[Though this example is much longer than what you should aim for, it illustrates all of the crucial tips in the Top 10 Tips for Writing Op-Eds section.]

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In Ohio, Wisconsin and other states facing budget deficits, some elected officials assert that closing those gaps requires achieving labor savings and weakening labor unions. They are half-right.

Across the country, taxpayers are providing pensions, benefits and job security protections for public workers that almost no one in the private sector enjoys. Taxpayers simply cannot afford to continue paying these costs, which are growing at rates far outpacing inflation. Yes, public sector workers need a secure retirement. And yes, taxpayers need top-quality police officers, teachers and firefighters. It’s the job of government to balance those competing needs. But for a variety of reasons, the scale has been increasingly tipping away from taxpayers.

Correcting this imbalance is not easy, but in a growing number of states, budget deficits are being used to justify efforts to scale back not only labor costs, but labor rights. The impulse is understandable; public sector unions all too often stand in the way of reform. But unions also play a vital role in protecting against abuses in the workplace, and in my experience they are integral to training, deploying and managing a professional work force.

Organizing around a common interest is a fundamental part of democracy. We should no more try to take away the right of individuals to collectively bargain than we should try to take away the right to a secret ballot. Instead, we should work to modernize government’s relationship with unions — and union leaders should be farsighted enough to cooperate, because the only way to protect the long-term integrity of employee benefits is to ensure the public’s long-term ability to fund them. In Wisconsin, efforts to rein in spending on labor contracts have included proposals to strip unions of their right to collectively bargain for pensions and health care benefits.

Yet the problem is not unions expressing those rights; it is governments failing to adapt to the times and act in a fiscally responsible manner. If contract terms or labor laws from years past no longer make sense, we the people should renegotiate — or legislate — changes. Benefits agreed to 35 years ago that now are unaffordable should be reduced. Similarly, work rules that made sense 70 years ago but are now antiquated should be changed.

In New York City, we share the same goal as cities and states across the nation — less spending and better services. We, too, are seeking to legislate changes to reduce pension and benefit costs and
modernize our labor laws. But in some cases, we believe expanding collective bargaining would be more beneficial than trying to eliminate it.

For example, in New York, state government — not the city — has the authority to set pension benefits for city workers, but city taxpayers get stuck with the bill. The mayor cannot directly discuss pension benefits as part of contract negotiations with unions, even though pension benefits could be as much as 80 percent of an employee’s overall compensation. In addition, members of the State Legislature pass pension “sweeteners” for municipal unions that help attract support for their re-election campaigns.

These are problems that mayors around the country also face. In New York City, taxpayers will be forced to pay $8.3 billion in pension costs this year, up from $1.5 billion 10 years ago. Our proposal to the state is simple: legislate lower costs this year and, going forward, give us the authority to negotiate fair pension savings ourselves.

Pensions are not the only area where we would like to expand our collective bargaining authority in order to modernize government. New York is one of only a dozen or so states with a law requiring layoffs of teachers based strictly on seniority — a policy that’s known as “last in, first out.” In New York City, we are preparing to lay off workers across city agencies, including 4,500 teachers. And the only thing worse than laying off teachers would be laying off the wrong teachers — some of our very best.

That’s why we are asking the state to give us the legal authority to collectively bargain a layoff policy with the teachers’ union — and in the meantime, to conduct layoffs based on common-sense factors like eliminating teachers who have been rated unsatisfactory, found guilty of criminal charges or failed to meet professional certification requirements.

To the extent that collective bargaining agreements or state laws are no longer serving the public, we should change them. That is what democracy is all about — and that is our responsibility. The job of labor leaders is to get the best deal for their members. The job of elected officials is to get the best deal for all citizens.

Rather than declare war on unions, we should demand a new deal with them — one that reflects today’s economic realities and workplace conditions, not those of a century ago. If we fail to do that, the fault is not in our unions, or in our stars, but in ourselves.

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John Smith

I remember so vividly my two-year-old always responding, "No!," to so many of my suggestions—my parental wisdom. There's a twist to that reaction as youngsters enter their teen years.

Young adolescents—children from 10 to 14 years of age—are beginning a time of development when they search for power. The two-year-old's "No" becomes "Soooooo," or "You're so old-fashioned," or "Leave me alone," or even "Don't give me your attitude."

Such reactions can be extremely intimidating to parents or other adults, such as teachers and school principals. But we all need to understand that this is a natural phase—it doesn't mean that our children suddenly despise us.

As a middle level (teacher or principal—change as appropriate), I see this behavior frequently. And while the frequency doesn't make it easier to understand, those of us teaching young adolescents have developed some strategies over the years to deal with this behavior shift. There are strategies that will help adults live successfully with young adolescents.

Parents and other relatives of young adolescents should understand first that this is normal behavior. Kids at this age want more control over their own lives. They know they're no longer third graders and assume that greater power and control come with their added years.

Frankly, it can be just as tough being a young adolescent as being a young adolescent's parents. This is the second most dramatic time in a person's development. If we look into young adolescents' heads, we are likely to see that many of them believe they have no say over what they consider to be important parts of their lives, such as curfew or family/time commitments. Also, they have little money at their disposal since regular part-time jobs are not readily available. And they still must rely on others for transportation. So they are struggling.

The trick for parents is to find ways to help young adolescents grow, assume appropriate control over their lives, and develop the good decision-making skills they will need throughout their lives. Here are some ideas:

- Don't use a "bulldozer approach." Young adolescents need to grow, and adults should allow them greater control over their lives within limits. But to use our authority to "flatten" the child will only create greater walls between the parent and young adolescent.

- Bend a little. Find times when young adolescents can make decisions, even decisions for the entire family, such as where the family will go for dinner or what time you'll attend your religious service. As youngsters handle the easy decisions effectively, allow them to work on the harder decisions, even suggesting places for the family vacation. Have them plan some of these events to help them develop responsibility and decision making skills.

- Understand that young adolescents can be the most effective manipulators in the world. They have spent 10 years studying how we react to certain situations. Now they may play dad against mom, parent against teacher, grandparent against parent. Yes, we should help them grow, but we should not let them control us. Appropriateness is always the key.
• Disengage when that's most effective. Sometimes young adolescents will carry an argument forward just to see how far they can get. That's part of learning how much power they can achieve. Don't let arguments reach the point where both parties say things that will result in long-term damage to the parent-child relationship—especially if it's not the most important topic. Call for a cooling off period, set another time to solve the issue.

• Understand what the really important issues are. For example, many parents "freak out"—to use the young adolescent's terminology—when their youngster decides to color his or her hair or wear an earring. Such actions may be very different from how we acted in our youth, but they aren't as important as staying in school, staying away from drugs and alcohol, or remaining involved with the family. Give on the smaller issues, but stand tall on those that are really important.

[If there are local programs at your school that would help parents, either add them to this list or replace this list with them. Such local information will improve this article greatly. Also, you may have different ideas to include. That's great.]

These are tough times—but a natural process—for all. Keep that foremost in mind.

National Middle School Association - http://www.nmsa.org