

AB-1127: EMPLOYEE SAFETY: VIOLATIONS

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INTRODUCED BY Assembly Member Steinberg: FEBRUARY 25, 1999

An act to amend Sections 98.7, 6304.5, 6309, 6400, 6423, 6425, 6428, 6429, 6430, 6432, and 6434 of, and to add Section 6719 to, the Labor Code, relating to employee safety.

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AB 1127, Steinberg. Employee safety: violations.

Under existing law, any person who believes that he or she has been discharged or otherwise discriminated against in violation of the Labor Code under the jurisdiction of the Labor Commissioner may file a complaint with the Division of Labor Standards Enforcement within 30 days after the occurrence of the violation.

This bill would extend from 30 days to 6 months that period of time within which a complaint may be filed with the division.

Existing law provides that the provisions of the California Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1973 (hereafter the act) have no application to, may not be considered in, and may not be admitted into, evidence in any personal injury or wrongful death action arising after January 1, 1972, except as between an employee and his or her employer.

This bill instead would provide that neither the issuance of, or failure to issue, a citation by the Division of Occupational Safety and Health (hereafter the division) has any application to, nor may be considered in, nor may be admitted into, evidence in any personal injury or wrongful death action, except as between an employee and his or her employer. The bill also would provide that Sections 452 and 669 of the Evidence Code would apply to the act and the occupational safety and health standards and orders promulgated under the Labor Code in the same manner as any other statute, ordinance, or regulation.

Existing law provides that if the division secures a complaint from an employee, the employee's representative, or an employer of the employee directly involved in an unsafe place of employment, that his or her employment or place of employment is not safe, the division is required to summarily investigate the complaint as soon as possible, but not later than 3 working days after receipt of a complaint charging a serious violation, and not later than 14 days after receipt of a complaint charging a non-serious violation. Under existing law the division is not required to respond to a complaint if it determines that either the complaint is intended to willfully harass an employer or is without reasonable basis.

This bill would require the division additionally to conduct those investigations if a complaint is received by the employee's representative, including, but not limited to, an attorney, health or safety professional, union representative, or representative of a government agency. The bill would also provide that the division is not required to respond to a complaint if, from the facts stated in the complaint, it determines that the complaint is intended to willfully harass an employer and is without any reasonable basis.

Existing law provides that every employer, and every officer, management official, or supervisor having direction, management, control, or custody of any employment, place of employment, or other employee is guilty of a misdemeanor if it, among other things, knowingly or negligently violates any standard, order, or special order, or any of certain provisions of law, or part thereof, authorized by the act, the violation of which is deemed to be a serious violation, as defined.

This bill would also make conforming changes to other provisions of law that impose civil and criminal penalties on employers for violation of specified occupational safety and health requirements. The bill would increase from \$5,000 to \$15,000 the maximum fine that may be imposed for a violation of those provisions. The bill also would increase the length of incarceration and the monetary penalties that may be imposed for a willful or repeated violation of certain employee safety standards that cause death to any employee, or cause permanent or prolonged impairment of the body of any employee.

The bill also would authorize a court to impose a fine in an amount less than certain minimums specified in the bill if the court finds that it is in the interest of justice to do so and states its findings and reasons on the record.

Existing law prohibits civil penalties from being assessed against employers that are governmental agencies for violations of certain employee safety standards.

This bill would repeal that prohibition and require civil or administrative penalties against a school district, community college district, California State University, University of California, or other specified educational entities to be deposited into the Workplace Health and Safety Revolving Fund and refunded or used for specified purposes.

Existing law requires the Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board (hereafter the standards board), on or before January 1, 1995, to adopt standards for ergonomics in the workplace designed to minimize the instances of injury from repetitive motion.

This bill would reaffirm the standards board's continuing duty to adopt those standards. By making certain violations of employee safety standards by employers subject to criminal penalties, the bill would impose a state-mandated local program. The California Constitution requires the state to reimburse local agencies and school districts for certain costs mandated by the state. Statutory provisions establish procedures for making that reimbursement. This bill would provide that no reimbursement is required by this act for a specified reason.

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA DO ENACT AS FOLLOWS:

SECTION 1. Section 98.7 of the Labor Code is amended to read:

98.7. (a) Any person who believes that he or she has been discharged or otherwise discriminated against in violation of any provision of this code under the jurisdiction of the Labor Commissioner may file a complaint with the division within six months after the occurrence of the violation. The six-month period may be extended for good cause. The complaint shall be investigated by a discrimination complaint investigator in accordance with this section. The Labor Commissioner shall establish procedures for the investigation of discrimination complaints. A summary of the procedures shall be provided to each complainant and respondent at the time of initial contact. The Labor Commissioner shall inform complainants charging a violation of Section 6310 or 6311, at the time of initial contact, of his or her right to file a separate, concurrent complaint with the United States Department of Labor within 30 days after the occurrence of the violation.

