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Poll Shows Support for Embattled Public Sector Workers

By MICHAEL COOPER and MEGAN THEE-BRENAN

As labor battles erupt in state capitals around the nation, a majority of Americans say they oppose efforts to weaken the collective bargaining rights of public employee unions and are also against cutting the pay or benefits of public workers to reduce state budget deficits, according to the latest New York Times/CBS News poll.

Labor unions are not exactly popular, though: a third of those surveyed viewed them favorably, a quarter viewed them unfavorably, and the rest said they were either undecided or had not heard enough about them. But the nationwide poll found that embattled public employee unions have the support of most Americans — and most independents — as they fight the efforts of newly elected Republican governors in Wisconsin and Ohio to weaken their bargaining powers, and the attempts of governors from both parties to cut their pay or benefits.

Americans oppose weakening the bargaining rights of public employee unions by a margin of nearly two to one: 60 percent to 33 percent. While a slim majority of Republicans favored taking away some bargaining rights, they were outnumbered by large majorities of Democrats and independents who said they opposed weakening them. Those surveyed said they opposed, 56 percent to 37 percent, cutting the pay or benefits of public employees to reduce deficits, breaking down along similar party

lines. A majority of respondents who have no union members living in their households opposed both cuts in pay or benefits and taking away the collective bargaining rights of public employees.

Governors in both parties have been making the case that public workers are either overpaid or have overly generous health and pension benefits. But 61 percent of those polled — including just over half of Republicans — said they thought the salaries and benefits of most public employees were either “about right” or “too low” for the work they do.

When it came to one of the most debated, and expensive, benefits that many government workers enjoy but private sector workers do not — the ability to retire early, and begin collecting pension checks — Americans were closely divided. Forty-nine percent said police officers and firefighters should be able to retire and begin receiving pension checks even if they are in their 40s or 50s; 44 percent said they should have to be older. There was a similar divide on whether teachers should be able to retire and draw pensions before they are 65.

The nationwide telephone poll was conducted Feb. 24-27 with 984 adults and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points for all adults. Of those surveyed, 20 percent said there was a union member in their household, and 25 percent said there was a public employee in their household.

Tax increases were not as unpopular among those surveyed as they are among many governors, who have vowed to avoid them. Asked how they would choose to reduce their state’s deficits, those polled preferred tax increases over benefit cuts for state workers by nearly two to one. Given a list of options to reduce the deficit, 40 percent said they would increase taxes, 22 percent chose decreasing the benefits of public employees, 20 percent said they would cut financing for roads and 3 percent said they would cut financing for education.

The most contentious issue to emerge in the recent labor battles has been the question of collective bargaining rights. A proposal by Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin to weaken them sent Democratic state lawmakers there out of state to prevent a vote, flooded the Capitol in Madison with thousands of

protesters and sparked a national discussion about unions.

The poll found that an overwhelming 71 percent of Democrats opposed weakening collective bargaining rights. But there was also strong opposition from independents: 62 percent of them said they opposed taking bargaining rights away from public employee unions.

Phil Merritt, 67, a retired property manager from Crossville, Tenn., who identifies himself as an independent, explained in a follow-up interview why he opposed weakening bargaining rights for public workers. “I just feel they do a job that needs to be done, and in our country today if you work hard, then you should be able to have a home, be able to save for retirement and you should be able to send your kids to college,” he said. “Most public employees have to struggle to do those things, and generally both spouses must work.”

The one group that favors weakening those rights, by a slim majority, was Republicans. Warren Lemma, 56, an electrical contractor from Longview, Tex., said states did not have the money to pay for many benefits that state workers enjoy.

“Retirement benefits should not be taken away from those about to retire, but the system should be changed for the people starting to teach just now,” said Mr. Lemma, a Republican. “And the only way the system will change is to do something about unions and their control, and the only way to do that is to take away collective bargaining.”

The poll found that 45 percent of those surveyed said they believed that governors and state lawmakers who are trying to reduce the pay or benefits of public employees were doing so to reduce budget deficits, while 41 percent said they thought they were doing so to weaken the power of unions.

Although cutting the pay or benefits of public workers was opposed by people in all income groups, it had the most support from people earning over $100,000 a year. In that income group, 45 percent said they favored cutting pay or benefits, while 49 percent opposed it. In every other income group, a majority opposed cutting pay or benefits: Among those making between $15,000 and $30,000, for

instance, 35 percent said they favored cutting pay or benefits, while 60 percent opposed it.

Labor unions, including private sector labor unions, are seen as less influential now than they were three decades ago. The poll found that 37 percent of those surveyed believe that labor unions have “too much influence” on American life and politics, while 48 percent said they had the “right amount” or “too little” influence. In a 1981 poll, by contrast — soon after President Ronald Reagan fired striking air traffic controllers — 60 percent of those surveyed said unions had “too much influence.” Of course, union membership has declined since then.

Marina Stefan contributed reporting.

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