

Family leave in California now includes pay benefit [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

LOS ANGELES — Gov. Gray Davis signed a bill today to establish paid family leave to care for a new child or an ailing relative, giving California workers the most expansive family benefit in the nation.

The law, which business interests say will drive away jobs, will allow virtually any worker to take up to six weeks paid leave to cope with a family emergency. The benefit will be paid solely out of employee contributions.

The bill was one of several on Mr. Davis's desk pushed hard by California's powerful liberal-labor coalition.

Political analysts read the governor's actions as an effort to strengthen support among core Democratic groups, who have been lukewarm about Mr. Davis's re-election campaign.

The family leave bill was closely watched as a gauge of Mr. Davis's political strategy this fall. Labor activists, who have long been suspicious of the governor because of his history of courting business to attract campaign contributions, said they were pleased with his decision but still unsure where his heart lies.

Mr. Davis signed the bill this afternoon at a children's hospital in Los Angeles, calling it landmark legislation that will aid workers and businesses.

"Californians should never have to make the choice between being good workers and being good parents," the governor said. "This bill will help millions of California workers meet their responsibilities to both their family and their employers."

Organized labor and family rights groups nationwide who have been pushing states to extend the benefit to all workers lustily cheered the governor's action. It is one of the highest priorities of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., which calls on other states to enact similar legislation. Lawmakers in 27 others states are considering such measures.

The measure's sponsor, State Senator Sheila Kuehl, said she was uncertain until the weekend whether Mr. Davis would sign it. The bill was heavily amended late in the legislative session to address business concerns and win passage in the Assembly. The bill's original provision for 12 weeks' paid leave was reduced to 6 weeks, and the employer contribution to the state fund that will pay the benefits was eliminated.

The bill also requires workers to use up to two weeks vacation time for family emergencies and caps the benefit at \$728 a week.

Ms. Kuehl, who represents the Democratic strongholds of West Los Angeles, Santa Monica and Malibu, said that business opponents were "crying wolf" about the bill's impact on jobs and labor costs in California.

"Their real objection was that they simply did not want workers to take time off, no matter how needy they might be in terms of family care," she said.

But business organizations said the bill was a job killer at a time when the state's economy was slumping and California lawmakers were imposing costly new environmental and labor rules.

The leader of the state chamber of commerce warned that the bill added to a business climate that discouraged job creation.

"We're opposed to a lot of bills, but this is one of the worst," said Allan Zaremborg, president of the chamber of commerce. "When you're the only state in the country with paid family leave and they've tried it in 27 other states and it's failed in each and every one, we see it as a competitive disadvantage in attracting or keeping businesses here."

The California bill broadens a federal measure, the Family and Medical Leave Act, which former President Bill Clinton signed in 1993. That law guarantees the jobs of workers who take time off to care for a child or sick relative, but the benefit is unpaid.

The federal law also exempts businesses with fewer than 50 employees. California's new law sets no size limit.

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