

"Pension Truth Squad" and "DontScapegoatUs.com" Debut in California Pension Reform Fight

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By Steven Maviglio

Californians for Retirement Security launched two new efforts yesterday to fight attempts to slash retirement security for millions of middle class Californians.

While lawmakers heard legislation Wednesday to slash public pensions, Californians for Retirement Security's "Pension Truth Squad" visited the State Capitol to share personal stories and set the record straight about the sustained attacks on public workers.

"We've given our fair share. Now we want a fair shake," said Martha Penry, a special education teacher's assistant in the Twin Rivers School District who said she will be lucky to collect \$800 a month from her pension when she retires. "It is time to start telling the truth about retirement security for working families."

She noted public employees agreed to last year's repeal of SB 400, which saved the state \$400 million and unions have been making significant concessions in local jurisdictions across the state. Just this week, more than 50,000 state employees agreed to contribute more toward their retirement to save the state \$300 million.

"Out-of-state billionaires and corporate interests whose greed led to California's budget mess are leading this attack," Penry said. "They selectively draw attention to headlines about the few sensational cases of abuse. And they continue to spread myths and falsehoods about public employee pensions."

Penry joined other teachers, firefighters, peace officers, scientists, engineers, school employees and other public employees and retirees in supplying fact-based information about California's public pension system as part of Californians for Retirement Security's statewide "Pension Truth Squad" tour.

California public employees' contributions to their pensions have climbed from 5 percent to 7 to 10 percent, and the average public pension in California is \$26,000. Many retirees do not receive Social Security benefits.

"I gave up a whole lot of opportunities to make a lot of money out in the private sector, in order to serve the public," said David Miller, a scientist who helps protect the public from environmental and other hazardous substances. "You trade off the salary and the bonuses for the promise of a safe, modest living wage and retirement and health benefits. That is what you hope the public is going to return to you for the sacrifices you've made and that promise is being threatened."

Meanwhile, Californians for Retirement Security launched a website, www.DontScapegoatUs.com, aimed at legislators, a foundation funded by an out-of-state billionaire, the Little Hoover Commission, and others that are wrongly scapegoating public employees for California's budget woes.

"Teachers, firefighters, school employees, and peace officers are being blamed for the budget deficit when we are doing more than our fair share to help the state and our communities balance their books," said Dave Low, Chairman of Californians for Retirement Security. "Retirement benefits for public employees represent less than three percent of the state budget – a lower percentage than 30 years ago. We have endured furloughs and pink slips, we are increasing employees' contributions to our retirement substantially and we are making concessions through collective bargaining.

"Proposed initiatives and legislation targeting retirement security simply amount to a Trojan horse for an assault on collective bargaining, workers' rights and the middle class," Low continues. "Make no mistake. This website is the first salvo in our fight against the right-wing interests attacking us."

Among the "scapegoaters": Assemblyman Tim Donnelly, sponsor of legislation to reduce retirement plans for public employees; former Schwarzenegger officials Dan Pellissier and David Crane, strong supporters of reducing retirement benefits for public employees; former Assemblyman Roger Niello, author of a 2012 ballot initiative; State Sen. Mimi Walters, author of a package of anti-pension bills; the Little Hoover Commission, which produced a widely-criticized report on pensions; and a mystery out-of-state billionaire, who has been bankrolling the efforts of the pension-busting Californians for Fiscal Reform Foundation.

Californians for Retirement Security is a coalition of more than 1.5 million public employees and retirees. The group's executive committee includes: California Federation of Teachers; California Professional Firefighters; California School Employees Association; California Teachers Association; Orange County Employees Association; Peace Officers Research Association of California; Retired Public Employees Association of California; SEIU California, and SEIU Local 1000.

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