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## **Blaming Public Workers a Bad Idea**

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In the past two weeks, tens of thousands of people in Wisconsin took to the streets, protesting a bill that sharply curtails the wages of the state's public sector workers and eliminates fundamental rights to collective bargaining won by workers decades earlier.

The attacks on public employees in Wisconsin reflect a longstanding conservative agenda that has gained ground across the United States since the recent financial crisis. With near unanimity, Republicans in Wisconsin as well as in North Carolina and many other states have claimed that the only road to fiscal responsibility and economic recovery lies in eliminating government services and curtailing public workers' wages, benefits, and unions.

Just as many conservatives attempted to blame the great recession on the mortgage defaults of a relatively small number of low-income home owners, they now target public sector workers and their unions as the top culprits in the nation's fiscal problems.

It is time to stop looking for scapegoats and face the facts. We confront our current crisis because during relatively flush economic times almost all states – and the federal government – maintained deficits, often opting to lower tax rates (mostly for wealthy households and corporations) rather than attempting to generate surpluses. Beginning in December 2007, our economy entered what became the longest and deepest recession since World War II, with more than 8 million jobs lost and huge slumps in capital gains, housing, and retail sales, resulting in a historic decline in revenues for all levels of government. For the first time in generations state tax revenue declined for five consecutive quarters through 2008-9 and now stands at 12 percent below pre-recession levels when adjusted for inflation. We are where we are not because of the costs of maintaining a strong public sector but because we did not collect revenue and save when we should have, and then unforeseeably bad times hit.

But, given that it is too late to go back and save now, what do we do? Those who argue for massive cuts to the public sector point out that with so many other workers hurting, it is only fair for public employees to share the pain. But they have already suffered. Since mid-2008, state and local governments have cut 400,000 jobs, forcing 45 states to cut services including health care, care for the elderly and disabled, and education from kindergarten through college.

The idea that public sector workers earn inflated wages is simply not true. Indeed, since World War II, one of the primary attractions of public sector employment has not been its high pay but its promise of job security. Generations of fire fighters, teachers, police officers, and social

workers looked on during good economic times as their wages fell well behind private sector workers with similar levels of skill and training. It was a tradeoff they made because they knew they had secure jobs. If we follow the Republican agenda and insist that public sector jobs should carry the same risk of layoff and cutbacks as those in the private sector, how can we expect young talented people to even consider teaching our children or keeping us safe? A public sector that offers all of the risks and none of the rewards of the private sector would hurt us all.

Public workers' willingness to sacrifice significant financial reward for job security serves a purpose in the economy as a whole. During boom times, our fire fighters and public school teachers are a relative bargain. Conversely, during recessions, the government dampens negative shocks by securing public sector employment, which limits job losses and supports consumption.

Punishing public workers will not balance our budgets, but it will damage our schools, colleges, and libraries, make our streets less safe and clean, and eliminate a wide range of social services that the private sector cannot realistically provide.

Rather than solving our current fiscal crisis, eviscerating the public sector will help guarantee more and worse recessions in our future.

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