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GUEST OPINION: CEOs should share in sacrifices, end hypocrisy of targeting state workers

BY PHIL THOMPSON

Doug Rothwell sure is singing a different tune these days.

In 1999, while working in state government, Rothwell got a handsome pay raise that bumped his \$108,000 salary to \$190,000. Adjusted for inflation, that's nearly \$240,000 in today's money. With the raise, Rothwell became the highest paid person in state government — better-paid than even his then-boss, Gov. John Engler.

When Rothwell got the raise, he complained it wasn't enough, saying the bonus was the government's way of recognizing that his job required "a little more skill and talent than somebody managing a burger-flipping joint down the street," according to Gongwer news service reported Aug. 6, 1999.

Fast forward to 2010. While Rothwell no longer works in government, he's still complaining about public employee salaries — except now, he thinks ordinary state workers earning one-sixth his old salary are paid too much. Talk about amnesia.

Rothwell and the group he leads, Business Leaders for Michigan, claim the only way to get Michigan out of a budget hole is by targeting state workers who have already made deep sacrifices year after year. Incidentally, the board chairman of Rothwell's group is David Joos, Consumers Energy CEO, who received a 148-percent pay raise this year, according to government filings. Last year, Joos pocketed \$5.8 million in pay and perks, Mlive.com reported March 10. Joos, by the way, is the same man who pushed legislation that raises electricity rates to pay his salary and build an expensive plant Michigan doesn't need.

It's the height of hypocrisy when wealthy, powerful multimillionaires — and some politicians in Lansing — demand more sacrifices from ordinary state workers who have taken cuts after cuts, when they themselves refuse to share in the pain and accept real reforms.

Here are some reforms that will save taxpayer dollars without hurting working families or public services:

- Every year, corporate CEOs get more than \$32 billion in tax giveaways. Michigan should review these loopholes to see if they create jobs, and end those that don't.
- Every year, Michigan spends \$15 billion in private contracts. Michigan should renegotiate those contracts to find savings, as everyone else in today's tough economy is doing.
- Every year, some Lansing politicians refuse to end their own tax-payer funded lifetime health benefits. Ending these free perks now for current politicians would save taxpayers millions — and show Lansing can lead by example.

Instead of adopting real reforms, CEOs and some politicians blame state employees. That's wrong because, every year come budget crunch time, state workers are the first to step up to help save taxpayer dollars.

According to a 2009 study by Michigan State University economist Dr. Charles Ballard, state workers have given up more than \$3.7 billion in pay cuts, health care sacrifices and other concessions since 2001. Many workers also lost their jobs.

State employees do vital work that keeps families in our communities safe, such as preventing contaminated or diseased foods from getting to consumers, inspecting roads and bridges for safety, and performing many other safety checks. Thousands of them also put their lives on the line every day, fighting fires and crime in our neighborhoods and keeping dangerous predators locked up.

State workers continue to serve proudly, doing more with less, tightening their belts and getting the job done.

Real reform requires everyone to sacrifice, not just state workers and their families.

They know what it means to sacrifice. They work hard without complaint. They have shown leadership by example. Rothwell and his CEO friends should end the hypocrisy and share in the sacrifice like everyone else.

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