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Public employees unionizing

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These are busy days for Randy Pines.

A union organizer for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Pines spends much of his workweek on the road. Based in Tampa, Pines visits communities from Levy County to Collier County, pitching the benefits of union membership.

Recently, some of his most curious audiences have been government employees.

As cash-strapped state and local governments look at layoffs to save money, workers are turning to unions to protect their jobs and wages.

"We're getting calls from all over," Pines said.

Pines is organizing a union election in Pasco County, where commissioners eliminated 260 jobs last year and laid off more than 100 workers. In Hernando County, workers last year voted 3-to-1 for Teamsters representation.

Hernando's workers joined more than 45,000 unionized government workers in a "Tampa area" also consisting of Hillsborough, Pinellas, Pasco and Polk counties. About half of those, 20,761, are in Hillsborough.

The Teamsters' Tampa-based Local 79 counts United Parcel Service drivers among the majority of its 4,000 members.

"But the dynamics of that are starting to turn around," said Steve Mosley, who represents Hernando County workers.

Public employees have been the Tampa Teamsters union's fastest-growing membership for three years, Mosley said.

A host of unions represents nearly 390,000 public-sector workers across Florida, accounting for about 40 percent of more than 950,000 state and local government workers. The bulk of the state's unionized government workers fall into three categories: law enforcement, fire rescue and education.

Nationally, government workers have become some of organized labor's most reliable members. More than 37 percent of public employees - from law enforcement officers to teachers and federal employees - belonged to unions in 2009, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. By comparison, about 7 percent of private-sector workers, who outnumber government workers 5-to-1, belong to unions, Bureau of Labor Statistics figures show.

The gap between unionization in the public and private sectors has been growing for more than 50

years. In that time, public-sector union membership remained fairly steady as private-sector membership plummeted, said Pat Cihon, an assistant professor of law and public policy at Syracuse University.

The disparity increased in the 1980s as Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush weakened the National Labor Relations Board, which had supported private-sector unions. Most public-sector workers fall under state regulations and weren't affected by those changes, Cihon said.

Decades of population shift away from factory-based Rust Belt economies in union strongholds such as Michigan and Ohio to "knowledge economy" jobs in Florida and other less labor-friendly states accelerated the changes, Cihon said.

"Knowledge workers are more likely to think of themselves as professionals and to view unions as more appropriate for factory workers," Cihon said. Public-sector workers have embraced unions as a form of political leverage against legislators and political appointees, Cihon said.

For example, look no further than Senate Bill 6, which proposed linking teachers' salaries to their students' performance on standardized tests. Teachers unions opposed the bill, and Gov. Charlie Crist vetoed it. When Crist bolted from the Republican Party last month, teachers were visible behind him at his news conference. And on Saturday, Florida's statewide teachers union endorsed Crist as well as Democratic U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, in their U.S. Senate race against Republican Marco Rubio.

'Financial straitjacket'

That kind of political power leads to an entrenched bureaucracy and makes it difficult for governments to respond to economic crises such as the present recession, according to Don Bellante, an economist at the University of South Florida.

In a recent paper published by the libertarian Cato Institute, Bellante criticized public-employee unions for putting governments in "a financial straitjacket" by locking in generous contracts as governments face falling tax revenue.

Pasco County firefighters personified Bellante's argument last year when they forced county officials to honor a contracted 5 percent pay raise even as other county workers went without increases and the county slashed programs and raised taxes to cut a \$36 million deficit.

Union supporters say membership is about more than money, though.

"People, in these times they're scared for their jobs," said Dan Oliver, a maintenance worker and one of seven shop stewards in Hernando County's new public employees union.

Oliver, 55, grew up in a union family and has worked for Hernando County for 21 years. He said employees supported the union to give them a more even playing field with management during budget-cutting. Union negotiations can protect longtime workers who, because of their higher wages, might be the first to be laid off, he said.

"Last year we would have lost vacation time and holidays," Oliver said.

He said the union's intent isn't obstructionism.

"We want to get along with them," he said of management. "We do get along with them."

Reaching deals

In recent years, collective bargaining has proved to be a thorny issue for governments intent on cutting costs. Last year, leaders in Tampa and Pasco County spent months negotiating deals with firefighters regarding wage increases and staffing levels.

In both cases, firefighters gave up raises to preserve jobs, but not without getting something in return. In Tampa, firefighters kept annual step increases. In Pasco, firefighters kept generous holiday pay.

In Pasco's case, union firefighters and management spent hundreds of hours and tens of thousands of dollars to reach a deal similar to what nonunion workers got, said Barbara DeSimone, the county's personnel director.

She expects to spend more time and money negotiating with county workers if the Teamsters' upcoming vote succeeds. None of that is likely to prevent layoffs - nor would it have prevented last year's had the union been in place then, DeSimone said.

"It doesn't stop layoffs," she said. "We would have laid off the same people."

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Keyword: Unions, to see how many public employees belong to unions across the state.

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Salaries, to see how much local public employees make.