



Editorial: Congress should do more to help average workers

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President Barack Obama said earlier this year that the United States is “the only advanced country on Earth” that does not guarantee paid sick leave to workers. On Monday [he signed an executive order](#) requiring federal contractors to offer this benefit to employees. This will give about 300,000 workers up to seven days a year to use to recover from an illness or care for a sick loved one.

This president has also raised minimum wage for employees under federal contracts, protected those who are gay and transgender from discrimination and made it more difficult for contractors who violated labor laws to do business with the government. This summer his administration announced a rule that will make millions more Americans eligible for overtime pay.

It is no secret Obama is using his executive authority to do what he can to help workers. But he can only do so much. He is also trying to lead by example, encouraging Washington lawmakers to enact similar provisions for private-sector workers.

Unfortunately, this Republican-controlled Congress isn't too interested in that idea.

The same lawmakers who earn an annual salary of about \$175,000 refuse to increase the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. Those who recently enjoyed a month-long summer break oppose efforts to provide sick and family leave for their constituents. One Republican presidential candidate is fixated on working to bust unions.

These politicians don't understand American workers are the backbone of this country's economy. Perhaps they believe the government has no business requiring how companies treat workers.

Well, that isn't what their predecessors in Washington believed. [Congress has a long history](#) of taking action to protect average people — because they knew the private

Majority of Iowa employers provide sick leave benefits

The White House estimates 40 percent of the private-sector workforce does not have access to paid sick leave. These people may go to their jobs when they're ill, putting coworkers and customers at risk. They may send sick children to school rather than lose a day's pay.

The Register's editorial board asked David Lind, owner of the Clive-based David P. Lind Benchmark research firm, about sick leave benefits in Iowa.

According to his firm's 2015 Iowa Employer Benefits Study, about half of private, for-profit Iowa employers indicate they offer sick leave to full-time workers. In addition, nearly 30 percent offer a paid time-off program (PTO), which typically includes a “sick leave” component.

“Given this information, it appears that 70-75 percent of private organizations offer some type of sick leave coverage,” Lind said. His 2007 survey of Iowa employees found workers considered this benefit among the most important.

sector would not.

It has been nearly 100 years since Congress ensured benefits for workers who are injured or contract illnesses on the job. Lawmakers went on to define unfair labor practices, ensure equal pay for men and women, enact child labor laws, set and raise minimum wages, and impose safety standards in workplaces. It also created and funds the agencies that enforce labor laws.

Would today's elected officials have voted to support any of those efforts? Probably not. And what would they have thought about President Herbert Hoover's secretary of labor, who instituted a five-day workweek at his federal agency? This seemingly radical action at the time prompted reform in workplaces across the entire country.

Washington's history is replete with examples of leaders who took pride in helping ensure fair treatment for American workers. Unfortunately, there are too few of those leaders today.

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