



# Toughen up, Ohio Republicans

## Cleveland Plain Dealer

Thursday, February 24, 2011, 4:59 AM

By Kevin O'Brien

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, God bless him, is dragging the country another step toward a finish line that seems awfully far away.

The race to restore fiscal sanity -- something the vast majority of Americans alive today have never really known -- is going to be a long, tough, acrimonious one. But it has to be run.

It would be nice to make great strides today, while the fiscal situations of the states and the federal government are merely dire.

With a cataclysm of unfunded liabilities rushing steadily up behind them, Americans can be counted upon to sprint, eventually.

Governors, the highest-ranking executives whose budgets actually have to balance, have figured it out. In the race for fiscal sanity, they're going to have to set the pace. And some Republican governors are doing their part to focus taxpayers on the political and fiscal liabilities that public employee unions pose.

Chris Christie, a Republican in Democrat-dominated New Jersey, was the first to take on public employee unions. No one could have been better cast to get the ball rolling.

Christie's blunt, regular-guy style and his gift for on-the-spot debate have produced some exchanges with public employees that are simply priceless.

Walker and the Republican majority in the Wisconsin legislature have vowed to pass a law that returns some balance to the power relationship between the public and public workers.

Ohio has an even better idea, and it's of vital importance that Gov. John Kasich and his fellow Republicans in the legislature not weaken.

Before the Ohio General Assembly is a bill that would effectively abolish public employee unions at the state level. It would leave to localities the decision of whether to allow their employees to engage the taxpayers in collective bargaining.

On Wednesday, however, Senate President Tom Niehaus went wobbly, suggesting something more like the Wisconsin approach: collective bargaining for wages, but not for benefits.

That would be a mistake, because Ohio's bill, as written, acknowledges an essential fact that even government-growing, labor-loving Franklin D. Roosevelt understood: Public employee unions should not exist.

Unlike unions that operate in the private sector, seeking to balance the private interests of labor against the private interests of management, public-sector unions pit their private interests against the *public* interest.

Or, as Time.com columnist Joe Klein puts it, "Industrial unions are organized against the might and greed of ownership. Public employees unions are organized against the might and greed . . . of the public?"

To add to the public's disadvantages, the people elected to deal with public-sector unions have too often had an interest in benefiting from union help in election campaigns and spending the public's money to buy "labor peace" at union prices.

And for quite some time now, they've been buying labor peace not with ready taxpayer cash, but with IOUs.

**The National Center for Policy Analysis**, a free-market think tank, estimates that in 2008, the latest year for which figures were available, Ohio's pension plans for state and local government employees faced more than \$176 billion in unfunded liabilities.

That's money the public employees are expecting to collect upon retirement but that isn't really there.

Those estimated unfunded liabilities amount to more than \$36,000 per Ohioan.

Only California, Illinois, New York and Texas were worse off, the NCPA notes.

If you think public employees are screaming now about "promises the public has made" to them, wait until they retire -- without going back to double dip -- and find that the public can't deliver.

Better to disappoint them now, while they have incomes and a chance to adjust.

Despite the overheated rhetoric of the protesters, no one wants to see Americans out of work. No one wants to see public employees mistreated; that's why we've had civil service commissions a lot longer than we've had public employee unions. No one wants to see public safety workers underpaid or put at needless risk. The sooner we act, the less of that sort of thing we'll have.

But hard choices need to be made, and the fiscal realities say those choices are bound to add up to fewer public employees doing fewer things for benefits that resemble those found in the private sector. That's not the public employee union way, though, and that's why public employee unions have to go.