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Gard creates another crisis

Assembly Speaker John Gard used his position on the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee to craft the spending plans that, over the past several years, created the most severe budget deficit ever faced by the state of Wisconsin.

But Gard is not done messing with Wisconsin's fiscal integrity.

Now he wants to close the budget gap he created by undermining the public services that have earned Wisconsin a reputation as great place to live and work.

Gard, who has never hesitated to line his own pocket with public largesse, has launched a legislative assault on the pay, benefits and job security of Wisconsin workers who ensure that this state protects its citizens from crime, responds to natural disasters, educates youth, trains adults, aids farmers, provides health care assistance for the elderly and needy, and maintains roads and infrastructure.

Last week, Gard engineered a decision by the Legislature's Joint Committee on Employment Relations to reject 15 contracts with unions representing state employees. Despite the fact that those contracts were negotiated in good faith - and with an eye toward fiscal responsibility - by former Gov. Scott McCallum's staff and the unions, Gard wants to launch a costly and controversial new round of negotiations.

Gard's move has heightened anxiety at a time when employees are already facing the threat of layoffs, undermined relations between the state and its employees, and raised questions about how and to what extent basic services for Wisconsinites will be maintained.

Did Gard do this to protect taxpayers? No. Gov. Jim Doyle had promised to craft a budget to meet contract obligations without raising taxes.

Did Gard do this in the name of fiscal responsibility? No. The Assembly speaker's track record of supporting budgets that are thick with corporate welfare payments for special interests that fund Republican campaigns, as well as his support of the tax rebate scheme that added close to \$1 billion to the deficit, dispels the myth that he cares about holding the line on spending.

So what is Gard up to? Good question. There are those who say he wants to break the unions that ensure state employees are treated with dignity and that help guarantee continuity of public services. And there are many who think Gard is merely messing with the budget to free up additional money to aid special interest groups that might help him maintain GOP control of the Legislature.

But these criticisms fail to fully explain Gard's actions.

We think that the John Gard who wants to destroy relations between the state and its employees, and to undermine state services, is the same John Gard who gleefully crafted the irresponsible spending and tax shifting schemes that landed Wisconsin in a financial crisis.

This leads to the conclusion that Wisconsinites in general, and Gard's fellow legislators in particular, would be wise to ask why a man who has already done so much damage to the state is now being allowed to create a new crisis.

The views in this space are provided by The Capital Times, Wisconsin's progressive daily newspaper.