

## House Republicans say federal workers are overpaid

By LARRY MARGASAK, Associated Press

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While conservative GOP governors are demanding concessions from state workers, House Republicans are making federal employees the next target.

Republicans at a House hearing on Wednesday complained that the 2.1 million-strong federal work force is overpaid compared with workers holding similar jobs in the private sector.

The personnel chief for federal workers cried foul. He said many federal employees earn too little.

Competing witnesses and House members threw out one statistic after another to fit their descriptions of an overpaid or underpaid government work force. In a larger sense, the hearing was part of Republican demands for cutbacks in Obama administration programs and spending.

On the wall directly behind Rep. Stephen Lynch of Massachusetts, the ranking Democrat on the House Oversight and Government Reform panel, majority Republicans had erected a large poster saying: "Employment Changes December 2008-December 2010; Private Sector Jobs -8,817,000; federal government jobs +157,000."

A sign next to it said: "2010 Average Total Compensation; Government Worker \$101,628; Private Worker \$60,000."

John Berry, director of the Office of Personnel Management, said President Barack Obama has frozen annual pay increases for two years. Before Obama took office, he said, government employees received raises "in virtual lock step with the private sector labor market regardless of who controlled Congress or the White House."

Berry said many federal workers are underpaid and many comparisons are phony. He noted the government doesn't employ retail clerks, waiters, short order cooks or other specialties whose salaries are included in pay comparisons. The few cooks employed usually work in prisons and have responsibility over inmates, he said.

Panel chairman Dennis Ross, R-Fla., cited Office of Personnel Management numbers showing the average salary for federal employees was \$74,311 in 2010. He then referred to an analysis by the Cato Institute think tank showing the average private sector worker earned \$50,462. Those numbers did not



include total compensation.

"The federal government also pays an average of 36 percent of employees' base pay health insurance and pension benefits, in addition to generous paid leave. Taken together, federal employees on average earned \$101,628 in total compensation in 2010," he said.

And back and forth it went.

Berry said half of federal government workers are in the nine highest-paying occupations, including judges, engineers, scientists and nuclear plant inspectors, while less than a third of private sector workers are employed in those groups. He added that a fifth of private sector workers are in the four lowest-paying occupation groups, including cooks, janitors, service workers and manufacturing employees.

Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, complained that **Obama's** salary freeze wasn't real. He cited a Federal Times article that said despite the freeze, some 1.1 million federal workers will receive more than \$2.5 billion in raises during the two-year period through automatic adjustments that are part of the federal pay system.

James Sherk, a senior policy analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank, said his research shows that on average, federal workers earn hourly wages that are 22 percent higher than comparable private sector workers.

Sherk, who said he was expressing his own views, testified, "If the federal government underpaid its workers it would have severe retention problems. Instead, the opposite occurs. Federal employees are considerably less likely than private-sector workers to quit their jobs."

Lynch disagreed, arguing that 616,000 people left the federal work force the past three years for a variety of reasons, including retirement and death.

Colleen Kelley, national president of the National Treasury Employees Union, said she believed Labor Department statistics showing federal workers are paid less than private sector counterparts.

She testified, "While witnesses at today's hearing will put forth quite different statistics, I do not believe the organizations they speak for have the unbiased credibility of the non-partisan, highly professional and respected, Bureau of Labor Statistics. ... The witnesses who will claim today that federal employees are overpaid have clear ideological views that I believe should raise serious questions about the reliability of their findings."

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