

Unions call on Portland to require paid sick leave

A proposed ordinance could make the City a pioneer on human rights and public health

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

A union-backed coalition is gearing up to ask City Council to make Portland a leader on human rights. Workers have a guaranteed right to paid sick leave in 163 other countries, but not in the United States. But in the last five years, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Seattle, and the state of Connecticut have passed laws requiring employers to provide paid sick days. If Portland passes such an ordinance and the trend continues to take off, it would be an unmistakable improvement in the lives of some of the nation's lowest-paid workers.

Right now, about four in 10 private sector workers in the United States have no paid sick time. When they get sick, they must either stay home and lose income (or even be disciplined, in some workplaces) ... or go to work sick, and in some cases expose co-workers and the public to contagious illness.

Making matters worse, the workers who don't have paid sick leave are also

usually the poorest workers — who can least afford to lose wages. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 23 percent of the lowest paid workers — those in the bottom 10 percent — have paid sick leave.

“What that means in real terms,” says Portland campaign coordinator Andrea Paluso, “is people go to work sick and/or they send their kids to school or childcare sick because they can't take the time off. And that has real public health consequences.”

Paluso is director of the group Family Forward Oregon, and a member of the state committee of the Oregon Working Families Party, a union-sponsored political party. She says paid sick leave is an emerging national movement.

San Francisco was the trailblazer: Since 2007, it has required every employer to provide paid sick leave, which workers can use when they or a family member are sick. Workers there accrue one hour of sick leave for every 30 hours they work, and can accumulate up to 72 hours of sick leave (40 hours at workplaces with fewer than 10 employees.)

In Portland, the campaign, known as “Everybody Benefits,” has been working on proposed language for an ordinance, and has been seeking support

from members of City Council. The coalition includes Working America; the Oregon Working Families Party; Oregon AFSCME Council 75; United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555; Service Employees International Union Local 503; and Oregon Nurses Association; as well as Urban League and several small business groups.

Many union members have paid sick days already, but plenty more would directly benefit from an ordinance. Grocery workers represented by Local 555, for example, have paid sick leave — but can't use it until the third day they're sick.

The Portland ordinance would likely have an exception for union workplaces like longshore and building trades, because those workers have other options under their collective bargaining agreements. They typically are dispatched by hiring halls and work short stints for multiple employers. They can choose not to work when they're sick for short periods; and for more serious illnesses, they have short-term disability coverage.

Working America, the AFL-CIO's community organization, has begun talking about paid sick days in its Portland door-to-door canvass operation. Kyle Allen, a Working America canvasser, says 95 percent of Portland residents he's spoken to think paid sick time is something workers should already have. The canvass is gathering let-



Working America organizers Kyle Allen and Tara Murphy (in T-shirts) demonstrate door-talk with fellow canvasser Rob Taylor. Working America, which is the AFL-CIO's community outreach organization, has been going door-to-door gathering support from Portlanders for a paid sick leave ordinance. (Photo courtesy of Working America.)

ters of support for an ordinance. The campaign is also circulating a petition, and gathering people's personal stories about sick leave at everybodybenefitsoregon.org.

On some doorsteps, Working America's sick leave discussion really hits home. One single mom, who for fear of employer retaliation asked that her name and workplace not be identified, told the Labor Press that as a \$10-an-hour full-time worker in a child care center, she can't afford to take the day off when she or her young son get sick. And she gets sick as often as once a month — because many parents don't have paid sick time either, and send

their sick kids to daycare.

Low-wage service-sector workplaces like restaurants, nursing homes, and daycare centers are among the least likely to have paid sick days. So backers say an “earned sick days” law would be a victory for public health as well as human rights.

“Our pitch to commissioners is, ‘You're part of a national movement,’” Paluso said. “This is like child labor or the minimum wage. We want a federal labor standard that applies to everyone in this country.”

“Nobody should have to go to work sick,” Paluso said, “and nobody should lose income because they're sick.”

Portland area janitors avert strike with new agreement

Portland area janitors, members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 49, ratified a new contract with seven janitorial firms that employ some 1,700 workers. The ratification vote was held June 30 — the day the previous contract was set to expire and workers prepared to strike.

The four-year agreement includes a wage increase each year of the contract, which will bring most janitors up to around \$30,000 per year by the end of the term, SEIU said. The new contract also calls for employer contributions for health insurance, one sick day, plus the ability to use vacation for paid sick time. It allows for workers to take extended vacation, giving immigrant workers the time to travel to their home countries.

“We worked hard to get this agreement,” said Brian Leeder, ABM janitor and SEIU executive board member. “It gives us at least one sick day, allows for many of our members to see their families, and gives us some guarantee about wage increases, it will have a big impact on 1,700 families.”

In mid-June, the two sides were not close to an agreement and workers were preparing for a strike. On June 15,

some 200 union janitors and supporters rallied and marched in downtown Portland demanding raises — and paid sick days. Under their previous contract, janitors made \$9.20 to \$12.45 an hour and had no paid sick days.

Local 49 bargaining team member Angel Moo, who cleans Intel for SBM, said the rally was a show of force, demonstrating that janitors were united in their fight.

Portland Mayor Sam Adams and Commissioner Amanda Fritz were there in support, and so were Multnomah County Chair Jeff Cogen and Commissioner Deb Kafoury. Also there were both candidates for Portland mayor — Jefferson Smith and Charlie Hales — plus Mary Nolan, candidate for city commissioner. Adams, Kafoury, Smith and Hales even donned the union's purple and white T-shirt. Both the City and the County employ union-signatory janitorial contractors.

Two weeks later, a deal was done. “This contract raises standards for janitors while maintaining the viability of the industry,” said Maggie Long, Property Services Director at SEIU 49 and chief negotiator.



James Coon



Raymond Thomas



Cynthia Newton



Chris Frost



Cheryl Coon



Charley Gee



Nicole Bockelman

The team at
SWANSON, THOMAS, COON & NEWTON
can help you:

Get Workers' Compensation benefits for on-the-job injuries or illness.

Get Social Security benefits if you can't work.

Recover damages if you are injured by someone's negligence.

Helping injured people for over 25 years.

Workers Compensation

Construction Injuries

Death Claims

Personal Injury/Product Liability

Social Security Disability

Occupational Disease/Mesothelioma

Call us today at **503-228-5222**

Straight answers. No cost for consultation.

SWANSON, THOMAS, COON & NEWTON
ATTORNEYS AT LAW
820 S.W. Second Avenue, Suite 200,
Portland, Oregon 97204
www.stc-law.com

