



J.J. Jelincic: Everyone likes kudos, and state workers are no exception

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The state Legislature has declared next Wednesday, October 4, as "Thank You State Workers Day" throughout California. Believe me, we appreciate it. Unfortunately for the thousands of public servants who make our state work, such favorable recognition is rare. Indeed, as it says in the Legislature's resolution, state workers "are too often taken for granted"--or worse.

Public service may be the only industry where the bosses (politicians) go out of their way to bad-mouth their employees. State workers are used as scapegoats for everything, from the state's budget problems to the long lines at the Department of Motor Vehicles. So let's celebrate "Thank You State Workers Day" by looking at some facts about the state's workforce.

First, California ranks 49th among the 50 states in the number of state employees per 10,000 population. Thousands of civil-service positions have been eliminated over the past several years, despite continued increases in both population and programs. So, instead of blaming state workers for inefficiencies in state services, please understand that they are trying to do more with less, and place the blame where it belongs: with political leaders who refuse to build a state work force to meet California's growing needs.

Next, public-sector workers generally make less, not more, than their counterparts in the private sector that do comparable work. For example, until just recently, Registered Nurses in state service earned some 26-percent less than RNs in private health care, according to Gov. Schwarzenegger's own Department of Personnel Administration. (It took federal-court action to begin to fix this problem.)

People who choose careers in public service sacrifice current income. In return, a government career offers them decent health benefits and retirement security. Yet those who would break that promise by weakening public-employee pension plans, or reducing health-care benefits, somehow never talk about offering higher pay in return.

Speaking of pensions, the average public-employee-pension benefit paid by CalPERS is only about \$20,000 a year for someone with nearly 20 years of service. And many of the retirees in my association who worked for state government for 30 years received less than \$1,250 a month. So, when you hear a politician describe a "typical" public employee who retires at age 50 with a \$60,000-a-year pension, don't believe it!

Another fact: Contrary to popular belief, the political scene in Sacramento is not dominated by public-employee organizations like CSEA. This myth is so ingrained that you almost never see the phrase "public-employee unions"

without the word "powerful" in front of it. I wish it were true!

Now, we in CSEA take great pride in what we've accomplished for our members since we were founded 75 years ago. We've led the way in creating the first retirement system for state workers, gaining collective bargaining for state and university employees, getting voters to approve the merit system for state service and much more.

But we have powerful adversaries. How else has Gov. Schwarzenegger been able to raise more than \$100 million in campaign contributions from oil companies, the insurance industry, the drug industry, big developers and other special interests? And if we're so all-powerful, why has the anti-tax, anti-government crowd been able to launch attack after attack on the wages, benefits and pensions of public employees and the services we provide?

Public employees want to be partners in helping our state, and our communities do the best possible job meeting the needs of the people of California. We have chosen public service as a career. We not only are motivated to improve public service and the lives of our citizens, but we also have the knowledge and expertise to make it happen. We're not the problem, but we can be part of the solution.

Maybe "Thank You State Workers Day" means that the people of California will begin to truly value state employees for who they are and what they do.

Maybe the politicians will stop blaming those who provide government and public service. But, to be honest, I'm not holding my breath.

J.J. Jelincic is president of the 140,000-member California State Employees Association, which is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year. CSEA has four affiliates: Association of California State Supervisors, CSEA Retirees, Inc., California State University Employees Union, and SEIU Local 1000.