

FACT SHEET

Government Workers Will Pay the Price of Climate Change

*Prepared by Labor Network for Sustainability
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THE FAILURE TO LIMIT GLOBAL WARMING IS TURNING THE CLIMATE CRISIS INTO A FISCAL CRISIS

Given that healthy local and state budgets are essential to public employee union bargaining, solving the climate crisis should be a top priority for unions representing public employees. **Climate change is eroding government budgets**, making it more difficult for public employees to bargain for fair wages and conditions. That will impact federal, state, and municipal workers, teachers, healthcare workers, and all others whose livelihood depends on public funding.

According to a new report from the federal Government Accountability Office, **direct costs to the federal government for expenses like firefighting, flood insurance and payments for lost crops have come to about \$350 billion in the past decade.** The GAO predicts that annual fiscal costs could increase by as much as \$35 billion a year by 2050, and by as much as \$112 billion by the end of the century.

State and local budgets are also deeply affected, but the effect varies by region. “The Southeast, Midwest and Great Plains regions will likely experience greater combined economic effects than other regions, largely because of coastal property damage in the Southeast and changes in crop yields in the Midwest and Great Plains.” The West will suffer from increased drought, heat and wildfire. Each of these effects will reduce state and local tax bases, while increasing expenditure for emergency services, infrastructure repair, and other many other expenses.

The GAO estimates do not include many of the most damaging aspects of climate change that do not show up directly in the federal budget. They include **hundreds of billions of projected damages from heat waves, droughts, wildfires, storms, and floods.** These effects of climate change, while not directly included in the federal budget, are likely to have a dramatic impact on the federal, state, and local tax base. They include annual costs before the end of the century of up to \$150 billion from lost work hours, \$89 billion in coastal impacts, \$87 billion in energy expenditures, and \$53 billion in crop yield losses.

"Climate Change in the United States: The Prohibitive Costs of Inaction" by the Union of Concerned Scientists reviewed effects of flooding, hurricane intensity, tourism, public health, water scarcity, shipping, agriculture, energy and infrastructure stress, and wildfires, and conclude: **"If global warming emissions continue unabated, every region in the country will confront large costs from climate change in the form of damages to infrastructure, diminished public health, and threats to vital industries employing millions of Americans."**

A study by the University of Maryland found that, "The costs of climate change rapidly exceed benefits and **place major strains on public sector budgets**, personal income and job security."

We are already seeing such costs in **extreme weather events, drought-caused water crises, intensified forest fires, floods, and other costly catastrophes already impinging on our government budgets at every level.** There can be little question that this will have significant and growing impacts on public employees and their unions. Indeed their employers, our governments, are likely to be swamped -- sometimes literally - by such effects.

PUBLIC EMPLOYEES CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Public sector workers and public sector unions in particular are under attack both from recession-driven budget cutting pressures and from right-wing anti-government ideologues who attack the very idea of public services. **The essential role of public sector workers in protecting public health, the environment, and the earth's climate can be a crucial part of the fight-back.** And it can provide opportunities for alliances with workers and others in the private sector that will make it harder to isolate and stigmatize public service workers.

Public employee unions are uniquely placed to take a lead at local, state, national, and global levels. They can do so through collective bargaining, public policy positions, public education, and coalition-building. There are roles to be played here by people in each of the job categories these union members work in, from health care to housing, to schools, to law enforcement.