

Union leaders slam federal budget deal

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI)—Government workers' union leaders and AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka slammed the federal budget deal top lawmakers reached Dec. 10, saying it unfairly hits the nation's 2 million federal workers — who have borne the brunt of prior budget cuts.

And Trumka hit Congress for refusing to ask those who have gained the most from the slow economic recovery — the rich and Wall Streeters who caused the crash — to pay their fair share of the recovery's costs, including extending jobless benefits.

But lawmakers paid little heed to labor's outcry. The GOP-run House advanced the two-year budget deal Dec. 12 by a vote of 332-94.

Sixty-two House Republicans and 32 Democrats voted against the bill. Among them were Oregon Democrats Kurt Shrader and Peter DeFazio.

The Senate was considering the measure as this issue of the Labor Press went to press. The Democratic-run chamber is expected to approve the bill, and President Barack Obama said he will sign it.

Many lawmakers who backed the measure criticized key sections of it — such as requiring federal workers to pay more for their pensions, and refusal to extend federal jobless benefits beyond their Dec. 28 end. More than 1.3 million people will be impacted.

The two-year bipartisan agreement sets non-entitlement spending at \$1.012 trillion for the fiscal year that began

Oct. 1, and \$1.014 trillion for the year that begins next Oct. 1. It ends "sequestration," the GOP-mandated budget cuts that slashed billions from both the military and domestic agencies.

Instead, it saves \$63 billion by, among other methods, requiring future federal workers contribute \$6 billion more from their paychecks over the next two years to fund their pensions, but with no increase in pension payouts. Civilian defense workers would contribute \$6 billion through lower cost-of-living increases for those ages 40 to 62.

And firms with traditional pension plans would have to pay \$8 billion more in fees to the federal Pension Benefit Guaranty Corp (PBGC), the agency that steps in when a firm goes bust and gives up its pension plan. Airline passengers would pay \$12.6 billion more in ticket taxes, too.

Trumka praised Senate negotiator Patty Murray (D-Wash.) for successfully "resisting Republican demands to cut Social Security, Medicaid, and Medicare benefits and food assistance for people with low incomes." But he said the deal "does nothing for the millions of people who remain without work and asks nothing from the people who caused our economic crisis and continue to benefit from economic inequality." Trumka also slammed the federal pension provisions, and predicted the higher PBGC fees would let firms "justify new rounds of pension dumping."

"Meanwhile, at the insistence of" Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), the House budget negotiator, "the agreement does not demand any sacrifice from the wealthy or from Wall Street," Trumka said. "It is hard to justify demanding further sacrifice from federal employees and private sector workers while continuing costly tax preferences for Wall Street investment managers and companies that send jobs overseas."

The pension cuts drew the ire of the government worker union leaders, who reiterated their members have already suffered a three-year pay freeze, lost 16 days of pay due to the GOP-engineered federal shutdown in October, and were ordered just last year to send more money in to pay for pensions.

"AFGE (American Federation of Government Employees) cannot support any budget deal that asks for more from federal employees," said President J. David Cox, a retiree from the Veterans Affairs Department. "AFGE rejects the notion there should be a trade-off between funding the programs to which federal employees have devoted their lives, and their own livelihoods," Cox continued. "Though the \$6 billion in increased retirement contributions for new employees is less severe than the administration's \$20 billion proposal, it is still unacceptable."

Cox said newly hired federal workers pay \$1 of every \$11 from their paychecks to fund their pensions and contribute to Social Security, combined. A 1.3 percent hike in the pension contri-

bution, which the budget deal mandates, would push that figure to 10.6 percent of newly hired workers' paychecks.

The **National Treasury Employees Union** (NTEU) took a dim view of the budget deal. "While we were able to prevent any cuts to current employees ... we continue to believe there should be zero cuts to federal pay and benefits in this deal and that federal employees are being asked to contribute a disproportionate share to deficit reduction," NTEU said. The union put the "contribution" from the pay freeze and prior pension contributions at \$114 billion, not counting furloughs, the 16-day shutdown or sequestration impacts.

The **International Association of Fire Fighters** (IAFF) reiterated those points and added that "these contributions" by federal workers to deficit cutting "will not be called upon to pay" an increased pension benefit. "They'll be diverted to other uses."

We support congressional efforts to find additional revenue" to help get rid of the sequester and its impacts, IAFF added. "But we strongly oppose asking workers to once again foot the bill."

Instead, Congress should eliminate "tax breaks for millionaires and billionaires," the union said.

In a letter to Sen. Murray and Rep. Ryan, a **coalition of unions** — including the Laborers, AFSCME, the Letter Carriers, the Mail Handlers/Laborers, the Machinists, the Postal Workers, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Rural Letter Carriers — said pension cuts are "simply unacceptable."

"The proposal would effectively cut the take-home pay of federal employees who are already struggling financially. Some refer to these changes as 'fees' on the federal workforce. Make no mistake about it — this is a tax on federal employees pure and simple; the only constituency who would be taxed under your proposed budget," the coalition's letter explained.

"No other group of Americans contributed to deficit reduction the way federal employees have. It is time for Congress to do its job and find other ways to reduce the deficit than continually taking from our members whose only sin has been to dedicate their lives to federal service."

...ATU at TriMet

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trying mightily to be neither earlier nor later than the schedule dictates. And worse, drivers go for hours without the ability to easily take bathroom breaks, and suffer for it. Many chronic conditions are worsened by dehydration.

"If you're knowingly going to be in a situation where you won't be able to use the rest room for many hours, you change the way you hydrate yourself," Freeman said.

TriMet hasn't solved the bathroom breaks issue, but it *has* taken other measures: It maintains gyms at multiple garages, offers yoga classes, provides healthy snacks in vending machines, and pays for smoking cessation, weight loss support programs and chronic condition management support programs.

"TriMet has put a considerable amount of investment into the health and welfare of their employees and their employees' families," Freeman told the Labor Press.

But utilization of available health plan programs is low. Freeman says it will take union and management working together to turn that around.

Something will have to change to transform a culture of stress and mistrust.

Novick's involvement may help, by bringing the two sides together. At the Dec. 5 meeting, participants came up with a menu of approaches to improving worker health. One approach would be to employ "hot spotters" — identifying individuals with chronic conditions who would benefit from health coaches and specialized attention. The Atlantic City, New Jersey,

casino workers union UNITE HERE Local 54 pioneered that approach, which came to national attention in a much-read 2011 article by Atul Gawande in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Another would be for TriMet to hire nurse practitioners or other medical professionals directly and make them available on site.

"Why are shifts so complicated?" Freeman asked. "What if replacement drivers, instead of sitting in the bull pen in the bus barn, were out in the field, easily accessible? What if there was free lunch delivery to every TriMet driver? What if there was an apple and an orange in their pouch when they picked up the keys to get their bus for their shift?"

On Dec. 12, Novick, Local 757 President Bruce Hansen and TriMet general manager Neil McFarlane delivered a panel presentation about their work to an audience of several hundred at a conference organized by Freeman's group, at which the headliner was Oregon governor John Kitzhaber.

Hansen told the Labor Press it was the first time McFarlane had been personally involved in the effort. But it's a start.

The next step will be for the stakeholders — labor and management — to pick one of those ideas and get to work. Once they do so, likely in January, Freeman said she would seek grant funding to implement it.

"I feel like the union has an amazing opportunity here to drive a culture of health," Freeman said. "It would be great if the cost of health care within TriMet got to a point where employees could start to see raises — instead of costs related to health care."

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