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Government pay is misconstrued

By CAROL MATHIA

Once again federal, state, and local government workers have become the scapegoat by the Republicans and other conservatives. Quite a few reports have been coming out recently trying to make us believe that government workers are overpaid and one way to help balance the budget should be at their expense. These reports contain misleading facts and falsehoods. Unless otherwise stated my quotes come from page 14 of the December 2010 NARFE (National Association of Retired Federal Employees) magazine.

First, the ultra-conservative Cato Institute states that, "The average federal civilian worker now earns twice as much in wages and benefits as the average worker in the U.S. private sector." This is very misleading. "(T)he truth is that federal employees are paid 22 percent less than their private-sector counterparts, according to the 2009 'Annual Report of the President's Pay Agent.' " This report is made yearly by the Office of Management and Budget, directors of Office of Personnel Management and the Secretary of Labor, whether the government administrations are Democratic or Republican.

How can these two figures be so far apart? The Cato Institute compares the average of all private sector workers with the average of all federal public sector workers. The Annual Report of the President's Pay Agent is "based on similar occupations, education, experience, length of service, age and location -- not on gross averages." For example, 32 percent of the private sector is made up of professionals and managers; whereas, for federal workers the figure is 44 percent. In addition, 28 percent of those in the private workforce have bachelor's degrees; whereas, 43 percent of federal workers have them.

In the Nov. 18 Tribune, Eric Schansberg states that, "Government employees have low quit rates, a sign of above-average compensation, since they find their current arrangements so attractive." This assumption is erroneous. According to John Berry, an OPM director, "working for the federal government is about more than money. People grow up dreaming about working for NASA, or the CIA, or becoming a park ranger, or cancer researcher. We should be applauding these hardworking civil servants -- not mischaracterizing them." It should also be noted that vast numbers of employees in the government workforce are policemen, firemen, teachers and the military services. The people in these occupations are dedicated to public service and do not transfer very frequently because similar jobs are simply not found in the private sector. Let me also use my husband, a retired federal employee, as an example. Robert worked for the United States Agency for International Development as an economist. His job required that our family (he, wife and two daughters) live in Third World countries, moving approximately every two to five years. At some of our posts we lived without electricity for hours each day, we experienced food shortages on the local market and unhealthy living conditions. At our post in Pakistan we even experienced bombs and artillery shells falling on the International School of Islamabad campus from a nearby ammo dump explosion. This was the school my daughters attended and where I taught. But Robert believed that the U.S. should be

aiding Third World countries and did his part toward that goal. (By the way, the U.S. does not give nearly as much aid per capita to poor countries as many other countries including Canada and Japan, but that is another story.)

Schansberg also states that, "public sector unions are collusive -- as they work with politicians to benefit themselves at the expense of taxpayers with deep pockets because they pay little attention to politics." This is certainly not true for NARFE which has for years been lobbying Congress to get rid of the Windfall Elimination Profit and Government Pension Offset, two programs that greatly reduce some federal government workers' Social Security benefits.

Let's use the facts correctly.

Carol Mathia is an Elkhart resident.
