

State needs more workers

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Althea Williams, now president of the Michigan State Employees Association, says the Blanchard administration is "fooling the public" by saying there are fewer employees on the state payroll.

She says the state needs more workers for the services it provides, not fewer.

Richard Headlee, spokesman of an anti-tax group, says state payrolls have soared far faster than the population.

The argument promises to be the major one in the Nov. 6 campaign. On

the state ballot is a Headlee-backed proposal called Voters' Choice. It seeks to roll back taxes to 1981 levels, require 80 percent majorities to approve local governmental fee increases and make all future tax increases the subjects of referendums.

Williams, 29, said state employees are overworked, that state government is dealing in false economies by hiring independent contractors to do what social workers have done, and that the Youth Job Corps "exploits" youngsters. "It's worse than bad," Williams said in an interview on WXYZ-TV's "Spotlight on News," scheduled for airing

Sunday. Many of her comments were replies to Voters' Choice arguments.

The first black, the first woman and the first two-year term president of MSEA said the 27,000-member group will seek a 30 percent increase in wages and fringe, a shorter work week and controls over contracting in negotiations now under way.

An employee of the Department of Social Services in Wayne County, Williams said there are 17,000 fewer persons on the state payroll than in 1979.

BUT HEADLEE argues in Voters' Choice presentations that state payrolls are excessive. Items:

- Using 1967 as a base, Headlee contends state employment rose 51.3 percent by 1983 while population rose 7.4 percent in the same period.

- Michigan state government employees are paid 20 percent more than the national average.

- State spending on welfare and prisons, in particular, has increased faster than inflation.

"And there are those who perpetuate the myth that government has been cut to the bone," says Headlee, 1982 Republican nominee for governor and president of Alexander Hamilton Life Insurance Co. in Farmington Hills.

THE UNION chief called it "not a realistic goal for the Voters' Choice People" to compare state employment growth to population growth, contending prison populations and welfare rolls have increased as the economy has declined.

A graduate of Detroit Mumford High School and Wayne State University, Williams said the caseload for social workers in Wayne County has grown from 180 to 300 "clients."

"It's worse than bad. You're unable to provide them services because you humanly cannot. Employees physically burn out," she said. "The state is not filling vacancies as they occur. It increases the workload of those who are left."

Williams said there is "strong sentiment" within the union to negotiate a caseload limit for social workers.

Williams' union was alone in opposing Gov. Blanchard's Youth Job Corps, a program of summer jobs for 16-21-year-olds at the \$2.35 minimum hourly wage.

"Our position has been that the Youth Corps should have work, they should have work at a decent wage, and they should have benefits for the work they perform. The state should not exploit the youth by paying minimum wages, no benefits, no job future, and call it a 'work experience,'" she said.

"We would support programs to permanently employ youth people. But when we have layoffs of their mothers and fathers in state government, to have the children of those laid-off workers work for minimum wage is a slap in the face to parents," Williams said.

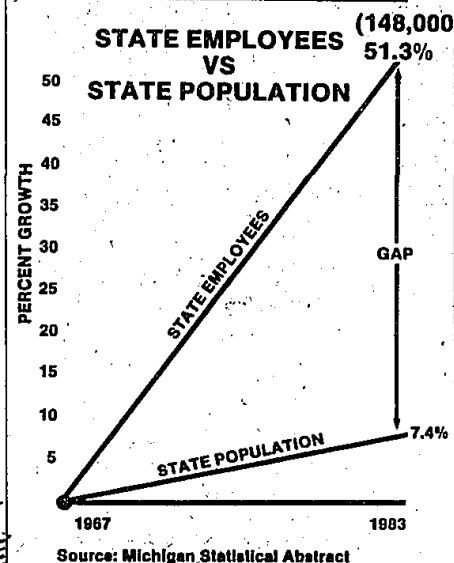
"We have people in the unemployment office who are eligible to be recalled, even on a temporary basis for a three-month period in summer, and the state refuses to call them back. But yet they can stand up and be proud that they have hired young people at minimum wage."

SHE LIKENED the state's practice of hiring independent contractors to buying an orange for \$2 when a state employee could provide it for 50 cents.

SSS in Kent County let a \$133,000 contract to a private firm to provide job training and job seeking service for welfare clients, she said, when the same work was being done by only 1 1/2 state employees.

She cited a similar contract for \$5 million in Saginaw to replace state workers.

"There have not been any upper or middle management cuts" on the state payroll, she added. "We have situations where supervisors are supervising two people as opposed to eight because the line workers have dwindled."



Headlee uses this chart to argue that state spending is excessive because the job rolls are increasing seven times as fast as Michigan's population. It's part of Voters' Choice slide presentation.



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