

## **Pass the Paid Sick Leave Bill**

Considering the terrible state of the economy, many people are thankful to be working these days. However, workers should not have to choose between their health and their jobs. But for many New York City workers – especially low-wage workers - without paid sick leave and desperate to hold on to their jobs in the midst of a brutal recession, that’s a choice they are forced to make. It does not have to be this way.

A bill mandating paid sick leave for New York City’s workers is being introduced today in the City Council. It is long overdue. New York’s Working Families Party has been campaigning for a paid sick leave ordinance for years. This legislation is an acknowledgement that nearly every worker at some time will need to be away from the job to take care of their own health needs or the health needs of members of their family. Yet about 1.5 million workers in New York City are not entitled to any paid sick leave.

Many of us take it for granted that we can stay home when we are ill or to care for a sick child or spouse. When you get sick, it’s probably in your interest and that of your employer, as well as your co-workers, that you stay home.

### **No Option**

But for many low-wage workers who must put their personal health at risk or fear the loss of their job, staying at home is not an option. More than three million New Yorkers – overwhelmingly Black and Latino residents - live in low-wage families, with household incomes near or below the federal poverty line (\$22,050 for a family of four). These low-income New Yorkers comprise about 40 percent of the city’s population. In many ways, their daily lives have little in common with the city’s affluent or even its middle class residents.

The latest Community Service Society (CSS) survey of New Yorkers, “The Unheard Third,” revealed that only 40 percent of low-income workers receive paid sick leave on the job compared to two-thirds of higher income workers. Consider that more than half of low-income New Yorkers have less than \$500 in savings for emergencies, and the choice between working when ill or staying home becomes moot for workers without paid sick leave.

One of the reasons that low-wage workers are significantly less likely to have paid sick time than other members of the workforce is that they are more likely than other wage groups to be employed by small firms – businesses with less than 50 workers. The smaller the size of the firm, the less likely that its workers will be offered job benefits such as paid sick days or health insurance.

### **City Council Bill**

The City Council bill states that all employees have the right to paid sick leave, at a minimum of one hour of paid sick time for every 30 hours worked by an employee. Employers would not be required to provide more than 72 hours of sick time for an employee in a calendar year. Because of their precarious financial situation, small businesses would not have to provide more than 40 hours of paid sick time in a calendar year.

New York City is not the first place to introduce mandated paid sick leave. In November 2006, the San Francisco Paid Sick Leave Ordinance passed as a ballot initiative sponsored by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. It mandated that all employers grant their employees working in the city a minimum amount of paid sick leave. The law provides time off for health-related needs for the worker as well as the workers’

family members. The ordinance applies to all employees working within the city, including part-time and temporary employees. It has provided sick leave to an estimated 115,800 additional private-sector workers.

In March 2008, the District of Columbia became the second locality to pass a mandate guaranteeing paid sick leave. Milwaukee voters passed a sick leave mandate in November 2008. A number of states, including California, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, have introduced legislation for paid sick leave.

On May 18, 2009, Representative Rosa L. DeLauro, Democrat from Connecticut, introduced the [Healthy Families Act of 2009 \(H.R. 2460\)](#) in the U.S. House of Representatives. Since businesses, particularly small businesses, are still reeling from the recession, this may be a difficult year to pass federally mandated paid sick leave. But changes in administrations and the composition of Congress, together with concerns over the swine flu virus, suggest that this might be the year that mandated paid sick leave passes.

Paid sick leave is important for a number of reasons. When parents are unable to take time off from their jobs to attend to a sick child at home, it often means that the child goes to school ill. Low-wage workers in areas such as security guards and restaurant workers who get no paid sick leave on the job are a threat to our health and security.

### **Health Hazard**

Sick children in school, security guards ill on the job, ailing restaurant workers handling food – what we have here is a public health hazard. And people recognize the magnitude of the problem. 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.

It is time to end the injustice of workers having to choose between the health concerns of their children or themselves and holding onto their jobs. This should be a priority issue not only for the members of the City Council but also for Mayor Bloomberg. The City Council bill should be passed and signed into law.

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Join the discussion on how we can improve the lives of low-wage workers by making your voice heard on our Turnstile blog at <http://turnstile.cssny.org/turnstile/>.

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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 160 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](http://www.cssny.org).

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