

La Nueva Mayoría

By David R. Jones



All New York's Workers Deserve Paid Sick Leave

By David R. Jones
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Nearly three quarters of low-income Latino workers in New York City don't have paid sick leave. These are workers who can least afford to lose their pay when illness strikes. More than half of low-income Latino respondents in a Community Service Society (CSS) survey said they have less than \$500 to fall back on in case of an emergency. In these circumstances, these parents must often choose between their paychecks and caring for a sick child.

Over a million working New Yorkers are without paid sick leave. Since October 2010, a paid sick leave bill has languished in a City Council committee. It has a veto-proof number of supporters, but the bill has not been brought to the Council floor for a vote. Council Speaker Christine Quinn, claiming to be concerned about the impact on business, has bottled up the bill in committee.

Many worker organizations have banded together to support paid sick leave legislation, including the Central Labor Council and local unions such as 1199 United Healthcare Workers and 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union. Although most workers in the city are not unionized, unions are reaching out to help all workers get basic benefits on the job. CSS surveys have shown that an overwhelming majority of New Yorkers in all income groups support a law requiring employers to provide paid sick leave.

Opponents of paid sick leave have engaged in a number of scare tactics. They argue that a paid sick leave law will cause job losses. But economic research and the actual experience from places that have already implemented paid sick days policies show this will not happen.

San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Connecticut have paid sick leave laws where no one has to choose between their health and their job. Their economies have not been damaged because of these laws. Paid sick days reduce turnover and job loss. That helps the local economy because one business's steady worker is another business's steady customer.

Opponents also argue that a paid sick leave law would force businesses to leave the city. Large businesses generally provide sick pay, so it would not be an issue for them. Mom-and-Pop stores – which are 62 percent of all businesses in the city – would not be required

to provide paid leave. Businesses like restaurants and retail, two industries that often lack sick days, are not going to incur the much greater costs of relocation, the loss of their customers and access to the lucrative New York City market to avoid paying for a few sick days a year for valued employees.

Opponents claim that almost 90 percent of New York City workers already have paid sick leave. That estimate comes via a corporate group fighting against paid sick days, and is based on online responses from 708 firms with an average size of 585 — not a scientific survey. Local data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that 63 percent of workers in the bottom wage quarter lack a single paid sick day, compared to just 16 percent of those in the top quarter. The consequences of not having paid sick leave are real. A 2010 report from the National Opinion Research Center found that 23 percent of workers have lost a job or been threatened with job loss for taking time off because of illness.

It is we who bear the costs of business not providing paid sick leave when germs are transmitted to customers at restaurants, parents send sick children to school because they cannot afford to take the day off, and workers end up in emergency rooms because they cannot get treated during work hours.

The best solution would be a national law requiring businesses to provide paid sick leave. But given the gridlock in Washington, New York City should adopt its own paid sick leave legislation now.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.