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Feds rally against becoming scapegoats for fiscal woes

By George A. Warner gwarner@govexec.com February 8, 2011

Nearly 1,000 American Federation of Government Employees members marched on the Capitol on Tuesday, urging Congress not to target the federal workforce in efforts to reduce government spending.

AFGE members from all 50 states delivered [petitions](#) to their senators, arguing that freezing federal salaries, cutting benefits and reducing the government workforce were not good ways to balance the federal budget. The petitions stated the budget deficit is not the result of issues with federal compensation.

"It's not like we're retiring rich," said Bob Snelson, who works for the Bureau of Prisons at a super-maximum security facility in Colorado Springs, Colo., and is chief steward of AFGE Local 1322. Snelson, a 25-year veteran of the government, said an extended pay freeze would affect him "quite a bit," especially with the rising costs of health insurance. The average amount that federal employees pay for health care coverage [is increasing 7.2 percent](#) this year.

Other attendees agreed moves such as extending the current two-year salary freeze to five years, as [Republicans proposed](#) in January, would cause real hardship for public employees, especially those at the bottom of the federal pay scale. "They don't make a lot of money as it is," said Robena Reid, a member of AFGE Local 3313 and an economist at the Transportation Department.

Government employees are being asked to "foot the bill for the nation's overspending and undertaxing," Snelson said.

The rally comes a week before President Obama will deliver to Congress his fiscal 2012 budget request, which is expected to reveal more details about potential changes to the federal workforce.

Since President Obama announced a two-year federal pay freeze in late November 2010, lawmakers have been discussing additional options for reducing the deficit through cuts in government benefits and jobs. In early December 2010, the president's fiscal commission proposed reducing the federal workforce by 10 percent, adjusting health and retirement benefits, and extending the pay freeze for another year. And in their January proposal, GOP lawmakers called for a 15 percent reduction in the federal workforce along with the three-year extension of the pay freeze. Obama has not said whether he intends to act on those proposals, but during his State of the Union speech last month, he announced a five-year freeze on discretionary nonsecurity spending and a major reorganization of the federal government.

Some rally attendees said cuts targeted at government employees would result in diminished or inadequate federal services. LaVerne English, a member of AFGE Local 2028 in Pittsburgh, said shrinking the federal workforce would lead to staffing shortages at the Veterans Affairs Department facility where she works. For English, the outcome is obvious. "If you don't have enough nurses or nurse practitioners," she said, "the veterans don't get good care."

AFGE President John Gage said in an interview during the march that the public has misconceptions about what government employees do. Federal employees are "[staffing] your VA hospitals, inspecting mines, watching the border [and] manning our prisons," he said. "It's time we really stand up and defend ourselves and defend the work we do."

Gage and other attendees expressed concern over the way politicians and the media have portrayed civil servants during the recent debate over the size and role of the federal government.

"It's coming from all angles for federal employees," he said. "We're upset

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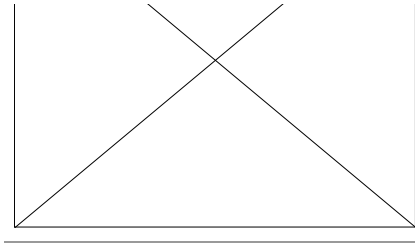
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...coming from an angle for federal employees, he said. "We're upset with the president for reinforcing these terrible myths that our people are overpaid [and] that [we have] a bloated government, when really many of our agencies are short-staffed."

Some of the rally attendees went further, expressing frustration over the government's bailout of the financial sector and the recent extension of the George W. Bush administration tax cuts. "They had so much money to bail out the banks, and we're being asked to accept less," Reid said.

"I think [Congress] should go to Wall Street" to make cuts, said Johnnie Gatling, a social worker at the Baltimore VA Medical Center and a member of AFGE District 4. "They're millionaires."



COMMENTS

Mr. Edie Stevens congratulations you missed spelled a word also..shame on you. Don't you know that the government monitors what you put in these comments? Also you get errors from the system, I'm glad you are perfect.
Worker Bee Posted February 14, 2011 9:52 AM

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Someone suggested reading the comment from Ryan posted at 12:41 pm Feb 9. And what do you know? When I started reading a comment where my reaction was yes, yes, yes, I realized it was indeed the comment from Ryan than someone had pointed out. Can somebody please write an article like this in a more widely read publication so the idea is introduced into the heads (pounded into the heads) of an unknowing public? Say, the Outlook section of the Washington Post? All the negative slurs against feds are more like mindless parroting, like a mob cry ... people just repeating what they've heard somewhere, not really using independent thinking. Or better yet, darn produce a documentary to show what feds do for the citizens and the country!!! It is so frustrating. Obama going for the 2-year pay-freeze only reinforced the negative take on fed employees' worth. It was more a self-serving move on his part, in my opinion.
Demoralized New Fed Posted February 14, 2011 8:15 AM

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