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President's pay-freeze plan called 'politics'

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President Obama's proposal to freeze the pay of federal employees for the next two years doesn't sit well with the groups that represent those workers as they criticized the president for trying to balance the budget on the backs of their members.

The pay freeze would affect a few thousand workers in Rhode Island, and ultimately, the benefits of federal retirees who live here. They work for more than a dozen agencies — touching the lives of residents here on a daily basis. Among them are: the Transportation Security Administration, the Social Security Administration, U.S. District Court, the Internal Revenue Service, the Federal Highway Administration and the Veterans Administration.

About 10,200 federal workers call Rhode Island home, including 3,200 defense workers and 4,300 U.S. Postal Service employees. Not all of them would be affected directly as the military would be exempt and postal employees among others are covered by collective-bargaining agreements that would not be subject to the salary directive.

"Of course, he's playing politics," said Derrick Thomas, a national vice president of the American Federation of Government Employees. Thomas oversees the federation's 2nd District, which represents 100,000 federal workers in New England, New York and New Jersey. "He's caving in to the Republicans, to the Cato Institute, to the Heritage Foundation, at the expense of his workers.

"It's really disappointing."

A pay freeze could affect thousands of federal employees for years to come as their retirement benefits are dependent on the "High 3," the highest average basic pay they earn during any three consecutive years of federal service.

"I don't think it's quite right; we're going to get slammed with that," said Roland B. Sasseville, the current Pawtucket chapter president of the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association. "If they freeze it now, [federal workers] are going to have a lull in their earnings."

Sasseville is a retired postal worker. The active members of the American Postal Workers Union, which represents 220,000 postal workers across the country, are working under a contract that expires Wednesday. The union is part of the AFL-CIO.

“Today’s announcement ... is bad for the middle class, bad for the economy and bad for business,” said Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO. “The president talked about the need for shared sacrifice, but there’s nothing shared about Wall Street and CEOs making record profits and bonuses while working people bear the brunt.”

Worker representatives said they’ll do what they can to blunt the pay-freeze plan though, Derrick Thomas, of the government employees’ federation, acknowledged they face an “uphill” battle to kill the proposal outright.

“We will go to our allies in Congress,” he said.

Members of Rhode Island’s congressional delegation talked Monday as if they may not be much help.

Sen. [Jack Reed](#) said that the president’s planned pay freeze for federal workers “sends the right signal.” The Rhode Island Democrat said, “Everyone’s got to start tightening belts” to begin reducing the federal budget deficit.

Democratic Rep.-elect David N. Cicilline said Mr. Obama’s freeze “sounds like a reasonable proposal to me,” but stressed that he wants to study it before declaring a firm position.

Rep. James R. Langevin issued this statement about Mr. Obama’s proposal:

“We continue to face difficult financial times across our country and many are being asked to make sacrifices, including federal employees. However, this decision should not be isolated from the larger debate on how to get our budget deficit under control, including allowing tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans to expire, saving our country \$678 billion over the next 10 years.

“In the coming months, I look forward to analyzing many options and taking a tough look at how we finance our government and its programs.”

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