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Press Releases | Public Addresses | Executive Orders | Press Kit | Reports

Home > Newsroom > Press Releases > 2010 > In Case You Missed It: Across the nation, a rising irritation with public employee unions is palpable, as a wounded economy has blown gaping holes in state, city and town budgets...

In Case You Missed It: Across the nation, a rising irritation with public employee unions is palpable, as a wounded economy has blown gaping holes in state, city and town budgets...

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Public Workers Face Outrage as Budget Crises Grow

New York Times
By Michael Powell

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Across the nation, a rising irritation with public employee unions is palpable, as a wounded economy has blown gaping holes in state, city and town budgets, and revealed that some public pension funds dangle perilously close to bankruptcy. In California, New York, Michigan and New Jersey, states where public unions wield much power and the culture historically tends to be pro-labor, even longtime liberal political leaders have demanded concessions — wage freezes, benefit cuts and tougher work rules.

It is an angry conversation. Union chiefs, who sometimes persuaded members to take pension sweeteners in lieu of raises, are loath to surrender ground. Taxpayers are split between those who want cuts and those who hope that rising tax receipts might bring easier choices.

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These battles play out in many corners, but few are more passionate than in New Jersey, where politics tend toward the moderately liberal and nearly 20 percent of the work force is unionized (compared with less than 14 percent nationally). From tony horse-country towns to middle-class suburbs to hard-edged cities, property tax and unemployment rates are high, and budgets are pools of red ink.

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To venture into Washington Township in southern New Jersey is to walk the frayed line between taxpayer and public employees, and to hear anger and ambivalence. So many Philadelphians have flocked here over the years that locals call it "South Philly with grass."

These expatriates tend to be Democrats and union members, or sons and daughters of the same. But property taxes are rising fast, and voters favored Governor Christie, a Republican. Bill Rahl, a graying plug of a retiree, squints and holds his hand against his throat. "I'm up to here with taxes, I can't breathe, O.K.?" he says. "I don't know about asking anyone to give up a pension. Just don't ask for no more."

Governor Christie faced a vast deficit when he took office last January, and much of the federal stimulus aid for schools was exhausted by June. So he cut deeply into state aid for education; Washington Township lost \$900,000. That forced the town to rely principally on property taxes. (Few states lean as heavily on property taxes to finance education; New Jersey ranks 45th in state aid to education.) The town turned its construction office over to a private contractor and shed a few employees.

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In the past, union leaders, too, have proven adept at winning gains not just at the bargaining table. In 2000, union lobbyists persuaded legislators to cut five years off the retirement age for police and firefighters — a move criticized as a budget-buster by a state pension commission. The next year, the budget still was flush and union leaders persuaded the Republican dominated legislature to approve a 9 percent increase in pension benefits. (The legislators added a sweetener for their own pensions.)

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Some politicians draw multiple pensions as county legislators, called freeholders, and as prosecutors or union leaders. Back in Washington Township, people tend to talk of state government as a casino with fixed craps tables.

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The sense that public workers enjoy certain advantages is not a mirage. Public employees pay into their pension funds, but health benefits often come at a fraction of the cost of most private sector packages.

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Government employment also tends to be more secure. When the economy crashed, federal stimulus dollars safeguarded many public jobs. The alternative, many economists point out, was to force towns and cities into extensive layoffs, even as unemployment hovered around 10 percent and millions of Americans sought help from public agencies.

But it accentuated the perception that public workers, however tenuously, inhabited a protected class. That's a tough sell in Washington Township.

Ask Michael Tini, 54, who works as a card dealer in Atlantic City, about teacher salaries and benefits and he taps his head, not unsympathetically.

"Look, I understand that teachers are the brains of the operation, O.K.? But my hours are cut, and my taxes are killing me."

He taps his head again. "They have got to take it in the ear, too."

View entire article[here](#).

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