

Thousands of New Jersey state workers protest savage concessions

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Thousands of New Jersey state workers demonstrated at the state capitol in Trenton on June 16 to denounce a bipartisan deal between Republican Governor Chris Christie and the Democratic leadership in the state legislature that would sharply increase employee pension and health care contributions. The proposed bill, which is expected to be brought to the State Assembly and Senate sometime next week, affects about 400,000 state and local government workers, in addition to retirees.

Under the plan, the current 1.5 percent contribution for health insurance would be replaced by a sliding scale. Workers earning \$65,000 a year would see their health care premiums jump from about \$1,000 to \$3,600 annually. At the same time, workers' pension contributions would rise from 5.5 percent of salary to 6.5 percent immediately, and thereafter to 7.5 percent, representing another effective cut in pay.

The New Jersey attack follows similar action against public employees in Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, Maine and other states. Democratic legislators have generally sought to distance themselves from Republican governors even as they worked with the unions to block resistance to the attack on public workers and social spending.

In New Jersey, the Senate President, Democrat Stephen Sweeney, has openly backed Christie's proposals. Several local Democratic Party officials, including party bosses in Camden and Essex County, have joined as well.

This turn of events has unmasked the state union leaders, who are screaming betrayal in an attempt to conceal their own complicity in the attacks on state workers. Union officials told the crowd of protesters that attention must be focused on trying to convince as many Democrats as possible to oppose the legislation.

In an effort to keep workers tied to this pro-big business party, Robert Master of the Communications Workers complained, "Real Democrats would not have collaborated with Chris Christie to make this attack on the democratic rights of public workers."

The New Jersey governor has won admiration from sections of the corporate, political and media establishment for his demagogic attacks on teachers and other government workers, and for his efforts to pit sections of the middle class as well as the unemployed against state workers who still have jobs and benefits. Spearheading the attack on health care and pensions, he has boasted that New Jersey is becoming the model for the kind of "reform" that state governments, along with the federal government, are seeking around the country.

Earlier this week Christie told an appreciative audience of New Jersey businessmen that other states and the federal government were looking at his work with approval, bragging that, "They thirst for it at a national level."

Indeed, there is a bipartisan consensus to use the fiscal crisis—caused by tax cuts for the wealthy and the economic slump—to carry out a long-sought rollback in wages and benefits won by earlier generations.

The events in New Jersey and elsewhere show that millions of working people are inexorably moving into a political struggle against both big business parties, but this struggle poses the urgent necessity of breaking with the Democrats and the unions, and mobilizing the independent strength of the working class on the basis of a socialist strategy.



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