

Dec 15 My Word: True pension reform can only occur at bargaining table

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My Word

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During this holiday season of giving, it is somewhat ironic that the public policy debate that has dominated the headlines has focused instead on eliminating retirement security for California's middle class.

In recent weeks, there has been much discussion (including a joint legislative hearing) about the specific elements contained in Gov. Jerry Brown's pension reform proposals.

That is an important discussion to have -- one that is essential to the sustainability of California's middle class. Are there good elements within those proposals? Likely so. Are there elements that are problematic or need more work? Absolutely.

For several years, I had the honor to serve as chairman and trustee of the Alameda County Employees' Retirement Association. What that experience taught me is that retirees want to know that their earned benefits are protected and that the promise of retirement is secure.

The promise of a respectful and secure retirement will help us build a great workforce and serve as an incentive to sustainable employment.

In addition, it must be a statement of appreciation for those who work hard to keep our communities safe, teach our children or care for our seniors.

As we debate the merits of any pension reform proposal, we must keep this in mind. A strong and secure workforce helps California's economy grow and supports our middle class in so many ways.

We must assure our retirees that their earned benefits represent a promise that will never be broken.

But as we debate the merits of pension reform, we cannot lose sight of the larger issue -- that meaningful and prompt pension reform will not be accomplished through an assault on the collective bargaining process.

Throughout California and the nation, the most successful reforms have occurred where labor is a partner, and changes are made through the collective bargaining process, where they should be.

These are real wins for hundreds of local government agencies and the state, but they are occurring at the bargaining table. Brown's current reform proposals also should be entrusted to that process.

Labor will not -- and should not -- negotiate with a gun to its head.

The best outcome, in terms of significant reform that promptly addresses some of these issues, will only occur where labor is a partner at the bargaining table.

Pensions are part of total compensation and cannot be isolated from these other elements or isolated from collective bargaining.

Reforms that are rammed down workers' throats in a Wisconsin-style assault outside of the collective bargaining process will only be bogged down in years of litigation.

Moreover, such an approach will not engender the type of collaborative approach that is needed to address this issue.

Labor should be a partner in the solution. Circumventing the collective bargaining process only serves to play the blame game with public employees, much as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger did with his furloughs and other ill-advised policies that scapegoated public employees but did not address the real problems facing our state.

Pension reform, if it is going to happen and happen well, needs to be tackled as a partnership that takes place at the bargaining table. Make no mistake, labor is committed to reform. But it is equally committed to the collective bargaining process. The two are not -- and should not be -- mutually exclusive.

A win-win can be achieved if we maintain our fundamental commitment both to reform and collective bargaining. All of this must be within the context of protecting the promise of retirement security for California's middle class.

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