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Family Support Benefits Not the Norm In Most Labor Contracts, MIT Report Finds

Even in difficult economic times, some unions have found ways to go beyond the usual benefits – health insurance, vacation pay, and sick leave –to provide on-site child care, subsidized after-school care, and full benefits for part-timers, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Workplace Center said in a report released October 23.

More unions should follow their lead, according to the center, which highlights in the report union-negotiated family programs for employees at New York hospitals and nursing homes, Ford Motor Co., and Harvard University.

Such programs are “not the norm,” Susan Cass, program manager of the MIT center, said in an interview. Many unions shy away from seeking expanded family benefits because it may seem like it benefits parents only and employers consider it too expensive, Cass added.

The report, which was mailed in late October to Labor Department officials, union officers, and Democratic

presidential candidates, provides three examples of how those challenges can be overcome. It is “sort of a call to unions to work toward this,” Cass said.

Based on presentations given by work-family program directors in 2002, the report chronicles steps by the unions at these companies to secure expanded benefits through bargaining.

It discusses sources of funding for work-family programs and union members’ largely positive reaction to such benefits. The report also explains why some unions may be hesitant to press for these benefits.

It examines three labor contracts between New York hospitals and nursing homes and the Service Employees International Union; Ford and the United Auto Workers; and Harvard and the University of Massachusetts Medical Center and a clerical and technical workers union.

- The Detroit-based Family Service and Learning Center, established under the 1999 Ford–UAW contract, provides child care services and a range of other activities, such as retiree walking clubs, travel clubs, literacy and cooking classes. Amid a recession in the auto industry in

1982, the union made concessions in return for the UAW-Ford National Joint Programs Center, Bill Corey a manger of the family center for the union, wrote in the report. The family center is the newest of these programs, he said.

- Under a current labor contract between several New York hospitals and nursing homes and the Service Employees International Union Local 1199, more than 380 employers agreed to contribute to a child care fund for voucher reimbursements, developing child care centers, and conducting summer day camps. The fund also provides vouchers for arts programs and provides career guidance and internships for high school students.

- Before the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers was formed in 1988, the turnover rate was about 40 percent partly due to the lack of work-family benefits, according to the report. “When an employee began building a family, often that person had to leave permanently. Paying for child care was just not feasible for clerical and technical employees,” Kris Rondeau, a union organizer, wrote. Now, Harvard subsidizes licensed child care, after-school care, camp, or summer programs.

In addition, part-time staff represented by HUCTW have the same benefits as full-time staff, Rondeau said. “Our hope is that the rest of the labor movement will start to push this forward,” she said.

Although the initial reaction to the child care benefits was negative at Harvard, union members eventually became enthusiastic about it, Rondeau said. “First, the

employees and the employer said they did not want the benefits and people should raise their own children.”

“At the last minute, during contract negotiations, we said, “What about a little money for child care?” And the employers agreed and then it seemed like everyone was behind the child care benefit.”

By Catherine Hollingsworth

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