

California Gov. Jerry Brown signs bill to boost paid family leave

- *Bill would bump compensation for workers taking time off following births, other care*
- *Plan follows embrace of deal to increase minimum wage*
- *'We are trying to compensate for the gross inequality,' governor says*

Continuing his recent embrace of liberal-backed policies to put more money in workers' pockets, Gov. Jerry Brown on Monday signed legislation boosting the compensation of Californians taking paid family leave.

In signing the bill, Brown endorsed another policy high on the agenda of Democrats and their allies in organized labor. A week ago, he signed legislation pushing California's minimum wage to \$15 an hour, a change Brown called morally justified despite an eventual cost to the state of around \$4 billion annually.

At a signing ceremony in his office Monday, Brown cast the family leave legislation as part of a package of policies that embody a more "empathetic" approach shielding Californians from the vagaries of a global economy.

"We know California has benefited from globalization," Brown said, but he argued it has brought "pressure on wages" and "pressure against providing benefits."

"We are trying to compensate for the gross inequality," the governor added. "We want do as much as we can in a creative way to make sure that everybody has a decent life."

Workers taking time off to care for family members now can receive 55 percent of their lost wages. The legislation Brown signed will boost that to 60 percent of prior wages, or to 70 percent for those who were earning near the minimum wage, by 2018.

The same increases would apply to people enrolled in California's State Disability Insurance program, which entitles people to paid time off for non-work-related injuries and disabilities, including pregnancies. Workers can take up to 6 weeks through the paid family leave program and up to 52 weeks off through the state disability program.

Raising the rate would allocate an additional \$348 million in 2018 and \$587 million by 2021 out of the state's Disability Insurance Fund. The state-run program is funded by employee payroll deductions, not taxpayer dollars.

Low-wage workers have not taken advantage of the program because they cannot afford the pay cut, according to research cited by Assemblyman Jimmy Gomez, D-Los Angeles, to explain why he authored the bill.

"The people who are using it the least are the ones who are making minimum wage or barely above minimum wage," Gomez said on the Assembly floor in March. "If a worker is already struggling to make ends meet on 100 percent of her salary, already living paycheck to paycheck, what makes us think that a worker can take off six weeks at 55 percent of their wage?"

Last year, Brown disappointed liberal lawmakers by vetoing legislation enabling more family members to take unpaid leave. In his veto message, he said the measure would create a confusing disparity with federal law. Business groups like the California Chamber of Commerce had opposed Senate Bill 406, warning it would cost employers money and expose them to lawsuits.

The expansion Brown signed on Monday did not draw opposition from the business lobby.

Brown compared the legislation to the agenda of "market fundamentalists, who believe that justice and morality and empathy doesn't have a place in our political life."

"We are a very divided country. We are divided about what is good and what isn't," Brown said. "I think California is setting the way, although if you talk to some of these red-staters, they say California is a failed state and we're interfering with the market. I would say we're creating a more decent and empathetic community to live in."