

CalPERS is a healthy, effective retirement system that ensures the future of millions of Californians. So...

Why is the Governor attacking our state pension system?

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CalPERS and STRS are both healthy pension systems. That is why the strident rhetoric against them is so notable. The changes proposed by the governor, in legislation, and by a ballot initiative would do nothing to solve the state budget crisis. In fact, the best estimate is that there would be no savings at all to the state for 10 years, and there may never be any savings.

These facts lead a political science professor like myself to conclude that other factors are at work besides trying to improve the economic life and the well-being of the people of California.

There is an ideological component to the attack that parallels the rhetoric on Social Security on the national level. This ideology says government should not concern itself with making sure that older people, after their working lives end, have a minimum standard of living. Rather, each individual

should be an "owner." Those who do well will be rich; those who don't, poor. This assumes that each of us individually has the time and skills to make our own individual killing by investing, primarily in the stock market.

Pension systems were not created to make individuals rich. They were created so a rich society would set a floor on misery below which we would not allow people to sink. There are many ways to become rich for those inclined to devote themselves to the task.

This attack is also about politics. Political strategists are talking about the governor's next step. It is likely he does not intend to work out a budget with the legislature, but wants to go to ballot initiatives in order to advance a personal political agenda. He reportedly has amassed \$26 million in a political war chest during his first year as governor.

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The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported in January that Americans for Tax Reform, run by Bush ally Grover Norquist in Washington DC, intends to back the governor's campaigns with a national effort. "When it goes to the ballot, it will be one of our highest priorities," Norquist said of the efforts to privatize our state retirement systems. Victories for them in California on key issues such as elimination of pensions for state workers would boost their agenda on social security and measures to reduce workers' benefits in other states.

Historically, the outcome of ballot measures are not simply an expression of the public will. Large amounts of cash can sway the vote on ballot measures just as well as dollars can produce wins for candidates. It looks like the dollars will be coming to California and we must be prepared to do the work to win voters to our side.

We in the faculty cannot take comfort in the fact that the governor's ideas on pensions, and other issues such as merit pay for K-12 teachers and forced furloughs for civil servants do not directly affect those of us already in the system. Divide and conquer still works. He will set future CSU employees against current, state workers against the cities, faculty against students. And when divide and conquer succeeds, both sides of the divide are losers.

On the other hand, the governor has attacked a wide swath of Californians from state workers to blind seniors, from teachers and nurses to the entire health care safety net and called all of us "special interests." The governor claims to speak for the people of California; but he attacks the people who work in the public's interest while maximizing donations for himself from self-interested businesses.

We must join with everyone who is willing to work for the public interest, which includes our schools and universities. The attack on us is harsh. But if we respond with unity and intelligence, we can win. When we advocate for public education, we have the interests of the people of California at heart.