Extend maternity leave to 20 weeks, says Women's Rights Committee

Members of the EP Women's Rights Committee are proposing that maternity leave be extended to 20 weeks. They also say a new EU directive on these matters should require 100% of salary to be paid for six weeks after birth, at least 85% of salary for the rest of the leave period and the introduction of paternity leave. The text adopted by the committee at first reading on Thursday will be put to a vote by the full Parliament in May.

The Women's Rights Committee adopted the report by Edite Estrela (PES, PT) by 18 votes to 6 with 5 abstentions. MEPs want to extend the duration of maternity leave to at least 20 weeks. At present such leave varies in the EU between 14 and 28 weeks. In some cases it can be as much as 52 weeks, of which only part is paid. "The aim is to have a positive impact on the state of health of mothers, to enable them to recover more easily after giving birth and to establish a strong relationship with the child", explained Edite Estrela.

In addition, of the 20 weeks, six weeks will have to be taken after the birth to encourage women to breastfeed as long as possible. On 3 October 2008 the European Commission proposed increasing maternity leave to 18 weeks, of which six would be taken after the birth.

Full salary to be paid for six weeks

To avoid penalising women who have children, most MEPs are proposing that it be compulsory to pay them their full salary for 6 weeks after giving birth. For the remainder of the period, 100% of salary should be paid, with a minimum figure of 85%. In addition, fully paid additional maternity leave should be granted in the case of premature childbirth, stillbirth, caesarean section, multiple births or children with disabilities.

The European Commission proposed the payment of a monthly salary during maternity leave equivalent to 100% of the last monthly salary or the average salary, but this would not have been compulsory.

Paternity leave

The current directive 92/85/EC uses the legal basis of health and safety at work. The Commission proposal for the latest directive adds a further legal basis: equal treatment. The rapporteur wants to use this new legal basis to introduce provisions on paternity leave.

A majority of the committee voted in favour of introducing paternity leave. This paternity leave - or co-maternity leave to take account of different family structures, an idea over which MEPs were divided - would be a compulsory minimum two weeks after the birth.

No sacking of new mothers
MEPs also want to ensure no-one can be dismissed from their job during maternity leave. Any sacking in the following 12 months would have to be justified in writing and not linked to maternity.

Lastly, MEPs approved amendments designed to enable women to have "equivalent" work on their return from maternity leave and to have flexible working arrangements. Employers will have to consider seriously any request for changes to working hours and patterns. They also voted in favour of time off work for breastfeeding equivalent to two one-hour breaks per day unless another arrangement has been agreed with the employer.

N.B. :
Procedure: Co-decision, first reading -- Committee vote: 18 for, 6 against, 5 abstentions -- Plenary vote: May, Strasbourg

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