to us to date that most favor you. It does not necessarily take into account negative facts, records, and documents that Employer may present throughout your case, including at trial. Obviously, Employer will provide facts and documents favorable to it and either refuse to pay any amount or at least provide an amount substantially less.

**B. Includes Amounts For Compensatory and/or Special Damages**

The initial offer includes a claim for compensatory and/or special damages. Compensatory and/or special damages may be claimed by law for an amount representing mental anguish, medical expenses, and other out-of-pocket damages. In our experience, employers usually try to contradict both of these things so that the court will minimize an award of compensatory and/or special damages. If they are successful in establishing such, the amount of your recover will be significantly decreased.

**C. Assumes You Will Be Unemployed For Another One Year**

The retaliations laws permit you to recover lost wages only for the period which you were unemployed as result of the violation. To show this, you must establish that you are making a reasonable effort to find another job through testimony and documents showing you applied for a position. Also, if you find a job, the recovery will be revised based on the wages paid for the new job and other factors.

Accordingly, the initial offer assumes that you will be unemployed, even though you are diligently trying to get another job, for a period of one year. Employer will likely argue that your damages are significantly less because you will find work soon.

**II. COUNTER OFFERS AND COUNTER DEMAND**

In our experience from prior cases, Employer will not respond to the Demand Letter or will provide a minimal counter-offer. We will attempt to further negotiate with Employer if

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there is a response. Of course, we will address with you offers we receive from Employer and will not accept or reject offers without your approval.

### **III. BENEFITS OF SETTLEMENT**

There are benefits to settling your case that should be considered when (a) making a settlement offer or (b) deciding to accept or reject an offer from Employer. Some of them are listed below. Of course, if you wish to address these in more detail or others, please do not hesitate to let us know.

#### **A. Resolution of Claim**

Settlement resolves your employment-related claim earlier and without the need of a trial. By continuing on with litigation and trial, it may be several years or more before the case is resolved. For example, even if we prevail at trial, Employer can appeal the judgment. By settling, we should be able to conclude the matter so that you may receive your portion of the settlement money in a fairly short period of time after a settlement is reached.

#### **B. More Likely to Receive Settlement Funds**

You are more likely to actually receive the funds by settling. Sometimes employers are not solvent by the time a judgment is entered and even if we obtain a judgment, we may not be able to collect any funds from Employer based on the judgment. Accordingly, you need to pay particular attention to Employer's ability to pay a judgment because they may not have sufficient money and/or assets. Also, if we proceed into the discovery process, Employer will likely incur significant legal expenses to pay their attorney. This could potentially exhaust the money and/or assets they currently have and you may not recover from Employer.

#### **C. Less Likely Employer Will Abandon or Dissolve Corporation**

Even if Employer does have sufficient money and/or assets, they may decide to abandon or voluntarily dissolve the corporation in an attempt to avoid liability for any size demand or judgment. They may try to abandon or voluntarily dissolve the corporation but still continue to do similar business activities. While an attempt may be made to find assets, we do not handle this type of law and you will need to find a separate attorney that does. Accordingly, if the corporation is abandoned or dissolved, you may not receive any recovery.

#### **D. Settlement Avoids Extensive Discovery**

If the case is not settled, the parties will most likely take extensive discovery that

will include deposition of you and past and current employees of Employer. During this time, Employer may learn facts that weaken your claim. These facts may be used against you at trial to reduce or eliminate the amount of hours you claim you are owed. This will also add to the attorneys' fees and costs and will require the litigation to become more complicated.

You should also consider the amount of time you will likely be required to spend responding to discovery requests from Employer, which may include you (1) responding to (a) written interrogatories (questions), (b) requests to produce certain documents and records, and (c) requests to admit to certain facts and (2) give a deposition. Each is discussed in more detail below. For example, you may have to take a full day or more off of work because your deposition could last all day. Unfortunately, you will probably not be able to recover the lost wages that result from your time spent at a deposition.

#### **E. Less Costs Incurred**

While we have initially agreed to fund the costs associated with pursuing your case, these costs must be reimbursed when and if Employer pays a recovery amount. These costs can use up a substantial portion of the amount recovered, especially the longer a case is litigated and more discovery is taken. Some of the costs associated with litigation are listed in the agreement with you. They include, but are not limited to, the cost of filing suit, service of process, discovery, expert, document copies, electronic research, etc.

