

As go the unions, so goes the nation: End the assault on public sector salaries and benefits

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A bad job is still a job: Lately, some hiring managers have been exploiting the desperation of the unemployed to force workers to accept this logic and the worst deals possible. Now pundits and politicians across the country are getting in on the action by claiming that public-sector employees must sacrifice more and act like private sector employees who supposedly feel blessed and thankful to get a paycheck, any paycheck.

Welcome to the new race to the bottom - a race that is doing terrible harm to many Americans. The absence of well-funded pensions, reasonable hours and decent pay in many precincts of the private sector is being used to stir up rage at the presence of those standards in the public sector.

Teachers, firefighters, cops and sanitation workers are derided as privileged compared to "everyone else." They recklessly pursue financial gain and swindle taxpayers!

How absurd. I mean, really, really, absurd. The truth is hardly tabloid material: Most public-sector workers earn a modest middle-class living and are as worried as anyone else about the economy.

But the perverse argument gaining traction is that what public-sector jobs provide - fair compensation, adequate benefits and dignified retirement options - sets the bar too high for everyone.

It's enough to rouse the labor leaders and activists of the past from the grave - people who fought for eight-hour days, weekends off and other basic employment standards now once again under attack.

We forget how recent - and still fragile - some of these victories are. Consider retirement. **"Until the 1950s," New School economist [Teresa Ghilarducci](#) has written, "only the wealthy could expect to retire."** Now guaranteed pension income is getting falsely assailed as lavish, as long as its recipients are unionized employees, not CEOs with golden parachutes.

But when anti-government anger is expected to translate into lots of swing votes,

attacking the public sector is a surefire electoral strategy for Republicans and Democrats. Republicans want to discredit the federal stimulus package as a special interest sop to unions, while Democrats want to look like independents who don't answer to the labor lobby.

Such posturing does nothing more than harm our prospects for national recovery. The [Economic Policy Institute](#) estimates that every 100 public sector layoffs result in around 30 private-sector layoffs, because the subsequent loss of income dampens consumer spending and thus weakens the economy.

And if public-sector workers become cheap, expendable labor, they will contribute less to the tax base and spend less, blunting private-sector job creation. A healthy public sector is just as good for the investment banker as it is for the unionized electrician.

If the march against the unions and the public sector continues, the recession could hang around like an unwelcome guest, costing businesses and government more over time through vanishing growth, productivity and demand. The ranks of the working poor will swell and public assistance rolls will expand.

Upward mobility and shared prosperity cannot be created this way. In earlier eras, a robust middle class was built and sustained not by making jobs worse for more people but by making them better: Standards improved across industries and occupations.

Rebuilding the middle class today will be difficult. But ending the plight of American families who see their livelihoods under assault must be an imperative.

The race to the bottom is a callous attempt to lower expectations for employment at a time when millions of people are counting on them to be raised. No victory worthy of the name can be achieved on those terms.

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