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February 28, 2011

# Majority in Poll Back Employees in Public Sector Unions

By **MICHAEL COOPER** and **MEGAN THEE-BRENAN**

As labor battles erupt in state capitals around the nation, a majority of Americans say they oppose efforts to weaken the collective bargaining rights of public employee unions and are also against cutting the pay or benefits of public workers to reduce state budget deficits, according to the latest New York Times/CBS News poll.

Labor unions are not exactly popular, though: A third of those surveyed viewed them favorably, a quarter viewed them unfavorably, and the rest said they were either undecided or had not heard enough about them. But the nationwide poll found that embattled public employee unions have the support of most Americans — and most independents — as they fight the efforts of newly elected Republican governors in Wisconsin and Ohio to weaken their bargaining powers, and the attempts of governors from both parties to cut their pay or benefits.

Americans oppose weakening the bargaining rights of public employee unions by a margin of nearly two to one: 60 percent to 33 percent. While a slim majority of Republicans favored taking away some bargaining rights, they were outnumbered by large majorities of Democrats and independents who said they opposed weakening them.

Those surveyed said they opposed, 56 percent to 37 percent, cutting the pay or benefits of public employees to reduce deficits, breaking down along similar party lines. A majority of respondents who have no union members living in their households opposed both cuts in pay or benefits and taking away the collective bargaining rights of public employees.

Governors in both parties have been making the case that public workers are either overpaid or have overly generous health and pension benefits. But 61 percent of those polled — including just over half of Republicans — said they thought the salaries and benefits of most public employees were either “about right” or “too low” for the work they do.

When it came to one of the most debated, and expensive, benefits that many government workers enjoy but private sector workers do not — the ability to retire early, and begin

collecting pension checks — Americans were closely divided. Forty-nine percent said police officers and firefighters should be able to retire and begin receiving pension checks even if they are in their 40s or 50s; 44 percent said they should have to be older. There was a similar divide on whether teachers should be able to retire and draw pensions before they are 65.

The nationwide telephone poll was conducted Feb. 24-27 with 984 adults and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points for all adults. Of those surveyed, 20 percent said there was a union member in their household, and 25 percent said there was a public employee in their household.

Tax increases were not as unpopular among those surveyed as they are among many governors, who have vowed to avoid them. Asked how they would choose to reduce their state's deficits, those polled preferred tax increases over benefit cuts for state workers by nearly two to one. Given a list of options to reduce the deficit, 40 percent said they would increase taxes, 22 percent chose decreasing the benefits of public employees, 20 percent said they would cut financing for roads and 3 percent said they would cut financing for education.

The most contentious issue to emerge in the recent labor battles has been the question of collective bargaining rights. A proposal by Gov. [Scott Walker](#) of Wisconsin to weaken them sent Democratic state lawmakers out of state to prevent a vote, flooded the Capitol in Madison with thousands of protesters and sparked a national discussion about unions.

The poll found that an overwhelming 71 percent of Democrats opposed weakening collective bargaining rights. But there was also strong opposition from independents: 62 percent of them said they opposed taking bargaining rights away from public employee unions.

Phil Merritt, 67, a retired property manager from Crossville, Tenn., who identifies himself as an independent, explained in a follow-up interview why he opposed weakening bargaining rights for public workers. "I just feel they do a job that needs to be done, and in our country today if you work hard, then you should be able to have a home, be able to save for retirement and you should be able to send your kids to college," he said. "Most public employees have to struggle to do those things, and generally both spouses must work."

The one group that favors weakening those rights, by a slim majority, was Republicans. Warren Lemma, 56, an electrical contractor from Longview, Tex., said states did not have the money to pay for many benefits that state workers enjoy.

"Retirement benefits should not be taken away from those about to retire, but the system should be changed for the people starting to teach just now," said Mr. Lemma, a Republican.

“And the only way the system will change is to do something about unions and their control, and the only way to do that is to take away collective bargaining.”