(b) Each complaint of unlawful discharge or discrimination shall be assigned to a discrimination complaint investigator who shall prepare and submit a report to the Labor Commissioner based on an investigation of the complaint. The Labor Commissioner may designate the Chief Deputy or assistant Labor Commissioner or the chief counsel to receive and review the reports. The investigation shall include, where appropriate, interviews with the complainant, respondent, and any witnesses who may have information concerning the alleged violation, and a review of any documents which may be relevant to the disposition of the complaint.

The identity of witnesses shall remain confidential unless the identification of the witness becomes necessary to proceed with the investigation or to prosecute an action to enforce a determination. The investigation report submitted to the Labor Commissioner or designee shall include the statements and documents obtained in the investigation, and the findings of the investigator concerning whether a violation occurred. The Labor Commissioner may hold an investigative hearing whenever the Labor Commissioner determines, after review of the investigation report, that a hearing is necessary to fully establish the facts. In the hearing the investigation report shall be made a part of the record and the complainant and respondent shall have the opportunity to present further evidence. The Labor Commissioner shall issue, serve, and enforce any necessary subpoenas.

(c) If the Labor Commissioner determines a violation has occurred, he or she shall notify the complainant and respondent and direct the respondent to cease and desist from the violation and take such action as is deemed necessary to remedy the violation, including, where appropriate, rehiring or reinstatement, reimbursement of lost wages and interest thereon, payment of reasonable attorney's fees associated with any hearing held by the Labor Commissioner in investigating the complaint, and the posting of notices to employees.

If the respondent does not comply with the order within 10 working days following notification of the Labor Commissioner's determination, the Labor Commissioner shall bring an action promptly in an appropriate court against the respondent. If the Labor Commissioner fails to bring an action in court promptly, the complainant may bring an action against the Labor Commissioner in any appropriate court for a writ of mandate to compel the Labor Commissioner to bring an action in court against the respondent. If the complainant prevails in his or her action for a writ, the court shall award the complainant court costs and reasonable attorney's fees, notwithstanding any other provision of law.

Regardless of any delay in bringing an action in court, the Labor Commissioner shall not be divested of jurisdiction. In any such action, the court may permit the claimant to intervene as a party plaintiff to the action and shall have jurisdiction, for cause shown, to restrain the violation and to order all appropriate relief. Appropriate relief includes, but is not limited to, rehiring or reinstatement of the complainant, reimbursement of lost wages and interest thereon, and any other compensation or equitable relief as is appropriate under the circumstances of the case. The Labor Commissioner shall petition the court for appropriate temporary relief or restraining order unless he or she determines good cause exists for not doing so.

(d) If the Labor Commissioner determines no violation has occurred, he or she shall notify the complainant and respondent and shall dismiss the complaint. The Labor Commissioner may direct the complainant to pay reasonable attorney's fees associated with any hearing held by the Labor Commissioner if the Labor Commissioner finds the complaint was frivolous, unreasonable, groundless, and was brought in bad faith. The complainant may, after notification of the Labor Commissioner's determination to dismiss a complaint, bring an action in an appropriate court, which shall have jurisdiction to determine whether a violation occurred, and if so, to restrain the violation and order all appropriate relief to remedy the violation.

Appropriate relief includes, but is not limited to, rehiring or reinstatement of the complainant, reimbursement of lost wages and interest thereon, and such other compensation or equitable relief as is appropriate under the circumstances of the case. When dismissing a complaint, the Labor Commissioner shall advise the complainant of his or her right to bring an action in an appropriate court if he or she disagrees with the determination of the Labor Commissioner, and in the case of an alleged violation of Section 6310 or 6311, to file a complaint against the state program with the United States Department of Labor.

(e) The Labor Commissioner shall notify the complainant and respondent of his or her determination under subdivision (c) or (d), not later than 60 days after the filing of the complaint. Determinations by the Labor Commissioner under subdivision (c) or (d) may be appealed by the complainant or respondent to the Director of Industrial Relations within 10 days following notification of the determination. The appeal shall set forth specifically and in full detail the grounds upon which the appealing party considers the Labor Commissioner's determination to be unjust or unlawful, and every issue to be considered by the director. The director may consider any issue relating to the initial determination and may modify, affirm, or reverse the Labor Commissioner's determination. The director's determination shall be the determination of the Labor Commissioner. The director shall notify the complainant and respondent of his or her determination within 10 days of receipt of the appeal.

