

Governors are singing the wrong tune

By Harold Schaitberger

An increasing number of governors are joining New Jersey Governor Chris Christie's anti-worker chorus.

Too bad they're all off key.

Wall Street's recklessness, not public employee pensions, caused our nation's financial collapse. Scapegoating workers won't solve anything.

We so desperately want easy explanations for complicated problems. We want someone to blame.

So when Governor Christie began pointing fingers at public employees, many people were eager to accept his fiction as fact. But the governor conveniently neglects to tell people that his state routinely failed to make payments into their pension plans. Workers made their payments without exception, but since 2001 the state of New Jersey has never made more than 58.8 percent of the required annual pension contributions to the pension fund for police and fire fighters, and it completely skipped making payments from 2001-03, starving the fund of \$304 million during that period. That should be illegal, but it's not. Too many states have robbed people of their retirement security, but they are blaming workers for the crime.

Newly-elected Governor Rick Scott, in Florida, has followed Governor Christie's lead, blaming public employees for that state's problems. He also conveniently neglects to mention that his state's pension fund for fire fighters is 90 percent funded.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, another Christie disciple, conveniently neglects to mention that his state's pension fund for fire fighters is funded at 105 percent.

The governors and others who want to use the recession as an excuse to skewer public employee pensions are opportunists with little regard for the truth. They are taking their direction from greedy Wall Street bankers, who desperately want to convert defined benefit plans to defined contribution plans so they can have access to the billions of dollars of retirement savings that they can't touch now. In 2005 they tried the same thing with Social Security – which most fire fighters are prohibited from collecting – and we barely fought them off. Now they're setting their sights on fire fighters and other public employees.

Like so many governors, Newt Gingrich also is using the recession as an excuse to take aim at public employees. He believes that letting states file for bankruptcy so they can abrogate collective bargaining agreements with public employees to skewer wages, pensions and benefits will solve our nation's problems. But it's a recipe for disaster. The former House speaker's bankruptcy scheme would cause more fiscal carnage than the economic devastation we've witnessed over the past two years by destroying the retirement security of middle class workers, the economic foundation of our great country.

Our nation needs a conversation about important issues that affect the middle class. We need to create jobs.

We are public servants, not public enemies. But a growing chorus of anti-worker lawmakers and Wall Street bankers want to convince the nation that workers are the problem. We don't like the sound of that.

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