

1823--A

2009-2010 Regular Sessions

I N   S E N A T E

February 9, 2009

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Introduced by Sens. MORAHAN, ONORATO -- read twice and ordered printed, and when printed to be committed to the Committee on Labor -- committee discharged, bill amended, ordered reprinted as amended and recommitted to said committee

AN ACT to amend the labor law, in relation to establishing a private cause of action for an abusive work environment

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK, REPRESENTED IN SENATE AND ASSEMBLY, DO ENACT AS FOLLOWS:

1     Section 1. The labor law is amended by adding a new article 20-D to  
2 read as follows:

3     ARTICLE 20-D

4     ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT

5 SECTION 760. LEGISLATIVE FINDINGS AND INTENT.

6             761. DEFINITIONS.

7             762. ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT.

8             763. EMPLOYER LIABILITY.

9             764. DEFENSES.

10            765. RETALIATION.

11            766. REMEDIES.

12            767. ENFORCEMENT.

13            768. EFFECT ON COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENTS.

14            769. EFFECT OF OTHER LAWS.

15     S 760. LEGISLATIVE FINDINGS AND INTENT. THE LEGISLATURE HEREBY FINDS  
16 THAT THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC WELL-BEING OF THE STATE IS DEPENDENT UPON  
17 HEALTHY AND PRODUCTIVE EMPLOYEES. SURVEYS AND STUDIES HAVE DOCUMENTED  
18 THAT BETWEEN SIXTEEN AND TWENTY-ONE PERCENT OF EMPLOYEES DIRECTLY EXPERIENCE  
19 HEALTH ENDANGERING WORKPLACE BULLYING, ABUSE AND HARASSMENT. THESE  
20 SUCH BEHAVIOR IS FOUR TIMES MORE PREVALENT THAN SEXUAL HARASSMENT. THESE  
21 SURVEYS AND STUDIES HAVE FURTHER FOUND THAT ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENTS  
22 CAN HAVE SERIOUS EFFECTS ON THE TARGETED EMPLOYEES, INCLUDING FEELINGS  
23 OF SHAME AND HUMILIATION, STRESS, LOSS OF SLEEP, SEVERE ANXIETY,

EXPLANATION--Matter in *ITALICS* (underscored) is new; matter in brackets [ ] is old law to be omitted.

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1 DEPRESSION, POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER, REDUCED IMMUNITY TO  
2 INFECTION, STRESS-RELATED GASTROINTESTINAL DISORDERS, HYPERTENSION, AND  
3 PATHOPHYSIOLOGIC CHANGES THAT INCREASE THE RISK OF CARDIOVASCULAR  
4 DISEASES.

5 FURTHERMORE, THE LEGISLATURE FINDS THAT ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENTS CAN  
6 HAVE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES FOR EMPLOYERS, INCLUDING REDUCED EMPLOYEE  
7 PRODUCTIVITY AND MORALE, HIGHER TURNOVER AND ABSENTEEISM RATES, AND  
8 SIGNIFICANT INCREASES IN MEDICAL AND WORKERS' COMPENSATION CLAIMS.

9 THE LEGISLATURE HEREBY FINDS THAT UNLESS MISTREATED EMPLOYEES HAVE  
10 BEEN SUBJECTED TO ABUSIVE TREATMENT IN THE WORKPLACE ON THE BASIS OF  
11 RACE, COLOR, SEX, NATIONAL ORIGIN OR AGE, SUCH EMPLOYEES ARE UNLIKELY TO  
12 HAVE LEGAL RECOURSE TO REDRESS SUCH TREATMENT.

13 THE LEGISLATURE HEREBY DECLARES THAT LEGAL PROTECTION FROM ABUSIVE  
14 WORK ENVIRONMENTS SHOULD NOT BE LIMITED TO BEHAVIOR GROUNDED IN A  
15 PROTECTED CLASS STATUS AS REQUIRED BY EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION STAT-  
16 UTES. EXISTING WORKERS' COMPENSATION PROVISIONS AND COMMON LAW TORT LAW  
17 ARE INADEQUATE TO DISCOURAGE SUCH ABUSIVE CONDUCT AND PROVIDE ADEQUATE  
18 REDRESS TO EMPLOYEES WHO HAVE BEEN HARMED BY ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENTS.

