

THE URBAN AGENDA

By David R. Jones



Paid Sick Leave: The Time Has Come

Paid sick leave isn't dead in New York. It just went on a bit of a vacation. Yesterday, a coalition of supporters held a rally on the steps of City Hall in support of a bill in the City Council that would institute paid sick leave for the million and a half working New Yorkers who are without it. The bill, in one form or another, has been around for more than two years.

But a lot has changed. Now the coalition's support is both stronger and wider. Earlier this month, George Gresham, the president of 1199 SEIU; in an Amsterdam News column, stated, "Paid sick leave is more than an individual human right. It is also an important public health issue." Gresham pointed out that one of the jobs least likely to offer paid sick leave is restaurant work, where workers, food, and the public come together.

Thirty-five Council members have expressed their support for paid sick leave. Also on board now are the New York City Central Labor Council, the Committee of Interns and Residents, and the Doctors Council of SEIU.

Over the past year, while the bill was stuck in committee, changes have been made to respond to specific concerns of some of the business community. For instance, the law would not cover companies with less than five employees, thus exempting the many "Mom and Pop" establishments in the city.

Public Support Growing

It's not as if New York City is in the forefront on this issue. San Francisco and Washington, D.C., have had paid sick leave for several years. Seattle adopted a paid sick leave law last year, as did Connecticut, becoming the first state to do so. If they can, why can't New York? 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.

Some in the business community argue that a weak economy is not the time for paid sick leave. But there are also enlightened business owners who support paid sick leave - the USA Latino Chamber of Commerce and New York Women's Chamber of Commerce, for example - because they understand that they are better off when sick workers don't come in and get everyone else sick. And with economic hardships hitting so many New

Yorkers, including many of those who are still working, this is a sensible step for the city to take. Now is when New Yorkers need this workers' benefit.

Many of us take it for granted that we can stay home from work 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.

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 (\$22,350 for a family of four). These low-income New Yorkers comprise about 40 percent of the city's population. 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 benefits.

Public Health Threat

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, quite possibly infecting other children. Low-wage employees in areas such as restaurant workers and security guards who get no paid sick leave on the job are a threat to our health and security when they feel forced to work when ill.

Mayor Bloomberg has come out against the issue, citing the threat of phantom economic disasters that haven't seemed to have occurred in other localities with paid sick leave laws. Council President Christine Quinn should allow a vote on the paid sick leave bill. The Council should pass the bill and if Mayor Bloomberg vetoes it, the Council should then pass it over his veto.

Paid sick leave laws are gaining momentum across the country. The time has come for New York City to act. Workers should no longer be forced to choose between the health concerns of their children or themselves and holding onto their jobs.

The Community Service Society will soon be releasing an update to its 2009 report, "Sick in the City," which set out the paid sick leave situation in New York City.

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 165 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.