

A Vote on Paid Sick Leave in May

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In October of last year, the Community Service Society (CSS) and A Better Balance (ABB) released a report, [Sick in the City: What the Lack of Paid Leave Means for Working New Yorkers](#), that in line with national findings indicated that workers without paid sick leave often go to work sick, endangering themselves, their co-workers and, particularly in the service sector, customers. The number of workers in New York City in this situation is huge, with conservative estimates of 1.3 million.

A bill was introduced in the City Council last year by Councilmember Gail Brewer with 37 sponsors - a veto-proof margin. At the request of the Council leadership, the bill never came up for a vote. Now it's been reintroduced with 35 sponsors and seems certain to pass if it reaches the floor in May. The major opponents are businesses, which believe that in the midst of a recession it's unfair to burden businesses big and small with a new mandate. This was almost the exact same opposition that elements in the business community raised in terms of the imposition of child labor laws and workplace safety 70 years ago.

Frances Perkins, F.D.R.'s labor secretary, who led the charge on the treatment of workers and bans on child labor, was trained in social work in a CSS program and corresponded with CSS regularly over her many years of public service. Her tough insistence that the United States had to set the standard for the developed world in insuring that workers weren't subjected to abuse that was all too common in other countries was what helped the U.S. to assume its position as moral leader of the free world. The fact that she came out of the social work world of CSS and progressive New York wasn't an accident.

The opposition to paid sick leave in New York has been fierce. It falls into two main themes: that in the midst of a recession this isn't the time to impose burdens on business and that workers, if given the chance, will abuse the law. The first argument is backwards. In our polling, which was in large measure the basis of our October report, it was evident that because of the economic crisis, workers when seriously ill were showing up at work because they couldn't afford the loss of pay and were fearful of losing their job if they were absent.

Sick workers on the job in the food service, personal service, and child care arena, exposing customers young and old to infection or operating complex machinery while ill may be something we'd expect in Dickens' time. But for New York City in 2010, it's simply crazy.

As to possible employee abuse, other cities that have passed these regulations (San Francisco, Milwaukee, Washington, D.C.) have reported no negative impacts on large and small businesses or any systemic signs of abuse. What the critics have right is that we don't know what to expect. Laws may have to be amended if there are unforeseen consequences, but that shouldn't stop this bill being passed by the Council and signed by Mayor Bloomberg.

Just as it was unacceptable not to put guards on slicing machines and working eight year-old children 10 hour shifts, it's time for giving ill workers the time they need to recover and safeguard the rest of us from infection or illness-related mistakes on the job.