(f) The rights and remedies provided by this section do not preclude an employee from pursuing any other rights and remedies under any other provisions of law.

SEC. 2. Section 6304.5 of the Labor Code is amended to read:

6304.5. It is the intent of the Legislature that the provisions of this division, and the occupational safety and health standards and orders promulgated under this code, are applicable to proceedings against employers for the exclusive purpose of maintaining and enforcing employee safety. Neither the issuance of, or failure to issue, a citation by the division shall have any application to, nor be considered in, nor be admissible into, evidence in any personal injury or wrongful death action, except as between an employee and his or her own employer.

Sections 452 and 669 of the Evidence Code shall apply to this division and to occupational safety and health standards adopted under this division in the same manner as any other statute, ordinance, or regulation. The testimony of employees of the division shall not be admissible as expert opinion or with respect to the application of occupational safety and health standards. It is the intent of the Legislature that the amendments to this section enacted in the 1999-2000 Regular Session shall not abrogate the holding in Brock v. State of California (1978) 81 Cal.App.3d 752.

SEC. 3. Section 6309 of the Labor Code is amended to read:

6309. If the division learns or has reason to believe that any employment or place of employment is not safe or is injurious to the welfare of any employee, it may, of its own motion, or upon complaint, summarily investigate the same with or without notice or hearings. However, if the division secures a complaint from an employee, the employee's representative, including, but not limited to, an attorney, health or safety professional, union representative; or representative of a government agency, or an employer of an employee directly involved in an unsafe place of employment, that his or her employment or place of employment is not safe, it shall, with or without notice or hearing, summarily investigate the same as soon as possible, but not later than three working days after receipt of a complaint charging a serious violation, and not later than 14 calendar days after receipt of a complaint charging a non-serious violation. The division shall attempt to determine the period of time in the future that the complainant believes the unsafe condition may continue to exist, and shall allocate inspection resources so as to respond first to those situations in which time is of the essence.

For purposes of this section, a complaint shall be deemed to allege a serious violation if the division determines that the complaint charges that there is a substantial probability that death or serious physical harm could result from a condition which exists, or from one or more practices, means, methods, operations, or processes which have been adopted or are in use in a place of employment. When a complaint charging a serious violation is received from a state or local prosecutor, the division shall summarily investigate the employment or place of employment within 24 hours of receipt of the complaint. All other complaints shall be deemed to allege non-serious violations. The division may enter and serve any necessary order relative thereto. The division is not required to respond to any complaint within this period where, from the facts stated in the complaint, it determines that the complaint is intended to willfully harass an employer or is without any reasonable basis.

The division shall keep complete and accurate records of any complaints, whether verbal or written, and shall inform the complainant, whenever his or her identity is known, of any action taken by the division in regard to the subject matter of the complaint, and the reasons for the action. The records of the division shall include the dates on which any action was taken on the complaint, or the reasons for not taking any action on the complaint. The division shall, pursuant to authorized regulations, conduct an informal review of any refusal by a representative of the division to issue a citation with respect to any alleged violation. The division shall furnish the employee or the representative of employees requesting the review a written statement of the reasons for the division's final disposition of the case.

The name of any person who submits to the division a complaint regarding the unsafeness of an employment or place of employment shall be kept confidential by the division, unless that person requests otherwise. The requirements of this section shall not relieve the division of its requirement to inspect and assure that all places of employment are safe and healthful for employees. The division shall maintain the capability to receive and act upon complaints at all times.

SEC. 4. Section 6400 of the Labor Code is amended to read:

6400. (a) Every employer shall furnish employment and a place of employment that is safe and healthful for the employees therein.

(b) On multi-employer worksites, both construction and non-construction, citations may be issued only to the following categories of employers when the division has evidence that an employee was exposed to a hazard in violation of any requirement enforceable by the division:

(1) The employer whose employees were exposed to the hazard (the exposing employer).

(2) The employer who actually created the hazard (the creating employer).

(3) The employer who was responsible, by contract or through actual practice, for safety and health conditions on the worksite, which is the employer who had the authority for ensuring that the hazardous condition is corrected (the controlling employer).

(4) The employer who had the responsibility for actually correcting the hazard (the correcting employer). The employers listed in paragraphs (2) to (4), inclusive, of this subdivision may be cited regardless of whether their own employees were exposed to the hazard.

(c) It is the intent of the Legislature, in adding subdivision (b) to this section, to codify existing regulations with respect to the responsibility of employers at multi-employer worksites. Subdivision (b) of this section is declaratory of existing law and shall not be construed or interpreted as creating a new law or as modifying or changing an existing law.

