

... States take the lead on sick leave ... because Congress won't

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also visited Fast Track supporter Brad Ashford of Omaha, Nebraska, on Aug. 17.]

The media advisory billed the 9 a.m. event as a “roundtable discussion.” Actually it was neither round nor a discussion: It was a stage-managed press event with no press questions. It took place in a meeting room at Portland’s iconic White Stag building, and it went like this: Perez, Brown, and Bonamici sat in the center of a U-shaped formation flanked by no fewer than 16 paid sick leave supporters. A dozen press aides and other staff looked on or checked their smart phones, and four reporters, including this one, recorded or took notes. The three principals each praised each other: Bonamici’s “got game,” Perez said. “She’s a star in Washington.” Then Family Forward Oregon head Andrea Paluso moderated a go-round. With 19 discussers and just an hour allotted, the union participants from Service Employees International Union, Oregon Nurses Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and PCUN only had time to introduce themselves and were not heard from again.

The event was meant to highlight “how states, localities, and businesses are taking the lead on enacting paid leave policies.” Oregon is a leader, Perez said, because this year it became the fourth state to require employers to provide paid sick leave, following the passage of local ordinances in Portland and Eugene. That’s a real gain for hundreds of thousands of workers.

Paid sick leave is the law in most of the world, but a bill in Congress to guarantee sick leave nationwide is blocked by Republicans. Republicans have made sick leave a partisan issue in the United States, Perez said. Left unsaid was why top Democrats didn’t propose paid sick leave until they were no longer in control of Congress.

Still, aided by patient on-the-ground organizing by unions and community coalitions, momentum for sick leave is building. And sick leave — like minimum wage increases — polls well with voters.

In Oregon, Democrats control the House, Senate, and governor’s office. They passed sick leave (Oregon was the only state to successfully pass a paid sick leave bill during the 2015 legislative session), but punted on



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— U.S. Labor Secretary Tom Perez

raising the minimum wage.

So as Gov. Brown headed into the roundtable, I swooped in: “Governor, your office was silent when the Legislature discussed raising the minimum wage earlier this year. Do you support it, and if so, do you plan to do anything to help pass it?”

“Certainly I support raising the minimum wage,” Brown answered. “I think the question is how we do it in a way that allows small business to thrive throughout Oregon.”

“Do you have some idea how to do that?” I asked.

Brown said she’ll be discussing it further with unnamed stakeholders in September.

Brown had to leave before the roundtable ended, but Perez and Bonamici stayed to the end, then were driven to the nearby EcoTrust building for a tour of the Laughing Planet Cafe. There was to be a “media availability” after, so I followed.

Franz Spielvogel, owner of the thriving Laughing Planet burrito chain, offers employees 12 weeks of paid maternity/paternity leave, something few American businesses, let alone restaurants, do. There are two tiers at Laughing Planet: Managers can take the leave after working there a year; workers

can take it after two years. Spielvogel said it’s a myth that everyone will get pregnant if their employer offers parental leave; only two of his 298 employees are currently on leave at Laughing Planet.

Perez praised Spielvogel for his parental leave policy, and had a friendly back-and-forth with the company’s top managers. Then Perez and Bonamici got a lesson on how to make a burrito, as TV cameras crowded into the kitchen. Finally, the official media availability commenced. We press got in all of two questions.

Me: “Mr. Secretary, when’s the last time you spoke with President Obama, and what did you discuss?”

“Recently,” Perez said (though pressed, he couldn’t say exactly when). The topic, Perez said, was sick leave and overtime and retirement security and lots of other kitchen-table pocketbook issues. [I had asked that question because it’s rumored that Obama very seldom meets with cabinet members like Perez, a much-admired progressive who in 2014 was placed in charge of a vast array of worker protection programs, from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to minimum wage enforcement to pension protection and on and on.]

TV reporter: “If paid leave is so important, this is not something that became important to-

day. You’ve had years? Why hasn’t this been done?”

The Republicans, Perez said. “The Republican leadership in Washington has been a brick wall on a lot of issues that have historically been non-partisan.”

Still, Perez said, the administration is working hard for America’s workers: “There’s 517 days ’til the weekend, and every single day we’re focused on ‘how do we address building an America of shared prosperity?’”

I was puzzled by what he meant, but in a flash he was on his way. As Perez headed out the door to his black vehicle motorcade, I followed him and asked the question my 10-year-old daughter put me up to: Had he wanted to be Secretary of Labor when he was little?

“Absolutely not,” Perez laughed.

Back at the office, it was Google that answered my question: 517 days was the rough count of how many days Obama has left in office (More than 2,400 days have elapsed since he took the oath of office.) Obama pulled out all the stops to pass Fast Track. What a shame he waited so long to lead on leave.

“Certainly I support raising the minimum wage. I think the question is how we do it in a way that allows small business to thrive throughout Oregon.”

— Governor Kate Brown



Sick leave in Congress

A pair of bills in Congress would guarantee up to seven days of sick leave a year for all workers: paid leave at businesses with over 15 employees, and unpaid at businesses smaller than that.

S. 497 is sponsored by U.S. Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) and is co-sponsored by 30 Democrats, including Maria Cantwell from Washington and Oregon’s Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley.

H.R. 932, an identical bill, is sponsored by Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro (D-CT). It’s cosponsored by 123 Democrats, including Oregon representatives Earl Blumenauer and Suzanne Bonamici.

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