19 THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE SHALL BE TO PROVIDE LEGAL REDRESS FOR  
20 EMPLOYEES WHO HAVE BEEN HARMED PSYCHOLOGICALLY, PHYSICALLY OR ECONOM-  
21 ICALLY BY BEING DELIBERATELY SUBJECTED TO ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENTS; AND  
22 TO PROVIDE LEGAL INCENTIVES FOR EMPLOYERS TO PREVENT AND RESPOND TO  
23 MISTREATMENT OF EMPLOYEES AT WORK.

24 S 761. DEFINITIONS. AS USED IN THIS ARTICLE, THE FOLLOWING TERMS SHALL  
25 HAVE THE FOLLOWING MEANINGS:

26 1. "ABUSIVE CONDUCT" MEANS CONDUCT, WITH MALICE, TAKEN AGAINST AN  
27 EMPLOYEE BY AN EMPLOYER OR ANOTHER EMPLOYEE IN THE WORKPLACE, THAT A  
28 REASONABLE PERSON WOULD FIND TO BE HOSTILE, OFFENSIVE AND UNRELATED TO  
29 THE EMPLOYER'S LEGITIMATE BUSINESS INTERESTS. IN CONSIDERING WHETHER  
30 SUCH CONDUCT IS OCCURRING, THE TRIER OF FACT SHOULD WEIGH THE SEVERITY,  
31 NATURE AND FREQUENCY OF THE CONDUCT. ABUSIVE CONDUCT SHALL INCLUDE, BUT  
32 NOT BE LIMITED TO, REPEATED INFLICTION OF VERBAL ABUSE, SUCH AS THE USE  
33 OF DEROGATORY REMARKS, INSULTS AND EPITHETS; VERBAL OR PHYSICAL CONDUCT  
34 THAT A REASONABLE PERSON WOULD FIND THREATENING, INTIMIDATING OR HUMILI-  
35 ATING; OR THE GRATUITOUS SABOTAGE OR UNDERMINING OF AN EMPLOYEE'S WORK  
36 PERFORMANCE. A SINGLE ACT SHALL NOT CONSTITUTE ABUSIVE CONDUCT, UNLESS  
37 THE TRIER OF FACT FINDS SUCH ACT TO BE ESPECIALLY SEVERE OR EGREGIOUS.

38 2. "ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT" MEANS A WORKPLACE IN WHICH AN EMPLOYEE  
39 IS SUBJECTED TO ABUSIVE CONDUCT THAT IS SO SEVERE THAT IT CAUSES PHYS-  
40 ICAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL HARM TO SUCH EMPLOYEE.

41 3. "CONDUCT" MEANS ALL FORMS OF BEHAVIOR, INCLUDING ACTS AND OMISSIONS  
42 TO ACT.

43 4. "CONSTRUCTIVE DISCHARGE" MEANS ABUSIVE CONDUCT AGAINST AN EMPLOYEE  
44 THAT CAUSES SUCH EMPLOYEE TO RESIGN FROM HIS OR HER EMPLOYMENT WHERE (A)  
45 PRIOR TO RESIGNING, THE EMPLOYEE PROVIDES NOTICE TO THE EMPLOYER THAT AN  
46 ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT EXISTS, AND (B) THE EMPLOYER, AFTER RECEIVING  
47 NOTICE THEREOF, FAILS TO ELIMINATE THE ABUSIVE CONDUCT.

48 5. "MALICE" MEANS THE INTENT TO CAUSE ANOTHER PERSON TO SUFFER PSYCHO-  
49 LOGICAL, PHYSICAL OR ECONOMIC HARM, WITHOUT LEGITIMATE CAUSE OR JUSTI-  
50 FICATION. MALICE MAY BE INFERRED FROM THE PRESENCE OF FACTORS SUCH AS  
51 OUTWARD EXPRESSIONS OF HOSTILITY, HARMFUL CONDUCT INCONSISTENT WITH AN  
52 EMPLOYER'S LEGITIMATE BUSINESS INTERESTS, A CONTINUATION OF HARMFUL AND  
53 ILLEGITIMATE CONDUCT AFTER A COMPLAINANT REQUESTS THAT IT CEASE OR  
54 DISPLAYS OUTWARD SIGNS OF EMOTIONAL OR PHYSICAL DISTRESS IN THE FACE OF  
55 THE CONDUCT, OR ATTEMPTS TO EXPLOIT THE COMPLAINANT'S KNOWN PSYCHOLOG-  
56 ICAL OR PHYSICAL VULNERABILITY.