SEC. 5. Section 6423 of the Labor Code is amended to read:

6423: Except where another penalty is specifically provided, every employer and every officer, management official, or supervisor having direction, management, control, or custody of any employment, place of employment, or of any other employee, who does any of the following is guilty of a misdemeanor:

(a) Knowingly or negligently violates any standard, order, or special order, or any provision of this division, or of any part thereof in, or authorized by, this part the violation of which is deemed to be a serious violation pursuant to Section 6432.

(b) Repeatedly violates any standard, order, or special order, or provision of this division, or any part thereof in, or authorized by, this part, which repeated violation creates a real and apparent hazard to employees.

(c) Fails or refuses to comply, after notification and expiration of any abatement period, with any such standard, order, special order, or provision of this division, or any part thereof, which failure or refusal creates a real and apparent hazard to employees.

(d) Directly or indirectly, knowingly induces another to commit any of the acts in subdivisions (a), (b), or (c). Any violation of subdivision (a) is punishable by imprisonment in the county jail for a period not to exceed six months, or by a fine not to exceed five thousand dollars (\$5,000), or by both that imprisonment and fine. Any violation of the provisions of subdivision (b), (c), or (d) of this section is punishable by imprisonment in a county jail for a term not exceeding one year, or by a fine not exceeding fifteen thousand dollars (\$15,000), or by both that imprisonment and fine. If the defendant is a corporation or a limited liability company, the fine may not exceed one-hundred and fifty thousand dollars (\$150,000).

(e) In determining the amount of fine to impose under this section, the court shall consider all relevant circumstances, including, but not limited to, the nature, circumstance, extent, and gravity of the violation, any prior history of violations by the defendant, the ability of the defendant to pay, and any other matters the court determines the interests of justice require.

SEC. 6. Section 6425 of the Labor Code is amended to read:

6425. (a) Any employer and any employee having direction, management, control, or custody of any employment, place of employment, or of any other employee, who willfully violates any occupational safety or health standard, order, or special order, or Section 25910 of the Health and Safety Code, and that violation caused death to any employee, or caused permanent or prolonged impairment of the body of any employee, is guilty of a public offense punishable by imprisonment in a county jail for a term not exceeding one year, or by a fine not exceeding one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000), or by both that imprisonment and fine; or by imprisonment in the state prison for 16 months, or two or three years, or by a fine of not more than two hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$250,000), or by both that imprisonment and fine; and in either case, if the defendant is a corporation or a limited liability company, the fine may not exceed one million five hundred thousand dollars (\$1,500,000).

(b) If the conviction is for a violation committed within seven years after a conviction under subdivision (b), (c), or (d) of Section 6423 or subdivision (c) of Section 6430, punishment shall be by imprisonment in state prison for a term of 16 months, two, or three years, or by a fine not exceeding two hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$250,000), or by both that fine and imprisonment, but if the defendant is a corporation or limited liability company, the fine may not be less than five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) or more than two million five hundred thousand dollars (\$2,500,000).

(c) If the conviction is for a violation committed within seven years after a first conviction of the defendant for any crime involving a violation of subdivision (a), punishment shall be by imprisonment in the state prison for two, three, or four years, or by a fine not exceeding two hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$250,000), or by both that fine and imprisonment, but if the defendant is a corporation or a limited liability company, the fine shall not be less than one million dollars (\$1,000,000) but may not exceed three million five hundred thousand dollars (\$3,500,000).

(d) In determining the amount of fine to be imposed under this section, the court shall consider all relevant circumstances, including, but not limited to, the nature, circumstance, extent, and gravity of the violation, any prior history of violations by the defendant, the ability of the defendant to pay, and any other matters the court determines the interests of justice require.

(e) As used in this section, "willfully" has the same definition as it has in Section 7 of the Penal Code. This subdivision is intended to be a codification of existing law.

(f) This section does not prohibit a prosecution under Section 192 of the Penal Code.

SEC. 7. Section 6428 of the Labor Code is amended to read:

6428. Any employer who violates any occupational safety or health standard, order, or special order, or Section 25910 of the Health and Safety Code, if that violation is a serious violation, shall be assessed a civil penalty of up to twenty-five thousand dollars (\$25,000) for each violation. Employers who do not have an operative injury prevention program shall receive no adjustment for good faith of the employer or history of previous violations as provided in paragraphs (3) and (4) of subdivision (c) of Section 6319.

