



Family Leave Foes Do Not Want To Listen

CourierPostOnline — Sunday, December 16, 2007

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For the *Courier-Post*

The business lobby really should stop spewing its nonsense that paid family leave would doom the state's economy. In fact, getting partially paid to care for a sick family member or for a newborn is good for families and for the workplace. And to the business community I say: Prove me wrong.

The false claims I'm hearing now about my bill, S-2249, to create a worker-supported fund for paid family leave are the same ones I heard when I fought to raise the minimum wage two years ago. The clamor is fear-based, insulting to workers and divisive.

I am certain that passing a paid family leave bill now in both the Senate and the Assembly and sending it to the governor is the absolute right thing to do. To opponents I say: Prove me wrong.

You might have heard the radio pitches from the NJ Time to Care Coalition, a group of more than 60 labor, community, parent, child advocacy, research, faith-based and academic organizations, pointing out that a paid family leave program won't cause the sky to fall.

Unfortunately, well-financed opponents of my bill, led by the Business and Industry Association, are promoting a family-last attitude that casts a blind eye toward the workplace benefits of peace of mind in workers who need to pay bills or take trips to reach dying parents.

If you believe opponents of paid family leave, it will be the death knell for business, as we know it, in New Jersey. Companies will flee across our borders to Pennsylvania, Delaware and New York. Small business will shut down. Women will never get hired again because they have the babies.

Well, guess what? All those charges are baloney and, together, they weigh a lot more than the 10-pound loaf that was dropped off at the Business and Industry Association headquarters on West State Street last week by the NJ Time to Care Coalition. If anyone doubts me, I invite them to prove me wrong.

While the fear merchants want supporters to be consumed by answering their false charges, the pure and simple truth is that the proposal would enable workers to take up to 10 weeks a year caring for a sick family member or a newborn and receive two thirds of their weekly pay up to \$502 from a fund supported entirely by average weekly worker contributions of about a dollar.

There's no hidden business tax, no secret income tax, no new financial burden on employers. Small businesses with fewer than 50 employees don't even have to save the job of a worker who chooses to take family leave. If anyone doubts any of my claims, I stand ready to be proven wrong.

The state and federal leave programs in place now are perfectly fine for all those blessed with a hidden pot of gold to pay bills during family crises. The paths of most families aren't paved with gold. If you doubt that fact, ask around – I'll bet your neighbors, your colleagues at work or the person behind you in the convenience store will all prove you wrong.

My approach to seeking out support for paid family leave has been conciliatory. I've been willing to discuss reducing the amount of authorized time off to the limit of six weeks that is set in California which adopted a similar program in 2003.

But at some point I realized that opponents weren't listening to any compromises. In fact, they weren't hearing a thing.

Instead, they were content to abuse their authority as employers to instill the greatest fear in workers possible by claiming, wrongly, that if they embrace a paid family leave program, they will destroy the source of their income. That willingness to instill fear is beyond being wrong. It's insidious.

It can be noted that California hasn't crumbled into the Pacific Ocean since it adopted paid family leave. Businesses there haven't been forced to shut down because workers have abused the program.

That's what we should have for New Jersey workers because behind most every worker there's some kind of family out there somewhere, whether it's made up of healthy kids in school or children with disabilities or parents with Alzheimer's disease.

In my professional life, as both a public official and as a member of the Iron Workers Local 399, I've found that families pretty much all have the same kinds of needs at different times. This paid family leave program is hardly a cure-all, but it's a way to help families deal with unforeseen and, in many cases, unaffordable uncertainties.

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