1 6. "NEGATIVE EMPLOYMENT DECISION" MEANS A TERMINATION, CONSTRUCTIVE  
2 DISCHARGE, DEMOTION, UNFAVORABLE REASSIGNMENT, REFUSAL TO PROMOTE OR  
3 DISCIPLINARY ACTION.

4 7. "PHYSICAL HARM" MEANS THE MATERIAL IMPAIRMENT OF A PERSON'S PHYS-  
5 ICAL HEALTH OR BODILY INTEGRITY, AS DOCUMENTED BY A COMPETENT PHYSICIAN  
6 OR SUPPORTED BY COMPETENT EXPERT EVIDENCE AT TRIAL.

7 8. "PSYCHOLOGICAL HARM" MEANS THE MATERIAL IMPAIRMENT OF A PERSON'S  
8 MENTAL HEALTH, AS DOCUMENTED BY A COMPETENT PHYSICIAN OR SUPPORTED BY  
9 COMPETENT EXPERT EVIDENCE AT TRIAL.

10 S 762. ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT. IT SHALL BE UNLAWFUL TO SUBJECT AN  
11 EMPLOYEE TO AN ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT.

12 S 763. EMPLOYER LIABILITY. AN EMPLOYER SHALL BE CIVILLY LIABLE FOR THE  
13 EXISTENCE OF AN ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT WITHIN ANY WORKPLACE UNDER ITS  
14 CONTROL.

15 S 764. DEFENSES. 1. IT SHALL BE AN AFFIRMATIVE DEFENSE TO A CAUSE OF  
16 ACTION FOR ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT, THAT THE EMPLOYER EXERCISED REASON-  
17 ABLE CARE TO PREVENT AND PROMPTLY CORRECT THE ABUSIVE CONDUCT WHICH IS  
18 THE BASIS OF SUCH CAUSE OF ACTION AND THE PLAINTIFF UNREASONABLY FAILED  
19 TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE APPROPRIATE PREVENTIVE OR CORRECTIVE OPPORTU-  
20 NITIES PROVIDED BY SUCH EMPLOYER. SUCH AFFIRMATIVE DEFENSE SHALL NOT BE  
21 AVAILABLE TO AN EMPLOYER WHEN THE ABUSIVE CONDUCT CULMINATES IN A NEGA-  
22 TIVE EMPLOYMENT DECISION WITH REGARD TO THE PLAINTIFF.

23 2. IT SHALL BE AN AFFIRMATIVE DEFENSE TO A CAUSE OF ACTION FOR ABUSIVE  
24 WORK ENVIRONMENT, THAT THE EMPLOYER MADE A NEGATIVE EMPLOYMENT DECISION  
25 WITH REGARD TO THE PLAINTIFF WHICH IS CONSISTENT WITH SUCH EMPLOYER'S  
26 LEGITIMATE BUSINESS INTERESTS, SUCH AS TERMINATION OR DEMOTION BASED ON  
27 THE PLAINTIFF'S POOR PERFORMANCE OR THE COMPLAINT IS BASED PRIMARILY  
28 UPON THE EMPLOYER'S REASONABLE INVESTIGATION OF POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS,  
29 ILLEGAL OR UNETHICAL ACTIVITY.

30 S 765. RETALIATION. ANY RETALIATORY ACTION AGAINST ANY EMPLOYEE ALLEG-  
31 ING A VIOLATION OF THIS ARTICLE SHALL BE DEEMED TO BE A RETALIATORY  
32 PERSONNEL ACTION AS PROHIBITED BY SECTION SEVEN HUNDRED FORTY OF THIS  
33 CHAPTER.

