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[MARC HAIUNGS: Don't balance budgets at expense of public servants' pensions](#)

This is in response to syndicated columnist Dan Walters' Jan. 24 piece, "Civil service unions in denial on pension costs." I have been in law enforcement since I was 20 years old. I will be starting my 25th year in law enforcement this year. All Californians are struggling through this recent recession. Why is it that the media and politicians immediately target public safety and public employees' pensions to balance the budget?

There is this misconceived notion that all public safety employees retire with pensions of more than \$100,000 a year. The facts are, statewide, less than 3 percent of public safety retirees make that much a year. They are the few that were fortunate enough to promote through the ranks, remained healthy enough to have a 30-plus-year career, and retired as captains or chiefs. The fact is 78 percent of CalPERS retirees make less than \$36,000 a year.

Another idea, shifting more of future pension savings to defined-contribution 401(k)-like plans, would make those savings less secure while adding significant new program costs. The best idea? Continue working in good faith at the bargaining table for needed changes, focusing on the true issues and not those manufactured to make a political point. Meanwhile, I believe the larger pension concern should be for the vast and growing majority of American workers with savings hardly a quarter of what is needed to retire in dignity.

It is important to ensure the fairness and long-term stability of California's public pension plans. But ill-thought ideas like requiring teachers, police and firefighters to join Social Security would not provide any immediate cost savings, while adding significant new costs to create and administer the new plans it proposes.

Since the attack on retirement security has moved to the public sector, the pensions for teachers, police, firefighters, nurses and other public servants are increasingly at risk. We need to strive for a structure that ensures a secure old age and retirement for all Californians. Public employees pay up to an average 12 percent into their own retirement. Teachers contribute 8 percent of their salaries to their pensions, do not receive Social Security and most teachers over the age of 65 do not receive retiree health care benefits either. They pay for their pensions with every paycheck.

As our parents and grandparents told us, a secure pension is the core around which a decent retirement is built. But with secure pensions evaporating and pressure increasing to move future retirees to insecure 401(k)-type retirement savings, it is clear that today's pensions are not your grandfather's pensions. If this baseless attack is allowed to continue, the future for middle-class retirees will be bleak. We have already seen how the Great Recession we have just lived through trashed the retirement savings of vast numbers of private-sector Americans, forcing them to work far longer for retirements that will be a shadow of what they had hoped for.

A wholesale dismantling of California's public pension system would be a mistake beyond comprehension not only to state workers, but to California's entire economy and every Californian that deserves a secure retirement. Pension-gutting ballot proposals actually will cost taxpayers billions *more* for decades to come. Shrinking benefits for public workers is bad for the economy and will force more Californians to turn to other taxpayer-funded social services. The

Legislative Analyst's Office has determined that two proposed ballot measures to overhaul California's pension system would cost taxpayers at least \$1 billion a year for the next three decades.

Pensions are not the problem. Pension costs are one of the smallest-growing costs in all of state government. The state pays less today for pensions on a percentage basis than in 1980. The refusal of a small, politically entrenched faction to allow a vote on tax extensions, paired with Wall Street abuses that left our nation's economy in shambles, dwarfs the impact of pension costs by a ratio of about 20-to-1.

Remember, the police officers who protect you; the teachers who educate our children; the firefighters who save our property from burning; the nurses who help you get well; and all the rest of the public service employees in our great state did not cause the financial meltdown of this country. We did not cause the decline in home values. So do not balance your city, county and state budgets by gouging our future security. Thank you for your support!

Marc Haiungs of Bakersfield is president of the Kern Law Enforcement Association. Another View is a critical response to a previous editorial, column or news story.