

BLOOMBERG: Americans oppose Republican attack on unions in benefits poll

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Americans reject Republican efforts to curb bargaining rights of unions whose power they say is dwarfed by corporations, a Bloomberg National Poll finds.

As battles rage between state workers and Republican governors in Wisconsin and Ohio, 63 percent don't think states should be able to break their promises to retirees, and respondents split over whether governors aim to balance their budgets or weaken unions that back Democratic foes, according to the poll conducted March 4-7.

The poll shows that political challenges to government workers are failing to draw broad support from a public more concerned about unemployment than government deficits. Respondents are divided over whether public employees should sacrifice to help states ease their fiscal crises: About half say governors are unfairly targeting unions and 46 percent say public employees should be willing to accept benefit cuts. The fracture largely reflects party lines.

"The Republican Party sees an opportunity to attack and possibly destroy the base of their opponents' political power," says poll respondent Dale Palmer, 59, a Democrat and retired teacher from Zephyrhills, Florida.

Palmer says budget deficits are a result of the economy and years of tax cuts, not the actions of public employees. "They're putting it now on the backs of their enemies even when these particular unions are willing to bargain," he says.

With states facing budget deficits of \$175 billion over the next two years, tax revenue yet to rebound from the recession, and pensions strained by investment losses, even government workers in Democratic-led states including New York and California are facing job losses, pay cuts or challenges to retirement benefits.

States have cut 82,000 jobs, or 1.6 percent of their jobs, since their payrolls peaked in August 2008, a month before the collapse of investment bank Lehman Brothers Holdings Inc. accelerated the financial crisis, according to Labor Department data.

Rising tensions between Republican politicians and state workers sparked protests in the Midwest. Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker and Ohio Governor John Kasich, first elected in the November races that also put their party in charge of a majority of states and the U.S. House, are seeking to roll back the collective bargaining rights of government workers. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie also has challenged worker benefits he says threaten to hobble his state.

Poll respondents differ over whether government workers do better than their private-sector counterparts: 43 percent say government workers are better compensated, 21 percent say they are compensated less, and 27 percent say about the same.

Sixty-three percent of those surveyed -- including a majority of Democrats and independents - - say corporations wield more political clout than unions. Public employees, meanwhile, are viewed favorably by a large majority: 72 percent, compared with 17 percent who have an unfavorable view.

Government employees account for the majority of union members in the U.S. as a result of the long decline in manufacturing industries. In 2010, 7.6 million of the 14.7 million U.S. union members worked in the public sector, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

Sixty-four percent of respondents, including a plurality of Republicans, say public employees should have the right to bargain collectively for their wages. Sixty-three percent, including 55 percent of Republicans, say states without enough money to pay for all the pension benefits they have promised to current retirees shouldn't be able to break those obligations.

Poll respondent Anthony DeMarco, an industrial engineer from Havertown, Pennsylvania, says he supports curbing public unions' bargaining rights. Still, he says politicians shouldn't be able to roll back their pension promises.

"If it had been something that agreed upon in the past -- and everybody at the time agreed to it -- you shouldn't be able to change it retroactively," says DeMarco, 40, an independent. "A deal is a deal."

The bids to curb the collective bargaining rights of unions galvanized protesters who are rallying against what they say is a Republican assault on middle-class workers on behalf of business backers seeking to keep taxes at bay. Wisconsin's Democratic senators remain out of the state to deprive the legislature of the votes needed to proceed.

Randy Turner, a 32-year old construction worker from Springfield, Missouri, who participated in the poll, says he sees unions as a corrective force against a government that exerts enough power.

"Trying to make us not have a right for unions for anything is wrong," says Turner, an independent voter who isn't a union member. "They help our economy, they help the job market -- all kinds of things our government doesn't help."

The skirmishes have intensified support for unions among their members and Democrats, a potential challenge to Republicans in the 2012 elections, says Scott Keeter, a pollster with Pew Research Center in Washington.

"That fact might not change the outcome of the current battles, but could have implications for voter turnout among these groups next year," he says.

While the Bloomberg poll found Democrats and Republicans largely in agreement on the question of bargaining rights and pension promises, other questions about public employees reflect a partisan split over the motivations of politicians and the sacrifices government employees should be called upon to make.

Seventy percent of Democrats say Republican governors are unfairly targeting public employee unions, while a majority of Republicans and independents say public employees should be willing to make sacrifices because of the state budget shortfalls.

When asked whether governors are trying to reduce their budget deficits or the power of unions, the same split prevails: Sixty-two percent of Democrats see a gambit to weaken unions, while 71 percent of Republicans say deficits are the target. Independents are divided 51 percent to 41 percent, with the majority saying budgets are the cause.

Overall, poll respondents with a favorable view of unions outnumber those with an unfavorable view 49-to-40 percent. Even with the attention received by both Wisconsin Governor Walker and New Jersey's Christie, at least half weren't sure how they viewed either politician.

A majority says unions are appropriate for firefighters, nurses, teachers, prison guards and police officers. Respondents were divided only over whether custodians and office workers also should be unionized.

Poll respondent Margaret Coakley, 72, a retired psychiatric social worker from New York who lives in New Harbor, Maine, says politicians are wrong if they blame public employees for the financial ills of their state.

"It's outrageous they're pointing to public employees now," she says. "That's not where the problems are."

The poll of 1,001 adults was conducted by Selzer & Co., a Des Moines, Iowa-based firm. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.