Why America's Public Sector Unions Face Political Attacks

John S. Ahlquist, University of California, San Diego

The recent Great Recession pushed many U.S. state governments to the fiscal brink, prompting governors and legislators to look for quick ways to cut spending. In quite a few states – especially those with newly elected conservative Republican governors and legislators – public sector unionized workers such as teachers and firefighters became the favorite targets. If only overpaid public workers and their unions are reined in, all will be well – so the argument goes.

Personnel costs loom large in state budgets, but money is not the only issue. Public unions often support Democrats, so GOP attacks seek to hobble political opponents. *Yet why do Republican politicians presume that most voters will go along with attacks on public workers and unions?*

My research shows that U.S. public-sector unions were built on the foundations of a well-established union presence in the private sector. Voters are willing to extend to public-sector workers the same rights many of them already enjoy. But as private-sector unions falter, many Americans question the unusual rights and benefits of public workers.

The Public Sector in the U.S. Labor Movement

From the 1930s, U.S. labor laws encouraged workers to form unions and bargain collectively. At first, unions expanded in private-sector industries, because the original laws did not cover public employees. In 1962 President John F. Kennedy recognized federal employee unions, but state and municipal governments were left to decide union rights for their public workers.

In 1959, Wisconsin became the first state to legalize collective bargaining for state workers, and thereafter unions for state workers spread across the country quickly, though unevenly. Private-sector unions cheered on their public counterparts from the time of New York City's extension of collective bargaining rights to city workers in 1958. In recent decades, public employment – and therefore public unionization – has grown especially at the local level.

Unionization rates for U.S. public employees have remained stable since the 1980s, ranging from about two-fifths of the average municipal government payroll to under one-fifth of the federal workforce (apart from postal workers). But the rights of public unions vary. Some states treat public workers as if they were bargaining with a private employer. But others circumscribe rights – for example, by prohibiting public safety workers like police and firefighters from striking.

The Changing U.S. Union Landscape

Public-sector unions may have lagged in the initial stages of the U.S. union movement, but things have changed dramatically in recent decades. Public sectors now loom relatively larger, because private-sector unions have declined almost to the point of collapse:

- In the early 1950s, about one of every three U.S. workers was a union member. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2011 there were slightly fewer than 15 million unionists in the United States. This is about the same number as in 1950, but now represents only about 11% to 12% of the labor force.

- Today, less than 7% of private sector workers are union members – and this is in a sense an overestimate, because private-sector unions remain strong only in industries such as health care where government is deeply involved.

- Since 2009 public sector union members have outnumbered those in the private sector. Now the largest unions in the country are either unions of public sector workers or have large divisions comprised of public and quasi-public sector workers. The unionization rate in the U.S. public sector today is 37%, five times the 7% rate in the private sector.

What State Histories Tell Us

How well does earlier private-sector unionization predict current levels of public sector unionization and the rights of public unions? I compared the history of unionization in the various U.S. states and found striking patterns:

- The best predictor of a state's rate of public sector unionization in 2002 is the strength of unions in the private sector decades earlier. States with "right-to-work" laws discouraging private-sector unions in 1964 had 9% lower rates of public-sector unionization by 2002.

- States where organized labor had a strong presence in the past also granted more collective bargaining rights to their public sector workers – including the right to strike.

- Whatever the level of private-sector unionization in 1983, each percentage point decline in private sector unionization in a state between 1983 and 2002 was associated with 2% lower public-sector unionization by 2002.

In sum, U.S. public unionism emerged most forcefully where private-sector unions were already strong. As private-sector union strength has evaporated, public sector unions are increasingly vulnerable.

The Bottom Line

The U.S. industrial relations system is broken, and private employers push back against unions with near impunity. Faced with employer attacks and internal tensions, union leaders have failed to broaden their movement – leaving the Democratic Party to fall back on remaining public-sector unions for grass-roots mobilization. This dynamic only encourages many Republican politicians to redouble efforts to break public employee unions, counting on the fact that many voters employed in the private sector are reluctant to grant rights and benefits to public employees that they themselves have lost (or never enjoyed).

Even in states where public employee unions once flourished, more battles are looming. Public workers and their unions will remain on the defensive – until and unless all sectors in the U.S. economy experience a broader resurgence of worker rights and organization.

Read more in John Stephen Ahlquist, "Public Sector Unions Need the Private Sector (or: Why the Wisconsin Protests were Not Labor's Lazarus Moment)" *The Forum* 10, no. 1 (May 2012).