The poll found that 45 percent of those surveyed said they believed that governors and state lawmakers who are trying to reduce the pay or benefits of public workers were doing so to reduce budget deficits, while 41 percent said they thought they were doing so to weaken unions’ power.

Although cutting the pay or benefits of public workers was opposed by people in all income groups, it had the most support from people earning over \$100,000 a year. In that income group, 45 percent said they favored cutting pay or benefits, while 49 percent opposed it. In every other income group, a majority opposed cutting pay or benefits: Among those making between \$15,000 and \$30,000, for instance, 35 percent said they favored cutting pay or benefits, while 60 percent opposed it.

Labor unions, including private sector labor unions, are **seen as less influential** now than they were three decades ago. The poll found that 37 percent of those surveyed believe that labor unions have “too much influence” on American life and politics, while 48 percent said they had the “right amount” or “too little” influence. In a 1981 poll, by contrast — soon after President **Ronald Reagan** fired striking air traffic controllers — 60 percent of those surveyed said unions had “too much influence.” Of course, union membership has declined since then.

*Marina Stefan contributed reporting.*

**The New York Times**

 **CBS NEWS**

**POLL**

**February 24-27, 2011**

**N= 984**

*All trends are from New York Times/CBS News polls unless otherwise noted.*

2. Is your opinion of labor unions favorable, not favorable, undecided, or haven't you heard enough about labor unions yet to have an opinion?

	Favorable	Not favorable	Undecided	Haven't heard enough	Refused
2/24-27/11	33	25	19	20	2

3. Do you think labor unions have too much influence, too little influence, or about the right amount of influence on American life and politics today?

	Too much	Too little	Right amount	DK/NA
9/22-27/81	60	11	22	7
3/12-16/09 CBS	47	18	24	11
2/26-3/1/10 CBS	43	15	27	15
2/24-27/11	37	19	29	15

4. If you HAD to choose ONE, which of the following would you be willing to do in order to reduce your STATE'S budget deficit 1. increase taxes, 2. decrease benefits of public employees like teachers or police officers, 3. decrease funding for roads and public transportation, OR 4. decrease funding for education? ANSWERS CATEGORIES WERE ROTATED

	2/24-27/11
Increase taxes	40
Decrease benefits of public employees	22
Decrease funding for roads	20
Decrease funding for education	3
No state deficit (vol.)	1
DK/NA	15

5. In general, do you think the salaries and benefits of MOST public employees are too high for the work that they do, too low for the work that they do, or are their salaries and benefits about right for the work that they do?

	Too high	Too low	About right	Depends(vol.)	DK/NA
2/24-27/11	26	25	36	9	4

6. How much have you heard or read about the recent efforts in many states to reduce state budget deficits by cutting the benefits of public employees – a lot, some, not much or nothing at all?

	A lot	Some	Not much	Nothing	DK/NA
2/24-27/11	39	33	20	6	1

7. In order to reduce state budget deficits, do you favor cutting the pay or benefits of public employees, or do you oppose that? IF FAVOR OR OPPOSE: Do you favor/oppose that strongly or somewhat?

	Favor strongly	Favor somewhat	Oppose strongly	Oppose somewhat	DK/NA
2/24-27/11	17	20	29	27	7

8. In general, when governors and state legislators try to reduce the benefits of public employees, do you think they are doing this mostly to reduce state budget deficits or mostly to weaken the power of unions?

	Reduce budget deficits	Weaken the power of unions	DK/NA
2/24-27/11	45	41	14

9. As you may know, collective bargaining refers to negotiations between an employer and a labor union's members to determine the conditions of employment. Some states are trying to take away some of the collective bargaining rights of public employee unions. Do you favor or oppose taking away some of the collective bargaining rights of these unions? IF FAVOR OR OPPOSE: Do you favor/oppose that strongly or somewhat?