#### **F. Withholdings and Other Deductions by Employer**

An employer generally deducts withholdings and other deductions from the settlement check(s) for unpaid wages and overtime and/or liquidated damages. These amounts represent the payment of federal income and social security taxes, child support, wage garnishment, and other withholdings and/or deductions employer may be required by law, court order, and/or contract to withhold and/or deduct. The amount of any withholdings and/or deductions by an employer are often unknown during settlement negotiations and usually result in your recovery being less than the amount agreed to in settlement or awarded by the court/arbitrator(s) for unpaid wages and overtime and liquidated damages.

Employer determines the amount of withholdings and other deductions and John Bales Attorneys does not participate in this process. Accordingly, John Bales Attorneys does not make any representations as to what such amounts will be or the amount of your recovery after withholdings and other deductions are subtracted by an employer. If you desire tax or financial advice or information, we recommend that you retain a separate attorney, accountant, or tax advisor practicing in these areas.

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## G. **Criminal Record**

Unfortunately, a criminal record for crimes that occurred in the past 10 years could be damaging to your case. Your credibility may be attacked by Employer based on your criminal record or other bad acts. If they succeed in attacking your credibility, the jury may believe Employer's assertions that you are owned less than you claim or are owned nothing at all. This may cause the jury to find in favor of Employer or substantially reduce any judgment entered by the jury.

## H. **Attorneys' Fees and Costs**

If litigation is commenced, your claim will likely be brought under the Florida Whistleblower Act ("FWA"). Under the FWA, a court may award attorneys' fees to the prevailing party whether that is you or Employer. In essence, if you pursue your claim under the FWA and lose, the Court may order that you pay Employer's attorneys' fees.

## IV. **RELEASE**

If your case is settled, you will likely be required to sign a release that includes a release of Employer from further responsibility and liability for at least your claims against them for violating the retaliation laws. Employer may also insist that you release them for all other claims including past and present injuries, damages, and losses sustained by you relating to Employer. Essentially, if a settlement is reached and you sign a release, you will most likely not be able to bring any further claims against the Employer.

## V. **LITIGATION PROCESS**

If we are unable to reach a settlement agreement with Employer during the pre-suit period, we will probably begin the litigation process, which can sometime be a lengthy process without any guarantee you will ever recover. The following outlines the typical litigation process. Of course, your case may be different, but this will give you a basic understanding of the process.

### A. **Complaint**

A complaint is a court document that initiates your lawsuit by stating your claims, the wrongful conduct of Employer, and the relief that you seek. If a settlement agreement cannot be reached, we will draft the complaint and file it with the Clerk of Court for the Florida Circuit Court where your job was located. Once filed, we will attempt to have the complaint served upon Employer, which can take thirty (30) days or more depending upon the speed of the process serving company hired for the purpose of service.

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## **B. Removal to Federal Court**

In most cases, Employer will remove your case from the Florida Circuit Court where your case was filed to the United States District Court. This means that your case will be heard by a federal court and judge. Employer will have thirty (30) days from the date they were served to remove the case to federal court. The overall removal process can take months.

## **C. Answer**

Generally, Employer will have twenty (20) days to respond to the complaint after it is served. However, if the case was removed to federal court, Employer may have additional time to file an answer.

## **D. Discovery**

After the answer is filed, we will begin the discovery process that will most likely include Employer requiring you to (1) respond to (a) written interrogatories (questions), (b) requests to produce certain documents and records, and (c) requests to admit to certain facts and (2) give a deposition. During this process, Employer may learn facts that weaken your claim or call into question your credibility based on any negative past conduct and witness testimony. Employer may be able to use this against you at trial to cause the jury to find in favor of Employer or substantially reduce any judgment entered by the jury. The following discusses some of the discovery tools that may be used in your case.

### **1. Interrogatories**

Interrogatories are questions that you are required to provide your sworn responses to that can be used against you at trial, including for the purpose of impeaching your credibility. If interrogatories are served on you, you should carefully read the questions and write down all the information you have including dates, witnesses, addresses, facts, and similar information that responds to each interrogatory. It is important that you answer each interrogatory that is given to you unless the response calls for information that is irrelevant or protected by privilege. We will help you determine what responses request irrelevant and/or privileged information so that you make the proper objection to them.

