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'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

holiday.

professionals.

2010 PSL bill.)

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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. After a visit to the ER, Alvarado had to call his boss to request sick leave. He was granted two days' leave, unpaid.



12 COMMENTS

come to work the next day. "If you don't go to work, you're going to lose your job," Alvarado's boss told him. Unable to go to work the next day, Alvarado lost his job. 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. He still does not have

paid sick leave, and with the wages he makes, he cannot afford to take any time

off - not when he's sick, and not for Christmas, Thanksgiving or any other

he would need surgery. When he called his boss from the hospital, he was told to

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. Sitting in the Queens office of Make the Road, a non-profit labor advocacy organization, she said what she experienced was not uncommon among workers she knew. For instance, a friend's hand became disfigured after an accident with hot liquid at work, and she had to continue working despite the injury.

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. Workers

who are most in need of paid sick leave are low-wage workers, women and

people of color, according to Joe Dinkin of the Working Families Party New York, a paid sick leave (PSL) legislation supporter. A CommunityService Society report published last year shows that 64% of low-income workers in New York do not have a single day of PSL, compared to 35% of higher-income workers. Among those lower-income workers, mothers (70%), who often must take care of sick children, and Latinos (76%) were found to be more likely to lack PSL. 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. The bill is now waiting for Council Speaker Christine Quinn's approval to be brought to a vote.

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. The gap between the rich and the poor is even wider when you factor in benefits like PSL. As Vicki Shabo of the

National Partnership for Women and Family writes, "For families already on the

Indeed, the jobs of low-wage workers like Alvarado and Alvarez are often on the

brink of poverty, a few paid sick days can have devastating consequences."

line when they get sick or injured. PSL legislation could provide a safety net for workers in poverty or near-poverty and protect them from falling further into financial crisis because of an accident or a sick child. 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. PSL legislation would encourage sick workers to stay home and prevent them from transmitting contagious disease to their coworkers and customers. Additionally, PSL legislation could reduce healthcare costs and is supported by health

and did not bring it to a vote. The reason? As Quinn told the NewYorkDaily News, "I have to help small business stay alive in a fragile economy." 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. On the city council, 37 out of 51 members support it, a majority that

could override Mayor Bloomberg's veto. (The mayor threatened a veto of the

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

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

McDonald's, Burger King, KFC, and Olive Garden. These corporations "get big

tows the line of the bill's well-funded opposition: big corporations such as

lobbyists like the National Restaurant Association, or the NFIB [National

Federation of Independent Business] wrapping themselves in the flag of momand-pop shops, when they are really speaking for multimillion-dollar corporations," said Ellen Bravo, director of Family Values @ Work, an advocate group for PSL legislation. Here are some of those corporations and their lobbyists' ungrounded claims: Myth: "Paid sick leave would be att.com expensive." See today's Reality: Paid sick leave could save special offers

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money for businesses.

Numerous studies have concluded that

presenteeism, i.e., showing up to work

sick, is a major component of health-

American companies in 2004. In 2010, that number grew to an estimated \$180 billion, surpassing the cost of absenteeism, \$118 billion. Myth: "Paid sick leave would cost jobs."

related employer cost in the form of on-the-job productivity loss. Harvard

Business Review put an annual \$150 billion price tag on presenteeism for

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

is still too weak to support robust hiring by employers. n other words, a job lost

a Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey report, Eileen Appelbaum at the Center for Economic and Policy Research concluded that the economic recovery

result in losing their jobs. Based on her analysis of

for one worker does not necessarily mean a job gained by another. 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

Myth: "Paid sick leave would kill small businesses." Reality: Small businesses would do just fine. That is one of the favorite arguments att.com 2:45 held up by the opposition. However,

supported by small business owners such as Freddy Castiblanco, the owner of

Terraza 7 Live Music in Queens, whose business depends on low-income

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

IWPR's data show that only one in

seven employers reported adverse

effects on profitability after San

In New York, the PSL bill has been

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been stronger than other Bay Area counties.

workers' patronage. Myth: "Workers will abuse this policy."

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2010 - significantly less than the nine-day limit -- while more than one-quarter of workers did not use any PSL at all.

the median worker in San Francisco reported using just three days of PSL in

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. It's time for New York to be a leader."

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

Nationwide, Bravo sees New York and Massachusetts as two strong campaigns

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

though it is a fairly small thing."

essentially budget neutral and that has a huge impact on people's lives, even

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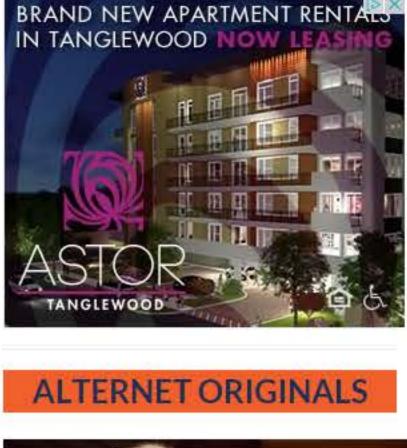


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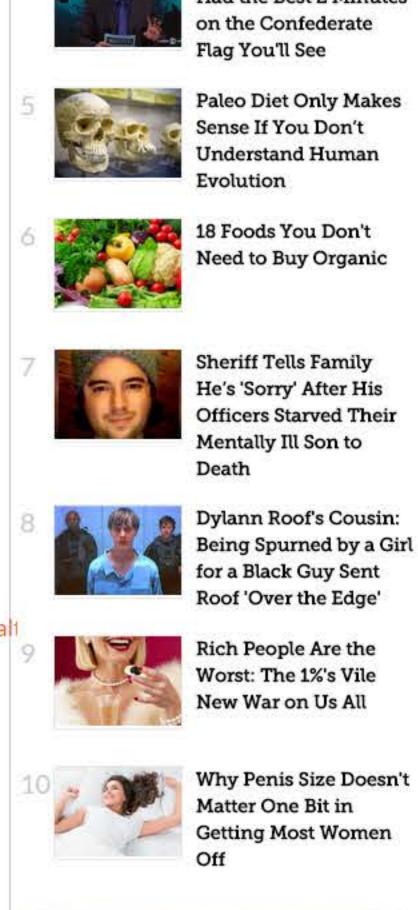






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