	Favor strongly	Favor somewhat	Oppose strongly	Oppose somewhat	DK/NA
<b>2/24-27/11</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>7</b>

10. Do you think police officers and firefighters should be able to retire after 25 years of service and begin collecting pension checks, even if they are in their forties or fifties, or should they have to be older than that to retire and collect pension checks regardless of the number of years they have served?

	Should be able to retire	Should have to be older	DK/NA
<b>2/24-27/11</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>6</b>

11. Do you think teachers should be able to retire after a set period of service and begin collecting pension checks even if they are younger than 65 or shouldn't they?

	Should be able to retire	Shouldn't be able to retire	DK/NA
<b>2/24-27/11</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>5</b>

55. Do you consider yourself to be a supporter of the Tea Party movement, or not?

	Yes	No	DK/NA
4/5-12/10	18	62	19
5/20-24/10 CBS	20	59	21
7/9-12/10 CBS	27	56	17
8/20-24/10 CBS	29	54	17
9/10-14/10	19	63	19
10/21-26/10	24	63	14
<b>2/24-27/11</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>13</b>

57. Do you or does someone in your household belong to a labor union? IF YES, ASK: Is that person you or someone else?

	Yes, self	Yes, someone else in HH	Yes, self and other	No	DK/NA
<b>2/24-27/11</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>1</b>

58. Are you or is someone in your household a public employee - that is a teacher, police officer, firefighter, or in some other government job? IF YES, ASK: Is that person you or someone else?

	Yes, self	Yes, someone else in HH	Yes, self and other	No	DK/NA
<b>2/24-27/11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>-</b>

Generally speaking, do you usually consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?

