



Letter to the Editor

March 15 2011 12:37 PM

Dear Editor:

With the turmoil around the country regarding public sector employees and their benefits, I felt compelled to share some thoughts regarding issues on both sides of the isle.

Our forefathers fled to this country because of religious persecution, tyranny, and unhappiness with the political systems in their respective countries. Unfortunately the latter of those three still persists and huge state deficits and pension indebtedness are the hottest topics on the minds of taxpayers today.

While I, as the Mayor of this community, have an obligation to all taxpayers for fiscal restraint, that obligation also reaches out to our employees, who some would portray as the villains in the pension crisis when actually they could be the victims.

There are two sides to every story and plenty of blame to share. On one hand, not all public pensions are excessive and many are stable. On the other hand, public safety pensions have to be revisited.

The state made great strides and necessary adjustments to pension plans last year and they should be commended for that effort. However, it gave no relief to the existing financial problems and therein lays the culprit.

There are also distinct differences with the bargaining process in the private sector and the public sector. Non-government union members negotiate with the owners of a company or their representatives. Private enterprise knows what they can afford to negotiate and the idea is to keep both sides financially solvent. Public employees negotiate with elected officials. The taxpayers, the ultimate owners of the company, have very little say in the negotiations. All elected officials receive political support

from someone. Sadly, many elected officials exchange political support from the unions in exchange for a more favorable contract leaving the taxpayer stuck with the bill. Public employees are a huge voting block and all elected officials realize this fact.

Also, negotiations in the public sector occur without the fear of employers moving or going out of business. The normal market forces of competition and profit do not exist in the government sector; very few cities ever dissolve or declare bankruptcy. The maximum amount of money a municipality may have is set by state law. As our area knows all too well, private sector businesses can relocate or close completely if profit objectives are not met.

Having made the above remarks, stripping public sector employees of their bargaining rights is not the answer. Reasonable adjustments in salaries and benefits could have prevented most of this problem and generations of elected officials who did not honor their promise to set aside money for today's retiring employees failed both the employees and the taxpayers. Make no mistake, enormous strides are needed from both sides of the isle to make a government, which is completely financially out of control, solvent.

The vast majority of expenses in any government entity are the wages and benefits of the employees. In my opinion, the best way to solve this problem would be to make the employees part of the solution. Ironically, the highest degree of unionization is found in police and fire departments, the two entities with the largest pension debts. In the case of Wisconsin, they have exempted these unions from their bargaining position. Teachers fall into either state or local government programs. A responsible politician and leader has to know when to say "no" and, just as importantly, know when to say "yes." I believe the employees caught in this firestorm of stripping them of their bargaining rights have agreed to significant reductions and increased healthcare costs. Obviously, there is more work to be completed.

We are seeing not just balancing budgets, but an outright attack on the very principles of organized labor. Make no mistake unions have caused many of their own problems, but never forget where you came from. I think many of these so called leaders' parents, grandparents & great grandparents could teach them a lesson of a time in American history we never want to revisit.

The real job is solving a huge, but manageable problem. Ask yourself, are public sector employees being made convenient scapegoats for irresponsible past and present politicians? Trying to determine blame and exacting punishment does nothing, is unfair, and does not get to the root of the matter.

Sincerely,

Tom Hoechst, Mayor

City of Alton, Illinois

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