

ACTIVISM

'When Workers Work Sick, It's Unhealthy for All of Us': New York's Battle for Paid Sick Leave

The U.S. is the only rich country in the world that fails to guarantee workers some form of paid sick leave.

By Jin Zhao / AlterNet June 7, 2012



12 COMMENTS

At 3am on a November day last year, Eudocio Alvarado, a 58-year-old worker from Mexico, was cleaning the bar in the Brooklyn restaurant where he worked when a piece of heavy furniture fell on his left foot.



Two days later, Alvarado's injured foot had grown worse and his doctors told him he would need surgery. When he called his boss from the hospital, he was told to come to work the next day.

Now Alvarado works 81 hours a week at a fresh food market, earning a weekly wage of \$380. Tuesdays are his only days off, and he uses them to go to a physical therapist in Coney Island for his recovering foot.

Like Alvarado, Celina Alvarez, an immigrant chef from Mexico, lost her job at a restaurant in Queens after she was hospitalized for four days for a heart problem.

Alvarado and Alvarez are two of the estimated 1.4 to 1.6 million working New Yorkers who have no paid leave whatsoever, for sickness or vacation.

This January, the New York City Paid Sick Time Bill (PSTA) was introduced to the city council to help New York workers without PSL benefits.

Proponents of the bill argue that it would protect workers' rights and bolster public health in New York. Income inequality is greater in New York than in any other large metropolitan area in the country.

PSL legislation makes sense with regard to public health as well. According to a survey commissioned by Community Service Society, a New York-based public policy institute, more than half of workers who handle food and 43% of workers in close contact with children or the elderly do not have PSL benefits.

This year's PSL bill is a revision of an earlier bill from two years ago. In 2010, despite a majority support on the City Council, Speaker Quinn opposed the bill and did not bring it to a vote.

This year, the bill has been revised to better accommodate businesses and has gained support from three-quarters of New Yorkers, across the political spectrum.

Quinn, nevertheless, has spoken on various occasions of her opposition to the bill. In a statement to the Queens Chronicle in response to a pro-PSL bill rally, she said that the bill "will cost us jobs and cost us small business and their future in these tough economic times."

At least she has been consistent — that is, consistently committed to the influence of the "business community" that opposes the bill vehemently. Quinn tows the line of the bill's well-funded opposition: big corporations such as McDonald's, Burger King, KFC, and Olive Garden.

Here are some of those corporations and their lobbyists' ungrounded claims:

att.com advertisement featuring a smartphone and promotional text: 'See today's special offers', 'FREE shipping or in-store pickup'.

Myth: "Paid sick leave would be expensive."

Reality: Paid sick leave could save money for businesses.

Numerous studies have concluded that presenteeism, i.e., showing up to work sick, is a major component of health-related employer cost in the form of on-the-job productivity loss.

Myth: "Paid sick leave would cost jobs."

Reality: The lack of paid sick leave costs jobs and hurts the economy.

To those without paid sick leave, like Alvarado and Alvarez, getting sick may result in losing their jobs. Based on her analysis of a Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey report, Eileen Appelbaum at the Center for Economic and Policy Research concluded that the economic recovery is still too weak to support robust hiring by employers.

Recent research shows that job displacement has a significant shock effect on income levels, and those workers' losses have a negative impact on the economy in general as well, because "families need to earn and spend if we are ever going to see more robust economic growth," as Appelbaum has pointed out.

The success of PSL legislation in San Francisco has confirmed that such legislation is good for employment growth. Two studies conducted by the Institute for Women's Policy Research in 2008 and 2011 both show that since 2007, when San Francisco implemented its PSL law, the county's job growth has been stronger than other Bay Area counties.

Myth: "Paid sick leave would kill small businesses."

Reality: Small businesses would do just fine.

att.com advertisement featuring a smartphone and promotional text: 'See today's special offers', 'FREE shipping or in-store pickup'.

That is one of the favorite arguments held up by the opposition. However, IWPR's data show that only one in seven employers reported adverse effects on profitability after San Francisco implemented its PSL law in 2007.

In New York, the PSL bill has been supported by small business owners such as Freddy Castiblanco, the owner of Terraza 7 Live Music in Queens, whose business depends on low-income workers' patronage.

Myth: "Workers will abuse this policy."

Reality: Workers tend to under-use the paid sick days provided to them.

Recent survey data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that full-time private industry workers who were provided with PSL did not use all the paid sick leave days provided. This is confirmed by IWPR's survey, which shows that the median worker in San Francisco reported using just three days of PSL in 2010 — significantly less than the nine-day limit -- while more than one-quarter of workers did not use any PSL at all.

Despite Quinn's expressed opposition, recent wins across the country — in Washington DC, Connecticut, Denver, and Seattle — have fueled momentum in New York. "We're optimistic about the campaign for paid sick days," said Caicedo, "because this year, we're seeing more and more groups, including small businesses and unions, sign on in support of the common sense idea that when workers have to go to work sick, it's not healthy for any of us.

Nationwide, Bravo sees New York and Massachusetts as two strong campaigns that have "similar ingredients" — that is "the broad coalition of labor unions, small business owners, everyone from school nurses, LGBT groups, to folks who care about seniors and children and ending poverty, and, obviously, women's groups."

This is encouraging, especially considering that the U.S. is the only rich country in the world that fails to guarantee workers some form of PSL. Like many other pieces of progressive legislation throughout history, change often starts with local grassroots efforts.

"This is an issue with great capacity for wins," said Bravo. "In these tough times, people just cannot afford to lose their jobs for being a good parent or following doctor's order, and at a time when budgets make it hard for legislators to do much for working people, here is something concrete they can do that is essentially budget neutral and that has a huge impact on people's lives, even though it is a fairly small thing."

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