

## FAIR Action Alert: "Why Does *USA Today* Hate Public Workers?"

March 01, 2011 5:22 pm ET - by Oliver Willis

*USA Today's* Dennis Cauchon regularly writes about differences in pay between private and public workers, but as Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) **explains**, he keeps getting it wrong. They sent out the following action alert:

On today's front page ([3/1/11](#)), **USA Today** alleges that public workers in Wisconsin earn more than private sector employees—a finding at odds with much of the research on public/private compensation.

Under the headline "In Wisconsin, Private Sector Pays Less," reporter Dennis Cauchon argues that "Wisconsin is one of 41 states where public employees earn higher average pay and benefits than private workers in the same state."

This "**USA Today** analysis" suffers from the same fundamental error as Cauchon's previous attempts (Extra!, [1/11](#)) to paint public workers as overpaid: the failure to control for factors like the type of work performed, experience and education. The paper does not try to hide this; as Cauchon writes, "The analysis included full and part-time workers and did not adjust for specific jobs, age, education or experience." But this failure to distinguish between different types of work renders the comparison entirely meaningless—unless you think that teachers and fast-food clerks ought to get exactly the same pay.

Last year, then-OMB director Peter Orszag **explained**:

Especially in these difficult economic times, everyone is understandably concerned about the performance and salaries of our federal workers (which is one reason why the President is freezing salaries and bonuses for all political appointees). And if, as some media reports claim, federal workers were earning roughly \$8,000 more than private-sector workers in occupations that exist both in the government and private sector for no reason at all, that would be troubling. But the truth is that a comparison of federal and private-sector pay, even by occupation, is misleading because the employees hired by the federal government often have higher levels of education than their counterparts in the private sector - even within the same occupations. When you factor in the education and experience of the federal workforce, there is no statistically significant difference in average pay levels.

This isn't Cauchon's first time writing on this misleading theme, as FAIR **explained** in January:

"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?

Copyright © 2010 Media Matters for America. All rights reserved.