



## **SERVING THE WORKING PERSON**

### ***March 2002***

It doesn't surprise me when reading the March 3 Boston Globe and then two weeks later in the Hartford Courant a very similar story appears, because it happens quite frequently. The Boston Globe article tweaked my interest—"Sick time divides employees in 2 camps." (Originally appeared in the Washington Post earlier). The article began by citing employer concerns that during the winter and flu season workers who are sick and return prematurely can expose other staff, leaving the workplace with a skeleton crew. Due to our job responsibilities, members can't stay home; snow and ice storms require members to plow and sand roads to make it safe for children on the way to school and parents driving to work, nor could food service or custodians who prepare food for the disabled or keep classrooms and buildings clean.

A vast majority of members live by the standard our parents taught us: work is like school, you go no matter what. The Boss knows when the flu season has hit; he/she is also aware when members are coming to work sick...In those situations a "thank you" for coming into work can go a tremendous way in boosting morale, and when it is known someone is sick, suggest staying out for a while.

The article's second point, raised to combat winter colds and the usual flu outbreak, has a growing number of private sector employers changing the way it doles out leave time. Private employers on average provide annually five sick days and recently started offering sick/vacation leave in one big lump (no contract violation—the employees are probably not represented by a union). If an employer used to offer 15 vacation and 5 sick days annually, now it gives a bank of 20 days for both uses. The reasoning behind the change, employers claim, is to reduce abuse of sick leave and cut back on the cost of absenteeism, i.e., an employee may rather use a day hunting instead of one sick day some other time.

So why am I writing about this? For two reasons—as stated before in this column, I am not a believer in using sick leave as quickly as it is earned. The sick leave is an insurance policy, to be used for an injury sustained out of work and major illnesses, providing for you to put food on the table and pay bills while out sick.

As you well know, in the present round of contract negotiations, sick leave usage was a big issue to the State, proposing a medical certificate for any sick leave absence in excess of 3 days vs. 5 days as in the present contract. To support that proposal, the members of the State's negotiating committee raised examples of members calling in sick for 5 consecutive days and are not required to submit a medical certificate, and the impact on fellow members who pick up additional work normally performed by the member out sick. You can't argue with extra workload issue...the first excuse leaves a double-edged blade, normally members can pick up a pretty good cold or flu due to snow and ice hours they are required to work. In many instances it could take 4 or 5 days to recuperate. The State, if it had its way, would then require the member to see a doctor prior to returning to work, increasing the health insurance utilization occurrences and increasing the state's premium costs.

Managers take five consecutive sick days too, and don't bring in a medical certificate. The usual double standard; just like managers who are not randomly selected for CDL drug/alcohol testing...those who break work place violence rules and receive no discipline. If the State wants to require a medical certificate...require managers to set the example and then suggest it to us. If the pre-school actions could stop and everyone stopped playing games, mistreating, picking on, cease treating favorites differently and just treat everyone fairly, it would make everyone happy.