Feds Mobilize Against Additional Hits On Their Pocketbooks

By Joe Davidson

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Federal workers have had enough.

Now if only they can convince elected officials not to hit them again.

As the White House and Congress look for ways to avoid a Jan. 1 “fiscal cliff” of budget cuts and tax increases, federal employee groups are increasingly mobilized against more hits on their pocketbooks.

The Federal Workers Alliance (FWA), a coalition of 20 unions representing more than 300,000 employees, scheduled a “federal employee day of action” on Tuesday to pressure officials not to take any more away from the workforce in the name of deficit reduction.

“With so little time left and so little progress being made, we agreed that something had to be done,” said FWA Chairman William R. Dougan. “Federal employees have often been a scapegoat of first resort in last-minute budget deals, and we won’t let that happen again. Federal workers have already seen $103 billion in cuts to their pay and benefits, but many in Congress still don’t get the message. That’s why we’re encouraging our members to contact their elected officials in any way they can, and tell them ‘the bank is closed.’ ”

The alliance is urging workers to contact elected officials by personal visits, phone calls, e-mails, social media, whatever, to deliver this message: “Federal employees have already sacrificed $103 billion in pay and benefits — enough is enough.”

The $103 billion over 10 years is about $50,000 for each employee, according to Rep. James P.Moran Jr. (D-Va.) This comes from a freeze on basic pay rates for current staffers, originally for two years and now extended at least through March, and the increased pension contributions most new employees will have to pay beginning next year.

“This is not a union issue. It’s not a Democrat or Republican issue. To an extent, it’s not even a federal employee issue,” Dougan said. “This is fundamentally about maintaining a government that is equipped to serve the American people. Federal employees keep our nation safe, our national treasures secured, and our veterans healthy. Hurting federal employees only hurts those they serve. That’s why we’re encouraging all federal employees to stand up and tell Congress put an end to the irresponsible compensation and budget cuts.”

Federal employee allies in Congress also are standing up for federal workers. A Nov. 20 letter to President Obama from area House members, including two Republicans, said many federal and postal employees “face an uncertain future under almost any deficit reduction scenario. And to date, no other group has been asked to financially contribute the way they have.”

In a Dec. 9 article in the Federal Times, Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.) wrote: “Like a broken record, those who continually disparage the important role played by our public employees again and again ask those employees to contribute to deficit reduction without asking the same of other groups. . . .

“The looming automatic budget cuts in January would almost certainly require unpaid furloughs in most agencies. Instead of treating federal employees as a convenient offset, we should recognize them for what they are: an outstanding asset.”

Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), in a telephone news conference last week organized by the 31-member Federal-Postal Coalition and in an interview Monday, spoke against legislation approved months ago that would effectively cut the pay of federal workers by making them pay more for their retirement benefits.

In May, the House, which is to say House Republicans, voted for a bill that would save the

government $83 billion by requiring employees to pay an additional 5 percent of salary toward their annuities. No Democrats voted for that bill and 16 Republicans also opposed it.

“It amounts to a 5 percent pay cut,” Van Hollen said.

A budget plan approved by House Republicans would extend the pay freeze to a total of five years and calls for “federal employees to make a more equitable contribution to their retirement plans.” That means paying more for the same product.

Speaking of retirement, one plan that has been getting increased attention lately is a proposal to base cost-of-living adjustments to Social Security payments, federal and military annuities, veterans benefits and disability benefits on the “chained CPI,”a formula that proponents say more accurately reflects inflation.

The National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association (NARFE) is not among those proponents. The chained CPI method would result in lower benefits than the current method, which itself underestimates inflation for seniors, according to NARFE. “They do not account for how much more seniors spend on health care, the cost of which continues to outpace inflation of other consumer goods,” said a NARFE letter sent to Congress this week.

Enough is already too much. That’s the message feds and their allies in Congress are taking to Capitol Hill and to Obama.

“Many of us have made it very clear that federal employees have already sacrificed,” Van Hollen said Monday. “They’ve already given more than their fair share. Therefore, they should not be asked to do more when so many have done so little.”