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Date: 12/12/2016 12:01:16 PM

Subject: Federal Insider: Obama's pay raise for feds praised by unions, local Hill members

## Obama's pay raise for feds praised by unions, local Hill members

By Joe Davidson

President Obama at a campaign event in Greensboro, N.C., in October. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

Like kids with a surprise in their Christmas stockings, local members of Congress and leaders of federal employee organizations are joyful over a larger-than-expected pay increase for federal workers.

Just in time for the holiday bills, President [Obama authorized an average pay raise of 2.1 percent for 2017](#), instead of the [1.6 percent he submitted in August](#). That means pay for the civilian workforce will increase by the same percentage as the military's, continuing a parity that has generally been followed for years.

The military raise was included in the National Defense Authorization Act passed by Congress last week.

National Treasury Employees Union President Tony Reardon said that after it was clear the military would get 2.1 percent, [he pushed members of Congress](#) for civilian workforce parity. "It was our view that the federal pay raise wasn't a done deal and could be adjusted," he said.

That appeared to be a veiled swipe at American Federation of Government Employees President J. David Cox Sr., who on Wednesday seemed resigned to the lower amount, telling reporters it was a "done deal."

After [The Washington Post broke news of the larger pay hike](#) on Friday, however, Cox sent a message to his members saying, "We did it! For years, AFGE has pushed aggressively for lawmakers to pay government workers

what they deserve . . . Together we organized, mobilized, and fought back. Now, we have seen the results of our efforts.”

Both union presidents cited the efforts of Democratic Sens. Barbara A. Mikulski and Benjamin L. Cardin of Maryland and Mark R. Warner and Tim Kaine of Virginia, as well as Reps. Steny H. Hoyer and Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, also Democrats. In a [letter sent Wednesday to Obama](#), the members of Congress requested the higher increase. “With very few exceptions we have had parity with respect to pay raises for the military and for civilian federal employees,” they wrote.

“Federal workers are constantly being denigrated even as they carry out critical missions under difficult circumstances,” the letter continued. “Since 2011, federal workers have ‘contributed’ over \$180 billion to deficit reduction. Pay freezes, salaries lost to the sequestration-related furlough, and higher pension contributions have hurt a largely middle class workforce that has a higher percentage of women, minorities, and veterans than the private sector workforce.”

Hoyer called the increased rate “a major victory for those who serve our nation.”

Van Hollen said Obama understands that the bigger boost “would help attract and retain the top-quality workforce necessary to serve American families. A strong federal workforce, and a pay structure that recognizes the contributions of our civilian and military personnel, makes America stronger and delivers better value to the taxpayers.”

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In Thursday [letters to the House and Senate authorizing](#) the 2.1 percent increase, Obama said he “concluded it would be appropriate to revise” his original plan “in light of the decision of Congress to provide a 2.1 percent pay increase for military personnel in 2017 and reconsideration of current and projected economic conditions.”

The new amount provides parity not just with the military, but also with “the average increase in private-sector wages and salaries from the last measured year,” said Richard G. Thissen, president of the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association. “Pay parity had been standard practice over much of the last three decades, prior to the pay freeze in 2011 — for civilian pay raises to track with raises for the uniformed services and in the private sector.”

Because of locality pay, the increase for employees in the Washington-Baltimore region will be 2.88 percent.

In October, the Federal Salary Council, composed of union representatives and outside experts, said federal employees are paid about 34 percent less on average than their private-sector counterparts are. No one expects a gap of that size, which other experts dispute, to close.

Few even expect approval of [legislation, offered by Rep. Gerald E. Connolly](#) (D-Va.), calling for a 3.9 percent raise plus a 1.4 percent locality pay boost, although it makes sense for workers and their congressional supporters to push for as much as they can get.

The higher raise Obama authorized also does not make up for the cumulative amount federal staffers have lost, according to AFGE’s calculations. In part because of the three-year freeze on basic pay rates, AFGE said, “since 2010, federal employees have been forced to give up more than \$182 billion in wages and benefits — which amounts to a \$91,000 pay cut per employee. Federal employees earn 6.5 percent less today than they did at the start of the decade when adjusted for inflation.” The Office of Personnel Management could not confirm or dispute those figures.

But there is no question, as Cox said, that “this pay adjustment will help employees pay their bills, reduce their debts, and cover the everyday costs facing working-class Americans.”

*Eric Yoder contributed to this article.*

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