

Protection for Horses But Not Sick Workers?

Posted: April 29, 2010

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Mayor Bloomberg signed a new law this past Tuesday, mandating that carriage horses receive a five week vacation and two yearly medical examinations by a licensed veterinarian (Int. No. 35). The mayor's daughter's standing as a world class equestrian has to make signing this legislation especially satisfying.

But I have to note that this progressive legislation for animal rights follows a long tradition in the United States, and New York City in particular, of providing more protection to animals than to children and workers. The ASPCA, founded in 1866, managed to get legislation passed in nearly every state in the nation protecting animals decades before similar legislation was passed protecting children from abuse.

Comprehensive workplace safety regulations for workers took even longer. It wasn't until December of 1970 that President Nixon signed the Occupational Safety and Health Act, providing basic standards for workplace safety. Regretfully, it didn't provide for five weeks of vacation and two annual physicals.

So why am I raising this? In May, City Council hearings will begin for the second year on a bill to mandate paid sick leave for all full-time employees working for New York City businesses. When first introduced by Councilmember Gail Brewer, the bill had 37 sponsors. Currently, it has 35 - a veto proof margin. But the bill has met massive opposition from some in the business community, raising the possibility that this legislation will damage businesses in the midst of the recession.

The bill states that all employees have the right to paid sick leave - nine days a year for employees of large businesses and five days a year for employees of small businesses. The definition of a small business was changed from under 10 employees to fewer than 20; this will mean that most businesses will only have to provide five days paid sick leave.

The Community Service Society of New York did extensive polling on this issue in the summer of 2009 - as well as an analysis of our survey findings in the CSS report "[Sick in the City: What the Lack of Paid Leave Means for Working New Yorkers](#)" - and got back some frightening responses. Low-wage workers overwhelmingly lacked paid sick leave and were routinely going to work sick, even though this endangered themselves, customers, and fellow employees. The economic realities made it virtually impossible for them to take a sick day off for fear of losing income or their jobs. No one has rebutted our findings and

national data confirm what we found. Already, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee have adopted required paid sick leave laws that have shown no adverse impact on local businesses.

Moreover, New York City, like the rest of America, is showing significant increases in workforce productivity - city workers are working longer hours, at less pay, and with greater efficiency than virtually anywhere else in the developed world. New York City's workers put in the time and effort.

The mayor and the City Council speaker have not expressed a formal position on the proposed legislation, although they both, to their credit, have expressed support for the concept.

It's time for the City Council and the mayor to do what is right and humane. If we can protect working horses, it should be possible to allow a White Castle server to take a day off with the flu. Perhaps next year we can move on to the five week vacation and the two annual checkups - even if they're only with a vet.