



**STATE SENATOR NAN RICH
LEGISLATIVE UPDATE
APRIL 2011**

**LEGISLATION AIMED AT PUBLIC EMPLOYEE LABOR UNIONS
AREN'T ABOUT BALANCING THE BUDGET –
THEY'RE PARTISAN POLITICAL ATTACKS**

Over the past few months, I've watched in dismay as Republican governors and state legislators across the country have launched political attacks on labor unions —particularly those that represent public employees. While most of the media attention has focused on the legislative battles in Wisconsin and other heartland states, unfortunately there are similar efforts underway right here in Florida.

This Session, bills have been filed in the Florida Legislature that would dramatically increase what public employees pay for health insurance coverage and require employees to contribute between two percent and six percent of their salary to the Florida Retirement System (FRS). Even more troubling, a bill has been filed that would seriously undermine the ability of public employee labor unions to organize, and would essentially eliminate their ability to advocate for candidates in political campaigns.

As we slowly begin to emerge from our nation's economic troubles and face large budget deficits in state and local governments, it may be tempting to make scapegoats out of public workers. When 11.5% of Floridians are out of a job, and countless others are underemployed or have become so discouraged they have quit looking for work, the good health insurance and retirement benefits of the public sector seem like an easy target.

At the same time, though, it's important to remember that Florida's public workforce is smaller and less expensive (when population is taken into account) than almost every state in the nation. For every 10,000 residents, Florida has a modest 117 state workers – that's dead last in the country. Florida's state worker payroll is the second lowest in the country, with a cost of \$38 per resident, compared to the national average of \$72.

Public employee salaries also lag behind those of the private sector – the average state worker in Florida earned \$38,540 in June 2010 (the most recent data available), while the average private sector worker earned \$40,973. Public workers were willing to trade relatively lower pay in return for the job security, health insurance and retirement benefits that government work offers. It's not fair to go back on that deal, and take away those benefits after the fact.

I agree that in tough budget times, everybody has to sacrifice. If I thought proposed legislation to require workers to contribute to their health insurance and retirement benefits was genuinely driven by concerns over cost, I might not take exception to it. But the FRS bill would require workers to continue contributing to retirement, even after the state pension fund had all the money it needed to pay out all the retirement benefits it owed to state workers. The state legislature could then spend the so-called "pension contribution" on any expense it deemed fit.

The legislature is running a shell game with education funding, by using teachers' "pension contribution" to balance school district budgets. This year's proposed budget decreases state funding of public schools by \$678 million dollars, but then uses the money teachers will now have to take out of their paychecks and contribute to the state pension fund to offset that cut. In essence, they're balancing school budgets on the backs of teachers and other school district workers.

Even more troubling is SB 830, which would prohibit state or local governments from deducting union dues from public employees' paychecks, and make it illegal to use union dues for political campaign purposes without express written authorization from each individual union member.

This measure – which union members overwhelmingly oppose – would essentially kill public employee unions. Not only could they not organize, they also couldn't band together to advocate for candidates of their choosing. In a time when corporations are considered "people," and can spend unlimited amounts on campaigns, crippling the ability of labor unions to counter such formidable special interests is like taking away David's sling and still expecting him to be a match for Goliath.

It is difficult for me to fathom that these attacks on labor unions – which tend to be strong supporters of Democrats – are a coincidence. As the erosion of the middle class continues at the hands of corporations made profitable again through taxpayer assistance and the Republican politicians who do their bidding, it is not a shock to me that they would seek to silence their opposition. But we should recognize such efforts for the partisan attacks they are, and not allow them to be cloaked in the mantle of fiscal responsibility.

As always, I appreciate the opportunity to serve as your State Senator. If you have any comments or questions on any issue related to Florida government, please feel free to contact my office at (954) 747-7933 or email at rich.nan.web@flsenate.gov.



My office is creating issue-specific e-mail distribution lists to keep you informed about the issues that matter most to you. Currently we have distribution lists for the following issues: Children's issues, Education, Environment, Health Care and Women's issues. If you would like to be added to any of these lists, please e-mail my office at fishman.julie.s34@flsenate.gov , and let us know.