### **2. Request for Production**

Request for Production requests you provide certain documents to

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Employer that may help or hurt your case. If request for production are served on you, you should respond to each request unless it asks for irrelevant or privileged documents. We will help you determine what responses request irrelevant and/or privileged information so that you make the proper objection to them.

### **3. Request for Admissions**

Request for Admissions request you admit certain facts as true in your case. As to each request made, you must respond by admitting or denying the facts. Any fact that you admit as true is deemed not to be in dispute in your case and we are unable to argue that that fact is not true at trial. If request for admission are served on you, you should respond to each request unless it asks for irrelevant or privileged information. We will help you determine what responses request irrelevant and/or privileged information so that you make the proper objection to them. Any request that you fail to provide an answer to, will be deemed admitted.

### **4. Depositions**

A deposition is your oral testimony taken under oath by a court reporter in response to questions by other attorneys, and in some cases, by an attorney representing you. The testimony is transcribed after the deposition is concluded and is available for use by either side for summary judgment or trial. A judge or jury is not present during the deposition; only the lawyers, the witness, the court reporter, and a representative of each party usually attend. In all likelihood, the proceedings will be held in one of the attorneys' offices or in a court reporter's office.

If a deposition is scheduled in your case, we will provide to you the *Deposition Preparation Booklet* that many clients have found helpful in preparing them for their deposition. The booklet discusses many topics relating to deposition including the following: (a) purpose of a deposition, (b) what to wear, and (c) suggestions relating to your testimony.

## **E. Mediation**

Mediation is a confidential, informal conference where the parties to a dispute meet with a neutral, impartial person called a mediator, in an effort to reach a mutually acceptable agreement. A judge or jury is not present during a mediation; only the lawyers, the parties, and the mediator. The mediator controls the mediation, but does not have authority to make a binding decision or force the parties to accept a settlement with which they are not satisfied. The mediator helps the parties voluntarily reach a settlement of the dispute. He or she is not to

be bias in favor of either party, but may bring up positive and negative issues in an attempt to have all parties understand the entire case.

If mediation is scheduled in your case, we will provide to you the *Mediation Preparation Booklet* that many clients have found helpful to prepare them for their mediation. The booklet discusses many topics relating to mediation including the purpose of mediation and what to wear.

## **F. Summary Judgment**

Summary judgment takes place after discovery has finished and before the trial date. It can take place at approximately the same time as mediation, or shortly afterward. During summary judgment the opposing party has an opportunity to argue to the judge that based on the facts uncovered during discovery, the law is clear that you could not win at trial. In the event you lose at summary judgment, your case is finished and you may or may not appeal the judge's decision. If you lose at summary judgment you may also be required to pay for the opposing party's costs of litigation. Your attorney will educate you about the likelihood of succeeding at summary judgment as your cases progresses. It is difficult to ascertain a likelihood of success when discovery is not yet complete.

## **G. Trial**

The purpose of a jury trial is to review facts of your claim, including your lost wages. If trial is scheduled in your case, we will provide to you the *Trial Preparation Booklet* that many clients have found helpful to prepare them for their trial. The booklet discusses many topics relating to trial.

## **H. Appeal**

Please be advised that even if we prevail at trial, Employer can appeal the judgment or sometimes may not be solvent by the time a judgment is entered. As you know, our contract with you provides that we will not represent you in an appeal unless a separate agreement can be reached. In any event, even if we obtain a judgment we may not be able to collect any funds from Employer based on the judgment. Accordingly, you need to pay particular attention to Employer's ability to pay a judgment because they may not have sufficient money and/or assets. Also, if we proceed into the discovery process, Employer will likely incur significant legal expenses to pay their attorney. This could potentially exhaust the money and/or assets they currently have and you may not recover from Employer. Even if Employer does have sufficient money and/or assets, they may decide to abandon or voluntarily dissolve the corporation in an attempt to avoid liability for any size demand or judgment.

## I. Tolling Agreement

We may attempt to enter into a tolling agreement with Employer if it appears settlement negotiations have the potential of being successful. A tolling agreement is essentially a contract between you and Employer in which Employer agrees, among other things, to waive its rights to contend that (1) any of your claims are barred with respect to any time period that is covered by the tolling agreement and (2) any administrative agency or court is without jurisdiction to entertain such claims. In essence, a tolling agreement provides that if you file a lawsuit before the expiration of it, Employer will consider the effective date of the tolling agreement as the date of filing the lawsuit if you file a lawsuit before it expires.