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Extra! **January 2011**

## USA Today Targets Government Workers

### Campaigning to cut their pay using bogus statistics

By **Julie Hollar**

In the midst of a major recession, one group of people is making out like bandits, and **USA Today's** on the case. Wall Street bankers? CEOs? Guess again: It's government workers.

"Federal workers are enjoying an extraordinary boom time—in pay and hiring—during a recession that has cost 7.3 million jobs in the private sector," wrote reporter Dennis Cauchon in a front-page article on **December 11, 2009**. His string of public worker pay "exposés" goes back at least as far as **February 1, 2008**, when he announced that "better pay and benefits for public employees come as private-sector workers face stagnant wages and rising unemployment." And he hasn't let up, with a recent analysis (**11/10/10**) finding that "the number of federal workers earning \$150,000 or more a year has soared tenfold in the past five years and doubled since President Obama took office."

An analyst from the libertarian Cato Institute quoted in one of Cauchon's pieces (**8/10/10**) seems to reflect the overarching message of these articles: "Can't we now all agree that federal workers are overpaid and do something about it?"

The numbers certainly sound unfair. Take that August 10, 2010, piece: "Federal civil servants earned average pay and benefits of \$123,049 in 2009 while private workers made \$61,051 in total compensation," Cauchon wrote, citing the federal Bureau of Economic Analysis.

But there's another side to the story. Looking at compensation for all federal workers versus all private sector workers is an apples-to-oranges comparison: The federal government doesn't have the same mix of jobs, skewing more toward white-collar work. In fact, a few months earlier (**3/5/10**), Cauchon did an analysis of jobs that exist in both the public and private sector, and came up with a completely different number. Buried at the bottom of his August piece was a line noting that the paper "reported in March that the federal government pays an average of 20 percent more than private firms for comparable occupations." So why do a less meaningful comparison less than half a year later?


Even that earlier comparison was misleading in a fundamental way. As the August piece went on to admit, "The [March] analysis did not consider differences in experience and education."

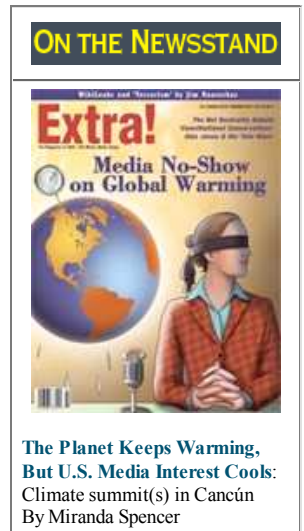
Of course, if you're trying to compare, in any reasonable way, the compensation of two groups of workers, you have to factor in different levels of education and skill. A study by the Center for Economic and Policy Research (**5/10**) noted that state and local workers are "older and substantially better educated than private sector workers." When CEPR compared public- and private-sector workers of similar age and education, the government workers actually earned 4 percent less.

A study by the Economic Policy Institute (**9/15/10**) likewise found that, even including benefits, state and local employees are slightly undercompensated relative to their private-sector equivalents. A report from the federal Bureau of Labor of Statistics—from which Cauchon gets numbers for his analysis—noted that federal pay lagged an average of 22 percent behind the private sector (**WashingtonPost.com, 11/1/10**).

As for the "soaring" number of federal workers earning \$150,000 or more, the National Federation of Federal Employees pointed out that a pay cap of \$149,000 was raised by 3 percent in 2009 (**Yahoo! News, 11/10/10**). (Prior to 2009, a few departments had exceptions to the cap that boosted a handful of workers above that level.) You're naturally going to find rapid growth at the very top of a slowly rising scale—treating that margin as an indicator is a statistical sleight-of-hand, not an attempt to inform readers.

If all the evidence points to this being a completely misleading non-story, what could possibly drive **USA Today** to repeatedly plaster it across its front page? It surely wouldn't have anything to do with a Republican agenda. As Cauchon tells readers (**11/10/10**): "The fast-growing pay of federal employees has captured the attention of fiscally conservative Republicans," who are on a mission to freeze federal pay.

After months of pressure from those 



**CounterSpin**

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Republicans, boosted by **USA Today**, Obama proposed on November 29 to freeze federal salaries for two years. Yet the right still wasn't satisfied—nor was **USA Today** (**12/1/10**), whose headline on the proposal read, “Obama’s Freeze Won’t Stop All Raises for Federal Workers.” And Cauchon noted that a salary freeze wouldn’t solve the problem anyway: “The big advantage for federal workers over private-sector workers comes in time off, pensions and lesser-known benefits.” Expect to continue reading all about it in **USA Today**.



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