

Paid sick days bill would end shame of city

It is Dickensian," said Nancy Rankin, the author of "Still Sick in the City," a just-released Community Service Society report on the lack of paid sick days among working New Yorkers.

More than a million city workers don't get paid if they call in sick, the report found. Even worse, they can be fired.

That's what happened to Guillermo Barrero, a 38-year-old Mexican immigrant and father of two. After working as a cook seven days a week for seven years at the same Brooklyn coffee shop, he became sick at work and had to be rushed to the hospital by his wife. His boss, "la señora," as he calls her, became so angry that she summarily fired him.

"You don't care about your job — if you leave now, don't come back," Barrero says the woman told him. Pale, feverish and trembling, Barrero left work and spent three days in the hospital.

Barrero's story is not new, it actually happened in 2009, but to the city's great shame three years later, the number of people who cannot afford to get sick in New York is even greater.

Nearly 64% of low-income workers lacked paid sick time in 2011. For Hispanics that number jumped to 76%.

The risks to the financial security and health of workers, their families and the wider public are potentially devastating.

Many of these employees work in food service and are public school parents. When they or their children get sick they need to stay at home. But without paid sick days that would mean losing income or, like Barrero, losing their jobs. For people in the lower rungs of the salary scale it is a difficult proposition.

Yet, if the City Council passes the Paid Sick Days bill introduced by Councilwoman Gale Brewer (D-Manhattan) in 2009 and in 2010, and amended last month, workers would benefit and the health risks for New Yorkers would be greatly diminished.

The legislation is supported by most New Yorkers and already

has 35 sponsors, enough to override the veto Bloomberg has threatened.

"The mayor is so worried about health that he is grading restaurants A, B and C," Rankin said. "But he forgets about the health of the workers and the risk to public health they represent when forced to go to work sick."

The bill would require employers to provide a modest amount of paid sick time, and in its latest version, mom-and-pop stores (those with five employees or less) would only have to give workers five days sick leave per year without pay and could not fire them.

The chambers of commerce oppose the legislation, arguing that it would place too much of a financial burden on small businesses.

"We have been getting positive support from women and minority-based groups, doctors, nurses, etc., who realize the public health risks of not passing this legislation," Brewer said.

Yet, despite its urgency and its overwhelming support, Council Speaker Christine Quinn has not allowed the bill to be voted on. She has mayoral aspirations and has allied herself with the big businesses.

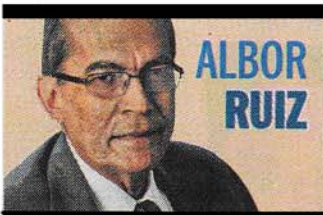
Quinn's office emailed us this, "...in the economic environment we are in, small businesses are hanging on by a thread in many cases. And I think, although this goal is laudable, it's not one that I can support."

But many small business people think otherwise.

"The benefits of this bill are much greater than its costs," said Noel Minaya, who owns New Heights Supply, a hardware store in Manhattan.

"If you treat employees as human beings, they are more loyal," Minaya said. "Besides, customers don't want to see sick employees. San Francisco has had a law like this for several years and it has worked fine. New York should follow its example."

As Barrero said, "It is unfair, no one wants to get sick. This is the 21st century; people should not be treated like this."



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