

For Low-Income Workers, Calling in Sick is a Luxury

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AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — For Shannon Henderson, getting a cold or flu could be the difference between putting food on the table and going hungry.

As a part-time customer service representative at a Wal-Mart in Sacramento,

ing companies for wage hikes are steering the conversation toward paid sick leave. The debate has caught the attention of governments and companies alike.

President Barack Obama is calling for federal legislation that would require companies to guarantee workers paid sick days. And

for Family Values @ Work, a network of coalitions fighting to pass paid sick days and family leave policies. “When you don’t have sick pay, you get docked.”

The new focus comes amid wide disparities between the benefits received by the top and bottom rungs of the corporate ladder. Sixty-one percent of



AP PHOTO/RICH PEDRONCELLI

In this Friday, May 15, 2015 photo, Shannon Henderson poses outside the Wal-Mart store where she works as a part-time customer service representative, in Sacramento, Calif. Henderson is one of an estimated 40 million American workers for who calling in sick is a luxury. If they don’t work, they don’t get paid.

percent of part-time workers do, according to BLS.

Despite the disparities, some industry groups are fighting against laws requiring sick leave pay. Lisa Horn, director of congressional affairs at Society for

Human Resource Management, a human resource management trade group, says many companies are leaning toward policies that lump sick, personal and vacation days together. But she says laws force compa-

nies to scale back on those benefits to keep down the costs associated with people taking sick days off.

“These mandates have a chilling effect on employ-

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Some of the same workers’ rights groups that grabbed headlines recently by pushing companies for wage hikes are steering the conversation toward paid sick leave

California, Henderson is one of an estimated 40 million American workers for who calling in sick is a luxury. If they don’t work, they don’t get paid.

“I’m super afraid of getting sick,” said Henderson, 29, who slathers on hand sanitizer at work in hopes of fending off illness.

Paid sick leave is the next frontier in the fight for the country’s lowest earners. Some of the same workers’ rights groups that grabbed headlines recently by push-

since San Francisco started requiring that in 2007, nearly 20 cities and three states — Connecticut, Massachusetts and California — have passed similar measures.

New York, Maryland and other states are considering laws too. And McDonald’s Corp. and Wal-Mart Stores Inc., which have announced wage hikes recently, are making changes to their paid sick leave policies.

“Paid sick days are a job issue,” said Ellen Bravo, executive director

U.S. workers get at least one paid sick day, according to a national compensation survey of employee benefits conducted last year by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

But only 20 percent of workers whose wages are at the bottom 10 percent get paid sick leave, compared with 87 percent in the top 10 percent. There’s also a difference when comparing part-time and full-time employees: Seventy-four percent of full-time workers get paid sick leave, while 24

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6-3-14