	Rep	Dem	Ind	DK/NA		Rep	Dem	Ind	DK/NA
1/92A	29	35	31	5	3/8-12/01	31	35	29	5
1/92B	28	32	35	5	6/14-18/01	27	36	30	7
2/92A	32	37	27	4	10/25-28/01	32	37	23	8
2/92B	30	33	32	5	12/7-10/01	30	32	30	8
3/92	30	38	27	5	1/21-24/02	28	34	31	7
4/92	30	38	27	5	4/28-5/1/02	33	37	23	8
5/92A	30	33	31	6	7/13-16/02	28	34	33	5
6/92	33	33	29	5	9/2-5/02	29	35	26	10
7/92	29	34	32	5	10/3-5/02	27	38	28	7
7/92B	26	38	28	8	10/27-31/02	31	34	28	7
8/92A	28	33	33	5	11/20-24/02	29	32	31	8
8/92D	27	32	33	8	1/19-22/03	29	32	33	6
8/92E	28	35	29	8	2/10-12/03	28	34	31	6
9/92A	28	34	33	5	3/7-9/03	29	32	30	9
10/92A	29	35	31	5	4/11-13/03	31	30	32	6
10/92C	29	36	31	5	7/13-27/03	27	32	34	7
10/92D	28	37	31	4	9/28-10/1/03	31	35	30	4
10/92E	28	38	29	5	12/10-13/03	27	33	35	6
12/92	28	39	28	5	12/14-15/03	28	31	35	6
1/93	30	36	28	6	1/12-15/04	28	32	33	8
2/93	28	36	30	6	3/10-14/04	31	30	32	7
3/93	26	37	30	7	4/23-27/04	29	35	29	7
5/93A	29	34	29	8	6/23-27/04	29	35	29	7
6/93A	29	34	32	5	7/11-15/04	29	37	30	4
6/93B	31	37	27	5	9/12-16/04	33	31	29	7
9/93	26	36	32	6	10/1-3/04	29	34	28	10
11/93	29	38	29	4	10/14-17/04	30	34	29	7
1/94	30	30	34	6	10/28-30/04	30	35	30	6
2/94	28	33	32	7	11/18-21/04	29	36	30	5
3/94	30	34	29	7	1/14-18/05	31	34	28	8
4/94	32	32	30	6	2/24-28/05	29	36	29	6
7/94	27	35	31	6	6/10-15/05	28	34	31	6
9/94	28	36	34	3	9/9-13/05	26	36	28	9
11/94	31	34	29	6	12/2-6/05	28	32	33	7
12/94	31	32	29	7	1/20-25/06	29	34	33	4
2/95	30	33	32	5	5/4-8/06	25	37	34	4
4/95	30	30	34	6	7/21-25/06	31	33	30	5
8/95	30	35	29	6	8/17-21/06	30	35	27	8
9/95	28	33	30	9	9/15-19/06	30	32	32	5
10/95	31	35	27	7	10/5-8/06	30	35	30	6
12/95	32	35	26	6	10/27-31/06	28	35	31	7
12/95	27	33	33	7	2/24-27/07	25	35	33	6
1/96	29	35	31	5	3/7-11/07	27	35	33	6
2/96	30	35	31	4	4/20-24/07	24	34	36	6
4/96	31	36	28	5	5/18-23/07	29	37	32	3
6/96	27	39	29	5	7/9-17/07	28	34	34	4
6/96 NYT	26	37	32	5	7/20-22/07	24	32	36	9
7/96	31	34	29	6	9/4-8/07	31	32	33	5
8/96	32	41	24	3	12/5-9/07	26	35	31	8
8/96C	30	34	28	8	1/9-12/08	28	40	27	5
9/96	29	36	29	6	2/20-24/08	27	38	29	6
10/96	28	40	25	7	3/28-4/2/08	26	41	27	6
10/96C	28	37	27	7	4/25-29/08	27	37	31	5
11/96	28	38	28	7	5/1-3/08	29	39	27	5
12/96	28	39	24	9	7/7-14/08	26	37	31	6
1/97	29	32	33	6	8/15-20/08	29	37	26	8
4/97	29	36	26	8	9/12-16/08	28	39	26	7
1/98	27	34	30	8	9/21-24/08	28	34	32	6
1/98B	26	35	31	7	10/10-13/08	28	36	29	7
2/98	31	32	30	8	10/19-22/08	26	41	28	5
4/98	28	31	33	8	10/25-29/08	30	37	27	5
6/98	28	32	30	10	1/11-15/09	21	39	31	8
7/98	28	35	30	7	2/18-22/09	26	36	32	5
8/98	26	37	29	8	4/1-5/09	23	39	30	7
9/98B	26	35	31	7	4/22-26/09	20	38	36	6
9/98C	27	35	32	6	6/12-16/09	24	38	31	8
10/98A	24	37	32	7	7/24-28/09	20	34	39	7
10/98B	27	39	28	6	9/19-23/09	22	37	33	7
12/98	27	37	30	6	12/4-8/09	27	36	29	8
1/99	25	37	33	5	2/5-10/10	28	30	37	5
4/99	30	34	28	7	4/5-12/10	28	31	33	7
11/99	28	37	30	5	4/28-5/2/10	25	34	31	10
2/00	28	37	28	6	6/16-20/10	24	34	33	9
5/00	31	34	27	7	9/10-14/10	25	35	33	7
7/00B	31	36	26	7	10/21-26/10	28	37	31	4
9/00A	31	33	27	9	1/15-19/11	27	34	32	6
9/00D	28	37	27	8	<b>2/24-27/11</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>7</b>
10/00	29	35	30	7					
11/00	27	36	29	9					

How would you describe your views on most political matters? Generally, do you think of yourself as liberal, moderate, or conservative?

