Role models, not scapegoats

Everywhere you look, there is a sea of red ink. Budget deficits reign at the local, state and federal levels. On top of the $1.2 trillion federal budget deficit, 46 of the nation's 50 state governments must eliminate a total deficit of at least $130 billion this year. Massive unfunded liabilities for pensions for state and local government employees—perhaps exceeding $900 billion—add to the sense of crisis. And no matter where you look, politicians and their allies in the media seek to find scapegoats for the fiscal mess. Unions, and in particular, public employee unions, are being invited to play the part. We must respectfully decline the role.

The governors of New York and New Jersey, a Democrat and a Republican, respectively, are leading the charge against public employees, vowing to slash their pay and pensions. And the nation's major media—from the editorial pages of the liberal *Washington Post* to those of the conservative *Wall Street Journal*—are eagerly playing along. Together they resort to misleading statistics and false claims about public sector compensation levels while conveniently forgetting recent history. As union members, we have an obligation to stick up for our fellow public employees when they are unfairly attacked—not only because it's the right thing to do, but also because if we let the politicians and pundits get away with these unsavory attacks, we surely will be next in line for this shabby treatment.

So let's set the record straight. We have just been through the worst recession in nearly 80 years. That recession was man-made on Wall Street by reckless bankers who created the biggest financial bubble in American history, aided and abetted by asleep-at-the-switch regulators who deemed it a good idea to let the financial services industry run wild. The resulting recession caused tax revenues to plummet—by 12 percent at the state level and by 20 percent at the national level—and the nation's budget deficits to soar. Yes, the temporary stimulus bill and spending on unemployment and other automatic stabilizers like food stamps added to the deficits (while preventing a depression), but the main driver of our deficits has been the loss of tax revenue. Not public sector employment, which has actually declined during the recession, and certainly not spending on public employee pay and benefits.

Similarly, the huge public pension shortfalls are mainly due to the recession as well—along with the refusal of some governments to fund their pensions when times were good. The value of public pension fund assets, like those of private pension fund assets, plummeted as a result of the Great Recession. The pension shortfalls are not due to skyrocketing pension benefits for public employees. They are a direct result of the 2008-2009 economic meltdown.

What makes it all the more galling is that the political interests most responsible for the global economic crisis (Wall Street traders, deregulating politicians and the right-wing media that cheered them on) now suggest that public employees pay for the crisis, even after those politicians enacted yet another round of unaffordable tax cuts for the wealthiest in our society. These shameless interests seek to turn private-sector workers who don't have pensions or health care against teachers and other public employees who do, when the real reason so many private-sector workers lack pension and health protection is that the very same interests have ruthlessly campaigned to stop unions from organizing workers.

Public employees must not be the targets when it comes to solving our country's budget woes. This is especially true for postal employees at the federal level. We have massively over-funded both our pension plans (the postal portions of FERS and CSRS) and have more than enough assets to cover all our future retiree health costs as well—if Congress will give us access to our own funds. The Postal Service and its employees have been highly responsible on retirement finances. We are role models, not scapegoats.