

The Washington Post

[Back to previous page](#)

rtis-e

For union families, a loss of value beyond bank accounts

By [Amy Gardner](#), Monday, April 18, 7:10 PM

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Judy and Jim Embree, an operating room nurse and paramedic and firefighter, were attending a rally at the state Capitol when they discovered that everything they thought to be good and right about their lives was, to an alarming number of people, completely wrong.

The people who showed up that day in support of a plan, since adopted, to cut the power and benefits of public-sector unions said that people like them were the problem. That their “high wages” and “exorbitant pensions” were crippling cities and counties across Ohio. Some, even, said their jobs were unnecessary.

It had never occurred to the Embrees that firefighters and nurses could be unnecessary. They thought of themselves as linchpins of the community — and one of the biggest rewards of their jobs was knowing that the rest of the world thought so, too.

“Kids go trick or treating in firemen’s costumes,” Jim Embree, 48, said. “Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts come and take tours and sit in the truck and blow the horn. People talk to you in the grocery store. I’m used to positive interactions with people. So it shocked me. To hear people speak in a public venue like I’m a Rockefeller . . . it shocked me.”

In heated debates in Ohio, as well as Wisconsin, Indiana, New York and other budget-strapped states, unions and the benefits their workers receive have become emblematic of the fiscal excesses of governments. Governors and legislators, with the vocal support of large blocs of voters, have sought to curb the escalating cost of salaries, pension and health benefits that have ballooned budgets across the country.

Those efforts, and the resulting restrictions on unions and their workers, have ripped apart how many public workers think of themselves and their role in society. The effect is doubly so

for families like the Embrees, with two union workers and a shared identity wrapped around their jobs.

There's no data here to show just how many of those families there are, but they're not hard to find. At Canal Winchester Middle School southeast of Columbus, an unofficial poll of employees gathered in the library on a recent school day found seven spouses of other public workers: a librarian married to a firefighter; an eighth-grade math teacher married to a court bailiff; a gym teacher married to a sixth-grade teacher; and so on.

One of those was Heather Baugess, 44, a librarian married to a firefighter. Baugess said she was less upset about proposals that would require her to work longer and receive less when she retires than she is about how people view her and her husband.

"It's not the money," said Baugess, who earns about \$60,000 and whose husband, Larry, earns a bit more. "We're comfortable. It's the teacher-bashing. It's the negativity. I guess I live in my own perfect world where everybody supports teachers and everybody supports firefighters. I don't want that to change."

How Much is Too Much?

The divide between those who back union workers and those who don't comes down to a matter of perception over what qualifies as modest and what is too much.

Judy Embree earns \$63,000. Under current rules, she is eligible to retire in five years, at age 54, after 30 years on the job. Upon retirement, she will be paid about 66 percent of her wages.

Jim Embree earns \$70,700. He is eligible to retire in two years, at age 50, after 25 years on the job. He will take home 60 percent of his retiring salary.

Both Embrees could continue to work and improve their pensions; Judy Embree would qualify for 100 percent of her wages after 44 years of service (at age 68), and Jim would max out after 33 years (at age 58) with 72 percent of his final pay.

"I didn't go into this to become rich," Jim Embree said, flipping grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner as he stood in the cluttered kitchen of the family's split-level home in Galloway, a western suburb of Columbus. "I am not rich. It's just that the benefits reward longevity."

That's one perspective. Another comes from private-sector workers, who see themselves, the taxpayers, paying tens of thousands of dollars for decades to retirees. In some cases, those payments are likely to go on longer than the careers of the people who receive them.

Ohio's private-sector workforce has suffered mightily in the last decade, shedding 400,000 jobs

in just the last four years and conceding pay, pension and health benefits that public workers have retained. Ohio Gov. John Kasich (R) likes to point out that the average private sector worker in Ohio pays 23 percent of health costs while the average public worker pays nine.

A third perspective comes from government itself, where state, county, city and even town leaders face staggering budget shortfalls. Kasich and the Ohio legislature must close an \$8 billion shortfall this year in a budget where 8 percent of costs goes to state worker salaries and another chunk goes to local governments, largely to fund public employee salaries. The crisis is so stark that Ohio school districts project that salary, health and pension costs for teachers and staff will eat up 96 percent of all revenue by 2015 — and will keep growing thereafter.

“The people who have been underrepresented in this are taxpayers,” Kasich said in a recent interview. “This is about the long term, about being able to do things that our local governments and our state can afford.”

Kasich and others who backed the bill to limit collective bargaining said it is necessary to negotiate more austere union contracts. Kasich signed the measure into law late last month, but it is almost certain to be challenged by union supporters, as Ohio law allows, in a popular referendum next fall.

The union bill inflicts only part of the pain that public workers are feeling in Ohio these days. When he unveiled a deeply austere state budget earlier this year that slashed state aid to local governments and proposed privatizing a number of institutions, Kasich set off even more worries among state and local workers whose jobs are now directly on the line.

At Canal Winchester Middle School two days after Kasich released his budget, teachers gathered quietly in the library at the end of the day to comfort tearful colleagues who’d just received letters that they’d likely lose their jobs if Kasich’s budget goes through.

“I’m pretty sure he got a letter,” one teacher, Missy McCarty, told a colleague about her husband, who is an aide in another local school. “I have not heard from him.”

That grim scene played out across Ohio that day — just as it has in other states where teachers have received provisional layoff notices. It felt to some as if harming the image of public workers was an intentional prelude to make the budget cuts more palatable.

“No matter how it turns out, my profession is going to have a black eye for a long time, and that hurts,” Jim Embree said. “So many people believe that I earn a six-figure income and can retire at 40. It seems like they’re calling into question why we’re doing the job. We’re not going to sound like we’re poor. But we’ve been doing this for 25 years. We’re 50 years old. I think I make enough to live on. And I think that’s the way it should be.”

gardnera@washpost.com

© 2011 The Washington Post Company