34 S 766. REMEDIES. 1. WHERE A DEFENDANT HAS BEEN FOUND TO HAVE ENGAGED  
35 IN ABUSIVE CONDUCT, OR CAUSED OR MAINTAINED AN ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT,  
36 THE COURT MAY ENJOIN SUCH DEFENDANT FROM ENGAGING IN SUCH ILLEGAL ACTIV-  
37 ITY AND MAY ORDER ANY OTHER RELIEF THAT IS APPROPRIATE INCLUDING, BUT  
38 NOT LIMITED TO, REINSTATEMENT, REMOVAL OF THE OFFENDING PARTY FROM THE  
39 PLAINTIFF'S WORK ENVIRONMENT, REIMBURSEMENT FOR LOST WAGES, MEDICAL  
40 EXPENSES, COMPENSATION FOR EMOTIONAL DISTRESS, PUNITIVE DAMAGES AND  
41 ATTORNEY FEES.

42 2. WHERE AN EMPLOYER HAS BEEN FOUND TO HAVE CAUSED OR MAINTAINED AN  
43 ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT THAT DID NOT RESULT IN A NEGATIVE EMPLOYMENT  
44 DECISION, SUCH EMPLOYER'S LIABILITY FOR DAMAGES FOR EMOTIONAL DISTRESS  
45 SHALL NOT EXCEED TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS AND SHALL HAVE NO LIABIL-  
46 ITY FOR PUNITIVE DAMAGES. THE PROVISIONS OF THIS SUBDIVISION SHALL NOT  
47 APPLY TO ANY EMPLOYEE WHO ENGAGES IN ABUSIVE CONDUCT.

48 S 767. ENFORCEMENT. 1. THE PROVISIONS OF THIS ARTICLE ARE ENFORCEABLE  
49 BY MEANS OF A CIVIL CAUSE OF ACTION COMMENCED BY AN INJURED EMPLOYEE.

50 2. NOTWITHSTANDING THE PROVISIONS OF THE CIVIL PRACTICE LAW AND RULES,  
51 AN ACTION TO ENFORCE THE PROVISIONS OF THIS ARTICLE SHALL BE COMMENCED  
52 WITHIN ONE YEAR OF THE LAST ABUSIVE CONDUCT WHICH IS THE BASIS OF THE  
53 ALLEGATION OF ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT.

54 S 768. EFFECT ON COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENTS. THIS ARTICLE SHALL  
55 NOT PREVENT, INTERFERE, EXEMPT OR SUPERSEDE ANY CURRENT PROVISIONS OF AN  
56 EMPLOYEE'S EXISTING COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENT WHICH PROVIDES

1 GREATER RIGHTS AND PROTECTIONS THAN PRESCRIBED IN THIS ARTICLE NOR SHALL  
2 THIS ARTICLE PREVENT ANY NEW PROVISIONS OF THE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING  
3 AGREEMENT WHICH PROVIDE GREATER RIGHTS AND PROTECTIONS FROM BEING IMPE-  
4 MENTED AND APPLICABLE TO SUCH EMPLOYEE WITHIN SUCH COLLECTIVE BARGAINING  
5 AGREEMENT. WHERE THE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENT PROVIDES GREATER  
6 RIGHTS AND PROTECTIONS THAN PRESCRIBED IN THIS ARTICLE, THE RECOGNIZED  
7 COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGENT MAY OPT TO ACCEPT OR REJECT TO BE COVERED BY  
8 THE PROVISIONS OF THIS ARTICLE.

9 S 769. EFFECT OF OTHER LAWS. 1. NO PROVISION OF THIS ARTICLE SHALL BE  
10 DEEMED TO EXEMPT ANY PERSON OR ENTITY FROM ANY LIABILITY, DUTY OR PENAL-  
11 TY PROVIDED BY ANY OTHER STATE LAW, RULE OR REGULATION.

12 2. THE REMEDIES OF THIS ARTICLE SHALL BE GRANTED IN ADDITION TO ANY  
13 COMPENSATION AVAILABLE PURSUANT TO THE WORKERS' COMPENSATION LAW;  
14 PROVIDED, HOWEVER, THAT NO PERSON WHO HAS COLLECTED WORKERS' COMPEN-  
15 SATION BENEFITS FOR CONDITIONS ARISING OUT OF AN ABUSIVE WORK ENVIRON-  
16 MENT, SHALL BE AUTHORIZED TO COMMENCE A CAUSE OF ACTION PURSUANT TO THIS  
17 ARTICLE FOR THE SAME SUCH CONDITIONS.

18 S 2. This act shall take effect immediately, and shall apply to  
19 abusive conduct occurring on or after such date.