

Networks Stand with Wisconsin Unions, Ignore \$1-3 Trillion Pension Deficit for Five Days

- By Julia A. Seymour
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For roughly a week, a battle has been raging in Madison, Wis. Evening news programs on the three broadcast networks framed these as "citizen uprisings" over pay cuts and "eliminating unions' collective bargaining powers to negotiate wages and benefits."

Reporters also portrayed this as a national union issue, but mostly failed to point out the national problem of pension underfunding.

Actually, the battle is the result of Republican Gov. Scott Walker's attempts to balance the state budget by asking roughly 300,000 state employees to contribute more to their pension funds and health insurance and give up the ability to negotiate more than their wages. According to CNNMoney, the state faces a [\\$3.6 billion budget deficit](#).

Only 1 out of 24 network evening stories about the Wisconsin "feud" since Feb. 16, reported a critical number relating to union pensions: \$1 trillion. That's the huge deficit facing public workers' pensions in America and the reason Walker and other state governors are facing tough choices including demanding public workers contribute more.

ABC's Barbara Pinto reported on the "looming crisis" on "World News" Feb. 21, the sixth night of coverage. Pinto said: "[P]ension plans for America's public workers that are underfunded by at least a trillion dollars. Finance professor Joshua Rauh thinks the debt could be at least three times as much."

She then quoted Rauh who said, "The only people who can pay for this are current taxpayers, future taxpayers, public employees, if their benefits are cut."

In fact, according to Americans for Tax Reform that figure is three times higher. ATR said in August 2010, that state and local government pensions are underfunded by \$3.04 trillion. Public school teachers' pensions make up nearly \$1 trillion of that figure ([\\$933 billion](#)). In Wisconsin, their pensions could be ['\\$10.9 billion shy of full funding'](#) according to the Manhattan Institute.

Networks Portray Budget Battle as 'National Assault on Unions'

So why did it take the networks so long to point out how big the pension problem really is? Perhaps, they were too busy sympathizing with the thousands of union protesters including many teachers who staged a massive multiple-day "sick-out" shutting down schools across Wisconsin.

Networks reporters framed many of their reports in the language of the unions claiming the bill would "strip state workers of collective bargaining rights" or that Walker's legislation was "targeting public workers and their unions." CBS's Cynthia Bowers even said that the battle "is now being billed as a national assault on unions." Well, according to both the unions and the networks that was the case.

Some of the network reports even drew comparisons between the Egypt and other Middle East unrest and the Madison, Wis., protests.

Gov. Walker has [not backed down](#). He told The Heritage Foundation, "I've said all along the protesters have every right to be there, but I'm not going to let tens of thousands overload or overshadow the millions of people in Wisconsin, the taxpayers of the state, who want us to do the right thing and balance the budget."

Unionization of public workers carries high costs, but many students still can't read

Bloated public-sector union benefits come at a huge cost to taxpayers and according to a recent analysis from MacIver Institute the Wisconsin protests alone could cost taxpayers in that state \$9 million.

[Commentary Magazine](#) noted on Feb. 22, that MacIver Institute had come up with a cost estimate for paying all the teachers in Milwaukee and Madison for the days they had walked out to protest Walker's bill.

If they are all paid for the days missed, MacIver News Service said "[protest related salaries for just the state's two largest districts would exceed \\$6.6 million dollars](#)." Add in the cost of the smaller school districts that have shut down and the total rises to about \$9 million. As Commentary's Alana Goodman noted, each "phony sick note" costs Wisconsin taxpayers \$513.

Already, according to Chris Edwards of Cato Institute, the public sector has a [significant pay advantage](#) over the private sector when it comes to benefits. He wrote that, "Bureau of Economic Analysis data show that average compensation in the private sector was \$59,909 in 2008, including \$50,028 in wages and \$9,881 in benefits. Average compensation in the public sector was \$67,812, including \$52,051 in wages and \$15,761 in benefits."

And what do Wisconsin teachers' unions have to show for all the taxpayer money they cost the state? On top of their pay and benefits, Wisconsin spends the most per public school pupil on its students than any other Midwest state: \$10,791 per student in 2008.

Despite that, CNSNews.com reported on Feb. 22 that [two-thirds of Wisconsin's eight graders \(in public schools\) cannot read proficiently](#). Only 32 percent of those eight graders earned a "proficient" grade on the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests. Forty-four percent earned a "basic" rating, while 22 percent received a "below basic" rating.

