

Both Parties Attack the Rights of Public Employees: Extreme Budget Cuts across the US

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States everywhere across the United States are facing the common enemy of extreme budget deficits. Many states have deficits in the multi-billion dollar realm, as the budget crises dominate the debates for the upcoming gubernatorial elections. In these debates, Republican and Democratic candidates are finding it difficult to disagree on the most essential issues around the budget crises. The most crucial question for any incoming governor must be: how will you resolve the state's budget crisis? The answer from both parties is a resounding: "Public workers and those who depend on their services will pay for the crisis"!

Take for instance California, where "friend of labor" Democrat Jerry Brown is running for Governor. The union leaders who endorsed Brown are having difficulty promoting him to their membership, since Brown has been bragging about his anti-union credentials, as reported by the San Francisco Chronicle:

"Jerry Brown said Friday that if elected governor he would have to "do things that labor doesn't like," including cutting pension benefits for public employees and asking labor leaders to "put everything on the table" to get California's bloated budget under control."

In speaking about cutbacks to public workers, Brown said: "If you're looking for frugality, I'm your man... I vetoed the pay raises for the state employees not once, but twice..." (September 3, 2010). These are his credentials for handling the budget crisis.

Even with his blatant anti-union perspective, Brown is being promoted as a "lesser of two evils," since his Republican opponent is a billionaire who is more honest in her anti-public worker comments.

In Oregon, the exact same dynamic is at play: a multi-billion dollar budget deficit with both political parties aiming their sights on public workers. The union-backed Democratic candidate, John Kitzhaber, has been in a war of words with his Republican opponent over who can most effectively take from public employees. The Oregonian reports:

"Kitzhaber promised to be plenty tough in [contract] negotiations [with public employee unions], noting that state employees went on strike during his first term in office. But he said only he has the necessary trust of union leaders [!] to lead successful cost-saving negotiations [cutting wages and benefits] next year." (September 18, 2010).

In New York, the current Democratic Governor, David Paterson, has viciously attacked public employees, and has promised that the incoming governor, regardless of political party, will resume the attack.

Likewise in Illinois, another state devastated by a budget crisis, the current Democratic Governor has made huge cuts in education and social services, while adding a sales tax that disproportionately effects working-class people.

The above examples are similar not by coincidence, but part of a well-defined policy agreed upon by the Democrat and Republican parties. Politicians everywhere are using similar, coded language to explain their policies to confront state budget deficits, all of them threatening working people. For example, state governments must completely “reset,” so that government reflects the “new reality” caused by the Great Recession, meaning that education and social services are de-funded, as are the wages and benefits of state workers.

Mitch Daniels, the Governor of Indiana, spoke bluntly of this national phenomenon in the Wall Street Journal, saying that it applied to all states. His article, *The Coming Reset in State Government*, focused on how permanent, massive cuts in state spending was the only way to deal with the recession:

“...[state governments] are facing a near permanent reduction in state tax revenues that will require us [governors] to reduce the size and scope of our state governments. And the time to prepare for this new reality is already at hand. (September 3, 2009).

More recently, the Seattle Post Globe spoke bluntly about how this “new normal” directly affected public workers, in an article entitled *Time to Reset State Union Rules*. The article argues for changes in law that would make it easier to reduce the wages and benefits of public employees, an opinion widely discussed by corporate interests all over the country, varying only by degree and form:

“...the Governor and legislature are going to need more flexibility dealing with state unions to truly transform the state budget. “

and:

“Another approach would be to follow the lead of Governor Mitch Daniels of Indiana. One of the first things he did when he took office in 2005 was to issue this Executive Order, which in effect ended any state negotiations with unions.” (August 24, 2010). Brute force replaced negotiations in Indiana, effectively destroying the power of unions.

These corporate-inspired ideas are shared by both political parties. The now-popular term “reset” refers to a national policy that intends to change the equilibrium of power in the U.S. between unions and corporations. Unions are being attacked, so that wages and benefits for all working people can be lowered. This is how corporations plan to survive the recession and maintain the highest profitability possible.

Consequently, the labor movement should be actively planning its defense and counterattack. Union members and community allies need to be educated about the assault and unite in coalitions to defend themselves. Pro-worker solutions to the crisis — such as taxing the rich — need to be demanded in the streets in mass demonstrations.

But this is not happening. Instead, many unions are spending precious time giving money to their attackers, the Democrats, and encouraging union members to phone bank and canvass for these villains. After the elections, these “friends of labor” will soon become enemies, once the state budgets are being implemented, and union leaders will find

themselves having to quickly switch directions, telling their members that they were once again “betrayed” by politicians who didn’t make any concrete promises to begin with.

Experiences like these have already happened in most states, and will continue to teach workers plenty of lessons, since the budget deficits are getting worse. The main lesson is that working people need to organize themselves independently of Democrats and Republicans, and fight back against a national assault on their jobs and living standards. “Tax the Rich!” must be the slogan that working people unite around to defend education, social services, and public employees in the face of the state budget crises.

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