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Enact paid family leave

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Changing workplace standards is never an easy lift. Business and industry, small or large, instinctively resist proposals that benefit employees because they fear that necessarily means a negative impact on the bottom line.

It was that way with the struggle to establish the 40-hour workweek. And efforts over the years to increase the minimum wage have always resulted in protracted fights. That same resistance greeted the idea of allowing workers to take time off -- without pay -- to care for family members.

So it's not surprising that now state business interests are waging a tenacious fight to defeat a bill that would provide paychecks for those who take family leave.

But the campaign to scuttle the legislation is just as wrong and out of step with what is needed as were those earlier battles that pitted workers against bosses.

The paid family leave proposal, scheduled for a vote by the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee today, would permit a worker to take up to 12 weeks to tend to a newborn, a newly adopted child or a sick family member. The worker would get two-thirds of his salary up to a maximum of \$502.

The leave wouldn't cost companies a dime. Instead, workers would pay through a weekly salary deduction that the legislation's sponsors estimate would amount to less than \$1 a week.

So why is the business community on red alert over this one?

The New Jersey Chamber of Commerce argues that the paid leave program would hit small businesses hard. While the current unpaid family leave law exempts companies with fewer than 50 employees, the proposed law would apply to all businesses. Without a doubt, the loss of one or two employees for up to three months would have a more drastic impact on a 10-person firm than one with 100 workers. But those smaller companies would not be required to hold the position open for 12 weeks, allowing them to minimize the disruption.

Another provision would require employees planning to take a leave to care for a newborn or adopted child to provide 30 days' notice, further limiting the disruption.

The business community also fears that if the family leave program fund ran short, lawmakers would dip into the temporary disability insurance fund to make payments. That's a legitimate concern. But the bill specifically states that only money dedicated to family leave can be used for that purpose.

There was a time when new moms or ill grandfathers could lean on an extended family for care. That's no longer the case. Now members of the extended family are all working.

Societal norms are constantly evolving. Workplace rules need to evolve with them.

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