	Lib	Mod	Con	DK/NA		Lib	Mod	Con	DK/NA
1/92A	19	41	34	6	7/00B	22	43	30	5
1/92B	21	43	30	5	9/00A	20	42	32	6
2/92A	19	39	36	6	9/00D	20	42	32	5
2/92B	20	43	31	6	12/7-10/01	23	39	33	4
3/92	20	47	30	4	1/21-24/02	22	44	29	5
4/92	18	44	33	4	4/28-5/1/02	22	38	35	6
5/92A	21	40	34	4	7/13-16/02	21	44	32	4
6/92	23	39	32	6	9/2-5/02	20	39	36	5
7/92	20	42	32	6	10/3-5/02	18	45	34	3
7/92B	21	41	30	8	10/27-31/02	20	38	37	5
8/92A	20	45	30	6	11/20-24/02	20	44	30	6
8/92D	22	44	27	7	1/19-22/03	19	45	32	3
9/92A	19	46	31	4	2/10-12/03	21	41	35	3
10/92C	22	39	34	5	3/7-9/03	18	45	35	3
10/92D	21	39	33	6	4/11-13/03	19	45	33	3
10/92E	21	40	33	6	7/13-27/03	22	40	34	5
2/92	20	41	34	5	9/28-10/1/03	19	42	34	5
1/93	18	45	32	6	12/10-13/03	20	45	31	4
2/93	23	41	31	5	12/14-15/03	19	39	37	5
3/93	22	39	34	5	1/12-15/04	20	43	31	5
5/93A	21	41	33	5	3/10-14/04	21	40	34	5
6/93A	19	43	32	6	4/23-27/04	22	42	30	6
6/93B	19	44	31	6	6/23-27/04	21	42	32	5
9/93	19	43	34	4	7/11-15/04	22	41	34	3
11/93	21	41	33	5	9/12-16/04	20	40	36	4
1/94	17	44	34	6	10/1-3/04	24	36	35	6
2/94	18	41	34	7	10/14-17/04	19	42	33	6
3/94	21	38	35	5	10/28-30/04	17	42	35	5
4/94	19	42	33	6	11/18-21/04	22	41	33	4
9/94	20	42	35	4	1/14-18/05	20	41	33	6
11/94	20	41	35	4	2/24-28/05	23	38	35	5
12/94	18	40	36	6	6/10-15/05	20	43	33	4
2/95	19	39	37	4	9/9-13/05	18	43	34	5
4/95	19	42	34	5	12/2-6/05	18	45	32	5
8/95	19	40	35	5	1/20-25/06	21	45	30	4
9/95	20	39	33	8	5/4-8/06	25	37	34	4
12/95	32	35	26	6	7/21-25/06	21	39	36	4
12/95	27	33	33	7	8/17-21/06	24	38	33	5
10/95	16	44	34	5	9/15-19/06	17	43	35	4
12/95	17	46	33	4	10/5-8/06	23	39	34	3
12/95	15	46	34	5	10/27-31/06	20	45	30	5
1/96	20	42	35	4	2/24-27/07	20	42	33	6
2/96	17	45	34	4	3/7-11/07	20	40	36	4
4/96	18	47	31	4	4/20-24/07	21	42	33	5
6/96	19	46	29	6	5/18-23/07	20	43	32	5
6/96	16	48	32	4	7/9-17/07	19	44	33	4
7/96	20	42	34	3	7/20-22/07	15	48	31	5
8/96	17	47	30	6	9/4-8/07	22	42	32	4
8/96C	18	43	33	6	12/5-9/07	22	43	31	4
9/96	16	44	34	6	1/9-12/08	25	39	32	4
10/96	16	47	31	7	2/20-24/08	23	41	29	6
10/96C	18	45	32	6	3/28-4/2/08	21	39	34	5
11/96	15	48	32	6	4/25-29/08	22	41	33	4
12/96	17	40	35	8	5/1-3/08	15	49	32	4
1/97	17	46	33	4	7/7-14/08	22	41	32	5
4/97	19	42	34	5	8/15-20/08	24	36	35	5
12/97	21	42	33	5	9/12-16/08	24	39	33	4
1/98	19	40	33	7	9/21-24/08	22	38	36	4
2/98	21	42	33	4	10/10-13/08	18	49	29	4
4/98	18	42	35	5	10/19-22/08	21	39	33	7
6/98	20	39	34	7	10/25-29/08	22	38	33	7
7/98	20	42	33	5	1/11-15/09	21	43	30	6
8/98	21	43	31	5	2/18-22/09	20	38	36	6
9/98	21	41	34	5	4/1-5/09	23	39	31	7
9/98C	21	41	31	6	4/22-26/09	22	42	29	7
10/98B	20	41	33	5	6/12-16/09	27	37	29	7
12/98	20	41	34	5	7/24-28/09	22	41	30	7
1/99	20	45	30	4	9/19-23/09	21	39	36	4
4/99	19	46	29	6	12/4-8/09	21	36	38	5
11/99	22	43	31	5	4/28-5/2/10	21	34	38	6
2/00	21	44	31	4	6/16-20/10	18	42	35	5
5/00	21	41	34	4	9/10-14/10	19	40	36	5
7/00	22	38	33	7	10/21-26/10	19	37	38	5
					1/15-19/11	20	41	35	4
					<b>2/24-27/11</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>8</b>