SEC. 8. Section 6429 of the Labor Code is amended to read:

6429: (a) Any employer who willfully or repeatedly violates any occupational safety or health standard, order, or special order, or Section 25910 of the Health and Safety Code, may be assessed a civil penalty of not more than seventy thousand dollars (\$70,000) for each violation, but in no case less than five thousand dollars (\$5,000) for each willful violation.

(b) Any employer who repeatedly violates any occupational safety or health standard, order, or special order, or of Section 25910 of the Health and Safety Code, shall not receive any adjustment of a penalty assessed pursuant to this section on the basis of the regulations promulgated pursuant to subdivision (c) of Section 6319 pertaining to the good faith of the employer or the history of previous violations of the employer.

(c) The division shall preserve and maintain records of its investigations and inspections and citations for a period of not less than seven years.

SEC. 9. Section 6430 of the Labor Code is amended to read:

6430. (a) Any employer who fails to correct a violation of any occupational safety or health standard, order, or special order, or Section 25910 of the Health and Safety Code, within the period permitted for its correction shall be assessed a civil penalty of not more than fifteen thousand dollars (\$15,000) for each day during which the failure or violation continues.

(b) Notwithstanding subdivision (a), for any employer who submits a signed statement affirming compliance with the abatement terms pursuant to Section 6320, and is found upon a re-inspection not to have abated the violation, any adjustment to the civil penalty based on abatement shall be rescinded and the additional civil penalty assessed for failure to abate shall not be adjusted for good faith of the employer or history of previous violations as provided in paragraphs (3) and (4) of subdivision (c) of Section 6319.

(c) Notwithstanding subdivision (a), any employer who submits a signed statement affirming compliance with the abatement terms pursuant to subdivision (b) of Section 6320, and is found not to have abated the violation, is guilty of a public offense punishable by imprisonment in a county jail for a term not exceeding one year, or by a fine not exceeding thirty thousand dollars (\$30,000), or by both that fine and imprisonment; but if the defendant is a corporation or a limited liability company the fine shall not exceed three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000). In determining the amount of the fine to be imposed under this section, the court shall consider all relevant circumstances, including, but not limited to, the nature, circumstance, extent, and gravity of the violation, any prior history of violations by the defendant, the ability of the defendant to pay, and any other matters the court determines the interests of justice require. Nothing in this section shall be construed to prevent prosecution under any law that may apply.

SEC. 10. Section 6432 of the Labor Code is amended to read:

6432. (a) As used in this part, a "serious violation" shall be deemed to exist in a place of employment if there is a substantial probability that death or serious physical harm could result from a violation, including, but not limited to, circumstances where there is a substantial probability that either of the following could result in death or great bodily injury:

(1) A serious exposure exceeding an established permissible exposure limit.

(2) The existence of one or more practices, means, methods, operations, or processes which have been adopted or are in use, in the place of employment.

(b) Notwithstanding subdivision (a), a serious violation shall not be deemed to exist if the employer can demonstrate that it did not, and could not with the exercise of reasonable diligence, know of the presence of the violation.

(c) As used in this section, "substantial probability" refers not to the probability that an accident or exposure will occur as a result of the violation, but rather to the probability that death or serious physical harm will result assuming an accident or exposure occurs as a result of the violation.

SEC. 11. Section 6434 of the Labor Code is amended to read:

6434. (a) Any civil or administrative penalty assessed pursuant to this chapter against a school district, county board of education, county superintendent of schools, charter school, community college district, California State University, University of California, or joint powers agency performing education functions shall be deposited with the Workplace Health and Safety Revolving Fund established pursuant to Section 78.

(b) Any school district, county board of education, county superintendent of schools or charter school community college district, California State University, University of California, or joint powers agency performing education functions may apply for a refund of their civil penalty, with interest, if all conditions previously cited have been abated, they have abated any other outstanding citation, and if they have not been cited by the division for a serious violation at the same school within two years of the date of the original violation. Funds not applied for within two years and six months of the time of the original violation shall be expended as provided for in Section 78 to assist schools in establishing effective occupational injury and illness prevention programs.

SEC. 12. Section 6719 is added to the Labor Code, to read:

6719. The Legislature reaffirms its concern over the prevalence of repetitive motion injuries in the workplace and reaffirms the Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board's continuing duty to carry out Section 6357.

SEC. 13. No reimbursement is required by this act pursuant to Section 6 of Article XIII B of the California Constitution because the only costs that may be incurred by a local agency or school district will be incurred because this act creates a new crime or infraction, eliminates a crime or infraction, or changes the penalty for a crime or infraction, within the meaning of Section 17556 of the Government Code, or changes the definition of a crime within the meaning of Section 6 of Article XIII B of the California Constitution.