

**Jack Kelly**

Public workers are overpaid

They are straining state budgets and ought to accept cuts

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By [Jack Kelly](#), Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It's probably just as well that Rita O'Neill-Wilson, a special education teacher at the high school in Rutherford, N.J., doesn't teach math.

Ms. Wilson had a spirited confrontation with New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie at a town meeting last month. It's become a YouTube sensation.

The governor earned the ire of the teachers' union when he asked teachers to accept a one-year pay freeze and contribute 1.5 percent of their salaries toward the cost of their benefits package to help close an \$11 billion state budget deficit.

Ms. Wilson told the governor "you're not compensating me for my education" -- she has a master's degree -- "and you're not compensating me for my experience."

She said she ought to be paid \$3 an hour for each of the children in her class. That would come, Ms. Wilson said, to \$83,000 a year. But, she said, she "makes nothing near that."

Actually, she makes more than that. According to the Rutherford Board of Education, Ms. O'Neill-Wilson makes a base salary of \$86,389, plus a "stipend" of \$652. When health and pension benefits are added in, her total compensation package exceeds \$100,000 a year. And she doesn't have to work summers.

Ms. Wilson told Mr. Christie she teaches "because she loves it." I don't doubt she meant that. But private sector workers in New Jersey -- the ones whose taxes pay Ms. Wilson's salary -- don't think she's suffering financially for her career choice.

In 2009, state and local government employees had total compensation packages which averaged \$39.66 per hour, 45 percent more than the \$27.42 per hour earned by workers in the private sector, according to a study by the Cato Institute.

Several states and many municipalities are on the verge of bankruptcy, chiefly because of the vast sums they are paying in salary and benefits to public employees.

Government employees make more in part because they have more education than do workers in the private sector. But it's mostly because of the strength of public employee unions and the willingness of political leaders to give them taxpayer money in exchange for votes and campaign contributions.

"We are paying much, much more money to deliver government services that (with few exceptions) are not performing any better, and the single biggest line item in that cost increase is employee compensation," noted Matt Welch of Reason magazine. Education is a good example. A whopping 27 cents of every state and local tax dollar goes to K-12 education. In 2008, according to the Center for Education Reform, \$10,889 was spent per student in public schools.

The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (2003) indicated the longer our kids are in school, the worse they do compared to our international competitors. U.S. fourth graders were a little above average in math, eighth graders a little below average and high school seniors near the bottom. In science, our fourth graders were near the top, eighth graders a little above average and 12th graders near the bottom.

Students in charter, private and parochial schools outperform public school students by most measures, despite spending much less per pupil. (Public schools do have to educate more high-cost, special-needs children, though.)

In the past, Americans have been willing to spend more for less on public education. Southern Methodist University researchers James Guthrie and Arthur Peng noted "there have been 11 periods during which GDP declined but mean total real per-pupil revenues still increased."

But the current recession is so severe most Americans now think public employees should share in the belt-tightening. And

the resistance of the teacher's union to the modest sacrifices Mr. Christie is asking them to make in New Jersey is making people angry. In a poll by Fairleigh Dickinson University released late last month, only 33 percent of respondents had a favorable view of the New Jersey Education Association, while 44 percent had a negative view.

"In an astonishing fall from grace that has taken only months, teachers have gone from respected and beloved members of the community to some of the most reviled," wrote Kevin Manahan of the Newark Star Ledger last month.

The Obama administration wants to spend \$23 billion we don't have to spare teachers the indignities of pay freezes or layoffs. For a nation that is \$13 trillion in debt, this is not a wise expenditure, and would not be popular.

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