How old are you?

	18-29	30-44	45-64	Over 64	Refused
2/24-27/11	24	27	32	16	1

What was the last grade in school you completed?

	Not a H.S. grad	H.S. grad	Some college	College grad	Post Grad	Refused
2/24-27/11	10	35	28	15	10	-

Are you of Hispanic origin or descent, or not?

	Hispanic	Not Hispanic	DK/NA
2/24-27/11	13	86	1

Are you white, black, Asian or some other race?

	White	Black	Asian	Other	Refused
2/24-27/11	74	11	2	11	2

Was your total family income in 2010 UNDER or OVER \$50,000? IF UNDER, ASK: Was it under \$15,000, between \$15,000 and \$30,000, or between \$30,000 and \$50,000? IF OVER, ASK: Was it between \$50,000 and \$75,000 or between \$75,000 and \$100,000 or was it over \$100,000?

	Under \$15,000	\$15,000- \$29,999	\$30,000- \$49,999	\$50,000- \$74,999	\$75,000- \$100,000	Over \$100,000	Refused
2/24-27/11	9	17	18	21	11	14	8

	Male	Female
2/24-27/11	49	51

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## How the Poll Was Conducted

The latest New York Times/CBS News poll is based on telephone interviews conducted Feb. 24-27 with 984 adults throughout the United States.

The sample of land-line telephone exchanges called was randomly selected by a computer from a complete list of more than 69,000 active residential exchanges across the country. The exchanges were chosen to ensure that each region of the country was represented in proportion to its population.

Within each exchange, random digits were added to form a complete telephone number, thus permitting access to listed and unlisted numbers alike. Within each household, one adult was designated by a random procedure to be the respondent for the survey.

To increase coverage, this land-line sample was supplemented by respondents reached through random dialing of cellphone numbers. The two samples were then combined.

Interviewers made multiple efforts to reach every phone number in the survey, calling back unanswered numbers on different days at different times of both day and evening.

The combined results have been weighted to adjust for variation in the sample relating to geographic region, sex, race, Hispanic origin, marital status, age, education and number of adults in the household. In addition, the land-line respondents were weighted to take account of the number of telephone lines into the residence, while the cellphone respondents were weighted according to whether they were reachable only by cellphone or also by land line.

In theory, in 19 cases out of 20, overall results based on such samples will differ by no more than three percentage points in either direction from what would have been obtained by seeking to interview all American adults. For smaller subgroups, the margin of sampling error is larger. Shifts in results between polls over time also have a larger sampling error.

In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey of public opinion may introduce other sources of error into the poll. Variation in the wording and order of questions, for example, may lead to somewhat different results.

Complete questions and results are available at [nytimes.com/polls](http://nytimes.com/polls).