

With the help of the Democrats and the unions

New Jersey Governor presses attack on public employees and education

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14 May 2010

New Jersey Governor Chris Christie this week announced a package of 33 bills that attack the most basic rights of public employees. A main feature of his proposals is an amendment to the New Jersey Constitution that puts a 2.5 percent cap on local property tax increases, which will make it nearly impossible to give teachers and other employees of local municipalities decent pay raises or in many cases any pay raises at all, particularly in light of deep cuts in state funding.

Other elements of Christie's proposed package include permitting communities to opt out of the state's civil service system via a petition of 15 percent of local voters. This would give local communities the power to furlough workers without regard to seniority.

Another of Christie's bills would abolish adjustments for cost-of-living in state pensions, increase employee contributions to health care and pensions, and raise the retirement age from 62 years to 65 years. Christie's plan will also make employees contribute toward their health care after retirement, and will eliminate all state-run health plans and the pension plan for new hires.

In state-run colleges and universities, faculty would now have to undergo a probationary period before hiring, and individual institutions, instead of the state's Office of Employee Relations, would bargain with unions.

Leaders of the New Jersey Democratic Party, which controls the state legislature and whose support is needed to pass these bills, have already voiced their agreement with the plan: "We're going to work with him," State Senate President Stephen Sweeney said. "We're going to provide him with a tool kit, as he says, for these communities."

In addition to this attack on the rights of public workers, in the last two weeks the Christie administration has proposed new laws aimed at further degrading public education in the state.

This follows the rejection last month by New Jersey voters of 58 percent of local school budgets, after Christie campaigned for this on the grounds that teachers had refused to accept wage freezes. Between \$820 million and \$1 billion is now scheduled to be eliminated from school spending in New Jersey,

destroying thousands of teaching jobs and closing down school programs.

On May 5, the state's Education Commissioner, Bret Schundler, announced in a speech in a conference in Princeton a proposal aimed at winning a \$400 million grant from President Obama's Race to the Top program, the plan by the White House and the federal Department of Education to grant federal funds to states that are most active in implementing plans for charter schools and other attacks on public education.

Schundler targeted tenure and teacher pay as particular obstacles. According to the new plan, teachers would now have to wait five, rather than three, years before being granted tenure. Significantly, tenure would be now tied to "student performance" on test scores. Layoffs would also be tied to performance, and would no longer be made by seniority.

Legislation along these lines is scheduled to be introduced by May 17, in time to meet the deadline for application for Race to the Top funds on June 1.

Schundler's scheme also seeks to create a statewide bonus pool using money from the Race to the Top funds. Individual teachers would be awarded pay directly, or schools could use it to support staff or programs.

At a subsequent press conference, Governor Christie emphasized the bipartisan nature of this attack on education: "This is an incredibly special moment in American history when you have a Republican governor in New Jersey agreeing with a Democratic president on how to get reform" in education.

In a related development, Christie said that he plans to expand the number of charter schools in New Jersey, and that he supports a bill now in the state legislature that will grant thousands of public scholarships for private or parochial schools. The bill, called the "Opportunity Scholarship Act," is sponsored by state Senators Thomas Kean, Jr., a Republican, and Raymond Lesniak, a Democrat.

New Jersey's public education advocacy group, the Education Law Center, noted that the bill is a boondoggle for corporate tax relief.

"Over five years, the bill allows corporations to contribute

\$360 million for private school vouchers and receive a 100% deduction from their state taxes. The result: a loss of \$360 million in revenue to the state treasury, revenue that is no longer available to support public education. The bill also diverts \$360 million in public funds to private and religious schools, with no requirement that these schools meet state education quality and performance standards.”

The ELC also observed that the legislation is not designed to help students in failing schools, since a district that might otherwise be wealthy, with successful private or parochial schools, would only have to have a single failing school in it to qualify for the program.

For example, according to the ELC, “even though Cherry Hill has one ‘chronically failing school’ serving only 37 students—or 0.3% of the district’s enrollment—all of the district’s students are eligible for a voucher under this legislation.”

The bipartisan support for charter schools and other types of private education go hand in hand with the attacks on teachers’ seniority rights, pensions and jobs. Every wing of the political establishment promotes this assault.

Among the most enthusiastic proponents of privatization of education in the state is Democratic Newark Mayor Cory Booker, who was reelected to office on Tuesday and is often touted as a possible candidate for statewide or federal office. Newark is New Jersey’s largest city, with a population of about 280,000 and one of the lowest standards of living in the state, with a pre-recession poverty rate of 24 percent.

A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* noted the close cooperation between Booker and Christie on educational policy in the state:

“Gov. Christie, a Republican, is likely to help the Democratic Mr. Booker make strides in education. The mayor said he’s already had conversations with the governor about getting more involvement in the oversight of the city’s schools, and thus accelerating his plans to improve the schools. He said he and the governor have been talking about ‘creating a national model for education reform,’ and that Newark is on pace to increase the number of students going to charter schools to up to 25% over the next five years.”

In New Jersey and elsewhere the unions have willingly surrendered to the cuts, wage freezes and other attacks. One of the two teachers unions in New Jersey voiced open support for the plan announced by Education Commissioner Schundler. Joseph Del Grosso, the president of the Newark Teachers Union (NTU), said, “We support merit pay in the broadest context. In the sense that there should be a way for a school or teacher to show that they have been successful.”

The NTU represents 5,600 teachers and is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers. The majority of New Jersey’s teachers belong to the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), which is affiliated with the National Education Association.

The NJEA has also played a deceitful role in implementing Christie’s cuts and supporting the privatization of education. A day after condemning the Board of Education’s proposal for merit pay, for instance, NJEA leaders met with Schundler to collaborate on the state’s application for Race to the Top funds. *Nj.com* reported NJEA President Barbara Keshishian as saying that the “NJEA requested the meeting in order to present ideas for the state’s application. We are hopeful that this could lead to a broadly supported and successful application.”

Thousands of New Jersey teachers now expect to lose their jobs and will be searching for work in the worst labor market since the Great Depression.

Christie’s campaign to make teachers and other public employees pay for the crisis is part of an unprecedented onslaught on these sections of the working class in virtually every section of the US. The tri-state area of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut has become a major focus of this attack. As the *New York Times* reported on May 12, 44 out of 69 Connecticut school districts are freezing teachers’ pay, and in many suburban New York school districts teachers are being told to reopen contracts in order to give up scheduled pay increases. At least 123 school districts in the New York City region itself, including 67 in New York, 20 in Connecticut and 34 in New Jersey, have successfully demanded concessions from their teachers.

The attacks on teachers are based on a cynical attempt to use the alleged welfare of schoolchildren in order to whip up a demagogic attack on supposedly overpaid sections of the working class. The real purpose is to undermine public education, pit one section of workers against another, and divert attention from the actual causes of the social crisis. The teachers are among the first targets of this reactionary campaign, but it will quickly be expanded against every other section of working people.

New Jersey is being touted as an example, a test case for what can be achieved through demagogic attacks on teachers. Both Democrats and Republicans can see, however, that despite the collaboration of the unions, this will not be an easy task. The student demonstrations that took place on April 27 and in the following days, when tens of thousands of high school students, organized by a group on the social networking Facebook site and through text-messaging, walked out of school to protest teacher layoffs and cuts in school programs, show that the deepening attacks on workers and youth will inevitably provoke new struggles. The New Jersey student walkouts were a harbinger of bigger battles to come.



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