

Paid Sick Leave for One Million New York Workers

As we celebrate Labor Day this weekend, 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. Mayor Bloomberg has announced that he is against paid sick leave legislation. And Council Speaker Christine Quinn, claiming to be concerned about the impact on business, has bottled up the bill in committee.

More than half of low-income black workers and nearly three quarters of low-income Latino workers in the city don't have paid sick leave. These are workers who can least afford to lose their pay when illness strikes. Consider that half of low-income respondents in a CSS survey said they have less than \$500 to fall back on in case of an emergency. In these circumstances, low-income working parents must often choose between their paychecks and caring for a sick child.

Support Growing

A critical mass of New Yorkers have banded together to support paid sick leave legislation, including the Central Labor Council and many 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.

Community Service Society surveys have shown that an overwhelming majority of New Yorkers in all income groups support a law requiring employers to provide paid sick leave.

Enlightened business owners support paid sick leave because they understand that they are better off when sick workers don't come in and get everyone else sick.

Opponents of paid sick days have engaged in a number of scare tactics. They argue that a paid sick days 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. If anything, the laws have been an equalizer for firms that already provided paid leave and those that now must do so. Moreover, 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 days 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. And small start-ups will have a grace period of a year to comply with the law. It defies logic to think that businesses like restaurants and retail, two industries that often lack sick days, would

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.

Public Health Concern

Much of the cost of not providing paid sick days is shifted from employers to the public. It's the rest of us who bear the costs 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.

A mother of two young daughters living in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn and working as a licensed cosmetologist for one of the largest cosmetics retailers in the world has the last word.

"I am a member of the Retail Action Project, an organization of retail workers working to improve opportunities and standards. I have worked in the retail industry for many years without any paid sick time. As a mother working two jobs to support my daughters – choosing between going to work sick or losing wages is a choice I've had to make again and again over the years.

"My younger daughter is six years old, and she's had more than her fair share of medical problems. She's had to go to the ER a few times. When she's in the hospital and I can't make it for my shift, I always tell my manager with as much notice as I can. Yet, each time my daughter has gotten sick, I've worried about whether it will cause problems at my job. One time, after I'd already called my manager from the hospital, I received a call asking me to still come in! Despite having a doctor's note, I still get disciplined by my manager and I lost wages I couldn't afford to lose.

"I urge you to support paid sick days legislation for all retail workers who don't have paid time off don't have to choose between keeping our jobs and caring for our children."

David R. Jones, Esq., is President and CEO of the Community Service Society of New York (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: www.cssny.org.

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