

The Times

Family Leave

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BY MICHAEL P. RICCARDS

EDITORIAL

Why is it that many of the same elements in our society that talk so much about family values oppose those social arrangements that allow some family leave for major medical problems and child-rearing responsibilities? The reason seems to be that no matter how much business and industry make in a given fiscal year, it never seems to be enough. Unlike in most advanced industrial nations, we still do not have universal medical coverage, for example – a reform that Chancellor Bismarck enacted in Germany in the 19th century. In the most recent debate on the issue, it seems we do not wish to extend that particular benefit – except to members of Congress and governors running for president, most of whom call the very medical coverage they have "socialized medicine."

The same is true with family leave. Several years ago, the nation and the state of New Jersey made modest changes in our policies with a meager policy of limited unpaid leave. Now in New Jersey, there is a proposal that would give workers up to \$502 per week for 10 weeks to support those who need to take some time off from work to care for others.

But the coverage would be sponsored by a self-insured trust fund, like disability insurance, which the workers, not the employers, would pay into. If so, how can the Chamber of Commerce and business and industry lobbyists oppose it? Well, it would take brief rearrangements of their operations to cover absences, and it is just not worth the effort, in their view, especially for smaller establishments. It is strange that we can cover closing early for going to football games or going hunting, but not to take care of infants or the very sick.

This sort of attitude is increasingly prominent in companies of all sizes: It is just not worth the effort. Despite the fact that the productivity of American workers is the highest in the world, their benefits have been cut back, especially in pensions and medical coverage. The only people who are benefiting from productivity increases are at the highest echelons of management, with their enormous benefits and profit sharing, stockholders, and major corporations with off-shore operations. Something is wrong with our national priorities.

Why can't business and industry include medical coverage in their cost of doing business and also include in it monies for family leave? That is much bolder than what the Legislature and the governor have discussed. It is odd how so many businesses regard machinery as assets to be cared for, but see employees simply as disposable liabilities. If that were not their view, how can

one explain the firing of 40- and 50-year-olds with many years of service, and the abandonment of America by so many who enrich themselves at our expense? It is odd that people are working at places that pay ridiculously low salaries and yet have to be happy that they have at least modest medical benefits.

It is the philosophical backdrop of the neo-conservatives that the superior ethical values are in the marketplace, and woe betide those who engage in the curtailment of those operations. Of course, people need freedom, but they also need security. While U.S. business does not wish to emulate Western European welfare states, it has no problem employing low-wage workers to make our tires, or T-shirts, or toys. Free trade does not permit, in the U.S. at least, an upgrade in the conditions of people's lives. Perhaps it does in South India or Taiwan, but not in Southern Indiana or Buffalo, New York.

It is worth noting that U.S. employees have the highest rate of productivity and they take fewer days of vacation than any other civilized society. Yet the benefits from that productivity do not trickle down to those who make it possible. There is simply a lack of respect for those who do the nation's physical work, and increasingly that neglect can be seen in the attitudes of corporate leaders toward middle management.

The opposition of business and industry to family leave is a part of the attitudes that show such little respect for workers. After all, if those workers were so worthy, wouldn't they be rich like the managers?

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