

EDITORIAL

Don't use Measure 8 to reform pensions

Forcing Oregon's public employees to pick up 6 percent of the state's contribution toward their retirement plans is a concept too long in coming.

The Public Employees Retirement System is too generous compared with the average private-sector retirement package and begs for reform. Ballot Measure 8 is an attempt at reform, but it fails in its simplistic and dangerous approach. It deserves a no vote Nov. 8.

The problems started in 1979 when state agencies negotiated contracts with public employee unions for which the state picked up the 6 percent contribution in lieu of wage increases. Collective bargaining agreements have maintained this clause ever since.

Over the last 15 years, the 6 percent pickup, coupled with steady wage increases, has placed public employee aggregate pay far ahead of average private-sector compensation.

The collective agreements reached after 1981 when inflation began to drop never included a "sundown clause" — where the state would give employees wage increases while decreasing its contribution to the retirement system.

Measure 8 seems more like a punitive action than a carefully considered solution to this complex problem.

The measure would create a constitutional amendment requiring an estimated 115,000 public employees and 60,000 retirees to contribute 6 percent of their gross salary to the retirement system. This action would save taxpayers more than \$347 million per year.

While such a scenario seems tantalizing to taxpayers, the consequences of the crude measure would be extreme.

Measure 8 amends the constitution. Such a multi-faceted issue is wholly inappropriate for a document intended to protect our basic freedoms. The authority to set pension benefits and wages for public employees should lie with the legislature.

The ability of state agencies, including the University, to attract quality employees could be seriously hindered under the measure. If the constitution forbids any wage increase to offset the loss of the PERS contribution, adequate compensation packages won't exist — and neither will top-notch professionals in state employment. Ballot Measure 8 will discourage talented people from entering government service.

The intense debate generated by this topic will hopefully persuade the 1995 Legislature to reform the system if the measure loses.

But if the Legislature fails to take action, whether because of intense lobbying by the public employees unions or the standard gridlock to which we have become accustomed, an initiative on the scale of Measure 8 would be in order.

Measure 8 is the right idea at the right time. Unfortunately, its specifics will do more harm than good. Vote no on Measure 8.



OPINION

A nation of whiners and victims

We in this fine country have a nasty habit. We love to whine.

From complaining about *Home Improvement* being moved to Tuesdays to complaining about the new one-week limit on dropping classes, it happens all the time.

The problem is that as we continue to whine, the more we think everything is a right and not a responsibility. ABC broadcast a program, *The Blame Game*, on this problem Wednesday night.

A good example is a man who got too frisky with his female employees and claimed it wasn't his fault because he had "fondling disease."

Of course, there's that retired woman from the Southwest who sued McDonald's and was awarded \$2.9 million by a jury. The reason? She burned herself when she spilled some coffee on her lap. I guess she didn't know fresh coffee was something you shouldn't apply to your skin.

Everybody's a victim.

Another man sued a bicycle company after he got hit by a car at night. He says he thought reflectors would be sufficient in the dark. He won a whopping \$7 million.

A transient couple in New York is suing the transportation department. They got hit by a subway train while they were having sex on the tracks. They say it's the government's fault that they were hit, and they're suing for \$10 million.

I could get into the issue of lawyers and how they drive this on, but that probably would be beating a dead dog. I'll just quote Shakespeare: "First, we kill all the lawyers."

With this attitude of victimhood in America, we'd hope that the government would once again not be part of the problem. But it is.

Because just about anything can be claimed under the guise of a disease under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the system is being taken for a ride.

One man says he's a victim of alcoholism, so he can't help himself. The interesting thing is that he's a school administrator who has been caught driving drunk twice, once during a cross-dressing episode.



BRIAN WOMACK

But since he's an alcoholic (at least at the time of the arrests) and, more importantly, a victim, he demanded \$200,000-plus and a nice pension from the school board. He won because the board just didn't have the money to fight it.

Lawsuits are killing businesses, too. Many are settled out of court because legal costs run into tens of thousands of dollars if the case goes to trial. Business just can't keep up if all these lawsuits continue piling up.

But I guess people have got a right to whatever they want.

Like drug addicts, for instance. They're sucking off the public coffers so they can keep up the habit.

In the ABC program, one addict says, "We shouldn't get it, but what are you gonna do about it?" He used his check to buy drugs so he could resell them for a profit.

One of my favorite quotes is from an addict who says, "I think everybody should get one (a check)."

A dependent class of people is growing.

I know someone back in my hometown who got pregnant out of wedlock. She has a questionable background and is not qualified to be a mother, as everyone around her says. She won't have an abortion because of her beliefs. But she will have the kid and not give it up for adoption because she can get a check from Uncle Sam. Just another great example of the government getting involved and messing things up.

More than anywhere else, we see that government has been a destructive force in minority communities.

When people are continually told they are victims of racism instead of how they should overcome their problems, they'll have difficulties ever breaking free from poverty. It doesn't help

when the government makes sure there's no good reason to get a job because the check's always there at the first of the month.

The claim of racism just doesn't seem to hold up for the poor black communities anywhere.

Just look at all those other groups that have done well here in the states. Asian-Americans have actually surpassed whites in many areas. For instance, the University of California at Berkeley capped the percentage of Asians that can be accepted.

Caribbean blacks are statistically more likely to have jobs and are less likely to be on welfare compared with their native black counterparts.

The welfare state has made parts of the black community more dependent so that they just won't (can't) get out and get a job.

For six months this year, I worked at a wood products warehouse. The pay usually ranged from \$5.50 to upward of \$9-10 per hour. The low-skill work was by no means glorious. It was dirty work. It was hard work.

But many worked there to help support their families. Many plan on leaving the company to "move up," and some did while I was there. There were a few blacks who worked there. About half of the workers were first-generation Hispanics who could barely speak the language but knew how to work.

They had taken responsibility for themselves.

Blacks would be a step ahead because of their knowledge of the language and the culture. I realize there's racism out there. That's undeniable. But as one Caribbean black quoted in the TV program said, when that happens, "just move on."

Rising above racism is the answer. Wallowing in it is not the answer.

Some blacks have done this. The black middle class has increased in strength in the last few years.

But a vast amount of blacks live in poverty, which they shouldn't be in.

Whining doesn't work. Taking responsibility for yourself does.

Brian Womack is a columnist for the Emerald.

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