



Attacking collective bargaining by public employees is shortsighted

Published: Monday, March 21, 2011, 12:18 PM Updated: Monday, March 21, 2011, 12:18 PM



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By

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — Pssst (Shhh) – KEEP IT A SECRET: Public employees are human beings. No, really! They're flesh-and-blood fellow citizens and some of them (gasp) are our neighbors. We may even have some of them in our family.

But keep it all a secret. Whatever you do, don't tell the conservatives. It would blow their flavor-of-the-season crusade against working men and women. It would puncture their blame-balloon and let the hot air out of their enthusiastically seized opportunity to use the severe economic downturn to ideological and political advantage.

In the words of an old politician, "I seen my opportunities and I took 'em."

After all, the problems can't be the fault of financial institutions like banks, Wall Street, mortgage purveyors or corporations. It has to be the insidious, faceless government workers: nurses, firefighters, clerks, teachers, police, social workers, in housing, postal, motor vehicles; hospital workers, crossing guards, accounting, traffic, etc.

We know what they're like: little more than welfare frauds greedily soaking up the public money; lazy, benefit bloated, secure for life in useless jobs and lording it over the rest of us. If they had any talent at all, they'd be working in the private sector where the market place rules and real initiative rewards economic winners.

And you there; yeah you! You're a public employee, aren't you? Oh; I see. You're one of the good ones. You're better than the rest of those leeches. Perhaps we should get rid of most of them and make the remaining ones actually work up to your standards. "Boy, if I were in charge."

Does any of this resonate? Have you heard these arguments on cable T.V. or talk radio, or read them in the tabloids? This is an orchestrated assault by anti-labor sharks on public employees and collective bargaining that has a national as well as a local sway.

So, let's take a real look at what is going on and even in the context of my hyperbole.

First of all, are states in big trouble facing severe budget difficulties? Yes, they are. States are confronted

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with budget shortfalls due to a drop in revenue averaging 12 percent below pre-recession levels at a time when there is an increased need for services such as unemployment benefits.

But, are public employees and collective bargaining the culprits?

They are definitely not the culprits. Where fiscal pressures involve public employees, formal and informal collective bargaining can and should help be the remedy. The unions saved New York City from bankruptcy in 1975 and all over the country they are prepared, through intense bargaining, to be a realistic part of the solution.

Then who are the major culprits?

An early example can be taken out of the Wisconsin governor's playbook. The first thing he did on taking office was to lower taxes for the super rich.

O.K.! Now there is a problem.

These created proportions justified his studied outrage against workers and their union voice. He trumpeted the line of attack being heard in Ohio, Indiana, New Jersey and elsewhere.

Philosophically, conservatives see government as a barely necessary evil, viewing its workers' union voice with hostility. Labor sees government at its best as a public guardian providing services for the common good.

Myth vs. fact:

*The cost of public employees has risen astronomically in recent years.

The opposite is true. Studies show that over the last 20 years, employee compensation has decreased as a share of total state budget expenditures, and that includes wages and benefits.

*Public employees earn more than their counterparts in the private sector.

Actually, most government employees face a wage penalty, not an advantage for becoming public servants.

*Pensions are overly generous due to union negotiations and will force states into bankruptcy.

Defined-benefit Pensions grate on the very fiber of corporate executives and their conservative allies. Once a general part of the social contract, business interests have been depriving their own employees of them and want to eliminate them for everyone.

Long range, state pension systems are secure over the next decades and as the recession ends, funding will rebound. Changes through negotiations have and can be made to adjust to economic realities without

gutting that social contract.

*States with collective bargaining are in the deepest trouble.

States that forbid collective bargaining like Nevada, North Carolina, Arizona, often have worse deficits than collective-bargaining states like Massachusetts, New Mexico, Montana. Collective bargaining is more likely a vehicle for sharing the pain in bad times as sharing the wealth in good times.

When Wisconsin union members agreed to negotiate sharing the pain accepting massively reduced benefits, the governor showed his true hand. He really did not want a budget solution but to deny union representation to public employees.

So, what is really at play here?

When the citizenry is hurting, losing homes, unemployed, fearful of the future, what better time to find a scapegoat and do some ideological dirty work? "I seen my opportunities and I took 'em."

Deflect attention away from unregulated financial wizards who whistled on their way to the bank as they defrauded the public. Blame public employees. Blame their union voice. Deny them representation. Play on public fears. Divide and conquer.

But I have another secret: Public employees and collective bargaining are not the problem, they're the solution.

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