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In Costa Mesa, are extremists playing politics with people's lives?

Critics of the plan to slash half the city's staff say proponents are more concerned with taking an ideological stand than with saving money.

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These are not the best of times to be a public employee in America. From coast to coast, their paychecks, their pensions and their benefits are under attack. To my knowledge, though, no one's being pummeled like the clock punchers who toil for Costa Mesa in Orange County.

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If the City Council gets its way, half the town's employees will be fired. About 200 pink slips have gone out, and come September, private contractors may be brought in to replace maintenance workers, dispatchers, mechanics, firefighters and other workers providing essential city services.

Councilman Jim Righeimer, whose strafing of public employees helped get him elected last November, told me pensions are rising and revenues are shrinking.

"We have no money in our budget," he said.

But when I visited Costa Mesa this week, I heard a bit of a different story. Yes, people agreed, Costa Mesa has budget deficit problems like lots of communities. But critics of the outsourcing plan, including some Republicans, think the tough talk is about philosophy more than about numbers, and that extremists are playing politics with people's lives.

"If this were about dollars and cents, we'd have no problem," said Billy Folsom, who got a layoff notice after 30 years as a city mechanic.

Folsom told me he's a Republican with friends in the "tea party," but he thinks Costa Mesa is actually ground zero for the anti-government movement run amok and that privatizing will cost more in the long run. If the city could save money by going private, he said, why hasn't it produced a shred of evidence?

"You don't just pull the rug out from under people," agreed former Mayor Sandy Genis, a Republican. She's bristled in the past at what she considered excessive pay and benefits, but she thinks city officials could have negotiated better deals without threatening the mass layoff, and she can't believe they didn't first get bids on the cost of privatizing.

She and others in town were talking about my colleague Catherine Saillant's story last week in which Orange County Republican Party Chairman Scott Baugh [told tea party supporters that Costa Mesa is "ground zero"](#) in the GOP's next big movement.

"This is basically a coup at this point," said another longtime Costa Mesa Republican, Geoff West, who writes the highly regarded blog Bubbling Cauldron.

Though he believes pensions need some tweaking, West said county GOP leaders are using Costa Mesa as a testing ground for unproven political ideas and a training camp for a particular strain of politician. He thinks Righeimer may be trying to use

public employee bashing to advance his career in much the same way former Mayor Alan Mansoor rode a militant stand on illegal immigration into the state Assembly.

West called Righeimer a "carpetbagger" who moved to Costa Mesa four years ago, worked as a campaign manager for U.S. Rep. Dana Rohrabacher and was appointed to the city planning commission by Mansoor despite filing his application after the deadline.

"I find it frustrating," former Mayor Genis said of recent developments in the seaside burg.

We were strolling through Costa Mesa's lovely Fairview Park when I asked what she meant.

"We seem to attract a certain kind of Republican," she said.

What kind is that? I asked.

"Intolerant," said Genis.

In defense of Righeimer and his posse, they make a fair point about the high cost of public employee packages won by unions. There are too many examples across the state of outrageous pensions and pension-spiking tricks. And far too many public employees retire way too young at three-fourths of their pay or more.

But the answer is pension reform, not bashing employees or firing them en masse.

If Costa Mesa ever gets around to doing the cost-benefit analysis it should already have done, and decides it can save a few bucks by going private, what about the cost to the rest of us when fired city employees end up on the dole and going to county emergency rooms because they've lost medical coverage?

At recent council meetings, Costa Mesans have lined up to attack the layoff plan. Righeimer claims those are mostly disgruntled employees. But some of the most vocal critics have been car dealers upset about the plan to ground the city's police helicopters, which the dealers fear will lead to a jump in car thefts and other crimes.

Genis thinks the zealous council underestimated the appreciation many residents have for city employees they've known for years.

"We see them in the supermarket, we see them in church on Sunday," she said.

At the maintenance yard, Folsom told me he was insulted by a critic who said the city should fire its mechanics and service its fleet at Jiffy Lube. Jiffy Lube can't do full service on firetrucks, buses, tractors, motorcycles and police cruisers, said Folsom. His partner, Ron Penley, with 20 years on the job, rolled out from under a police car with a wrench and joined the conversation.

"This is the hardest job I've had in 46 years as a mechanic," said Penley. "We do everything from lawn mowers to sewer suckers. And we're nonprofit."

If the city hires private mechanics, he said, it will have to pay for the profit margin built into the contract, and the contract may go up every year even if the quality of the work goes down.

"If I lose this job, I lose my house," he said before disappearing back under the car.

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