

“No one should have to send their kids to school sick!”

Netsy Firestein fights for workers



The U.S. may be far behind the rest of the industrialized world when it comes to paid leave, but California is way ahead of the rest of this country, and one reason is surely the commitment of Netsy Firestein. We've been watching her with admiration since our days on the first AWLP board together back in 1995, when her **Labor Project for Working Families** (www.working-families.org) was in its infancy. Now 15, Firestein's organization has been instrumental in transforming workplaces in her state. It's no coincidence that California was the first to figure out a way to pay workers to take extended time off for serious illnesses or newborn or adopted babies. Or that San Francisco was the first city in the country to mandate paid sick days (Firestein claims no responsibility). Or that the state's legislators are now working on taking that San Francisco model statewide and providing all workers with a few paid sick days; the bill would allow workers to accrue up to nine days a year, five days for small employers. Nearly half the nation's workers have no paid sick days, she points out, and about 75% of low-income workers. "We who have it take it so for granted. We're working our way through committees now," she sighs, "and we've passed two of them." If it gets through them all, the legislature will vote. If passed, it will go to the Governor. "This is so basic! No one should have to send their kids to school sick. The CDC says if you have the flu you should stay home, but what if you can't afford to? It's a public health issue." While Firestein admits to being an instigator of efforts across the U.S., she says "there's no way we could do this alone. Labor organizations, senior groups, women's groups – there's a broad coalition of support around the country." She plays a leading role in a consortium of 11 states that is "making an enormous difference" in helping states move ahead. "We give each other support, share resources, think together about media work. That consortium has done a lot to move the agenda ahead." And even candidates, she says, are talking about paid leave. "We're on the radar now." Workers owe her one.

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