Public sector employees have unfairly become the focal point in an economic catastrophe not of their making. Even "Saturday Night Live" skewered public employees for a cheap laugh. But, while fans of late night television may chuckle, it's no joke that in California, the public sector is under a magnifying glass that ignores the big picture. But as Labor Day approaches, it is important to remember the important role that public sector employees play.

The "Great Recession" is hurting all of us, and the revenue crisis in state and local government requires real solutions. But the overheated rhetoric about public employees misses the mark.

The facts fly in the face of those who call the public sector "bloated." California ranks 48th in the nation in its proportion of public to private sector employees. About 70,000 public sector jobs already have been eliminated over the past several years in the state. In fact, our state and local governments have experienced proportionately more job loss than other states. It would be misguided to cut even more.

Let's remember that financial institutions brought down the economy, not sanitation workers, nurses or bus drivers.

These and other public servants signed on to their jobs, often accepting lower wages in exchange for steady work, health benefits and future retirement funds. In hindsight, this was not a bad move, considering how much the stock market has played havoc with 401(k)s and other private investment accounts.

Many public sector jobs – teachers, nurses and firefighters – require high levels of training and skills. Once you control for workers' training, experience and education, California public sector workers earn 8 percent less on average than their private sector counterparts.

Even considering benefit costs, total compensation for public sector workers is lower on average than compensation in the private sector for similar skill levels.
One area receiving significant attention is the underfunding of public pensions. The problem arose because both public and private sector employers stopped paying into the pensions during good times. The average public sector pension in the state is quite small, a little over $2,000 a month.

For those public sector workers who do not receive Social Security, it may be their only source of retirement income. The solution is not to take away what public servants have earned through hard work, but to create solutions that improve everyone's retirement security.

By scapegoating the state's public sector and its employees, we are shooting ourselves in the foot.

We all love public services but prefer not to pay the taxes that will support them. As a result, our school districts are eliminating teaching positions at a time when California is already 45th in the nation in per-pupil education spending and last in teachers per student. Police forces are being cut in places like Oakland, which has the country's fifth largest crime rate. Potholes are expanding and public services are shrinking.

Shrinking the public sector, voting down funding plans and lowering taxes for the wealthy will not jump-start California's economy; in fact, such steps would do the opposite. To recover and compete, the state needs a strong infrastructure, and that depends on a robust public sector.

Research shows that education, public safety and infrastructure play a much more significant role in attracting businesses and skilled workers than corporate tax rates.

Far from impeding businesses, our infrastructure and regulatory framework provide the cornerstone of economic prosperity and allow business to grow, while also protecting consumers and the environment. This essential system simply cannot function without our dedicated public servants.

As we celebrate Labor Day, let's take a more expansive view of how to solve our economic dilemmas. The federal government must play a greater role in addressing the crisis. The problem cannot be solved on a state-by-state basis. There are, however, better and worse measures the state can take.

Cutting public services, further weakening our infrastructure, and reducing the number of teachers and janitors in our schools will only deepen unemployment and prolong the downturn.

On Labor Day, take some time to thank our public servants, rather than make them the misplaced targets of frustration and fear.

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