

New Jersey residents denounce bipartisan anti-worker law

A WSWWS reporting team
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Surrounded by dozens of Democratic and Republican legislators and mayors, on Tuesday New Jersey Governor Chris Christie signed into law a bill that imposes sweeping attacks on the state's 750,000 teachers, municipal workers and other public employees and retirees.

The measure imposes a de facto wage cut of thousands of dollars on workers through sharp increases in contributions to health care and pensions. It also raises the ages for retirement, suspends cost-of-living increases for retirees and restricts government workers' bargaining rights.

Christie, a Republican, relied on the votes of Democrats—who control both chambers of the state legislature—to push through the deeply unpopular bill. This included Senate President Stephen Sweeney, who is also an official in the ironworkers union.

After signing the bill, Christie declared, "New Jersey has once again become a model for America."

The bill provoked widespread opposition, with thousands of public employees rallying in the state capital of Trenton against the anti-worker legislation. The trade unions, however, attempted to strangle the opposition by channeling it behind the Democratic Party.

As in Wisconsin, the New Jersey public sector unions opposed the bill not because it imposes cruel cuts on workers' living standards, but because it includes provisions threatening the institutional and financial interests of the union apparatus. Union leaders hold up as a model the relationship they had established with the previous governor, Democrat Jon Corzine.

Corzine, a billionaire and former CEO of Goldman Sachs, obtained the agreement of the unions to force public sector workers to pay more into their health care and pension funds, raise the retirement age from 55 to 67 and sharply cut funding for education and other social services.

After backing the attack on public employees the Democrats are now floating the idea of a "millionaires tax" in negotiations over the state budget. This is only a political cover that will be quickly abandoned as they join the Republicans to gut public education and other vital

programs.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers and young people in Trenton, New Jersey about these attacks.

Sheila Jones is a state employee who works in human services. She reacted angrily to the cuts in health care, pensions and cost of living for retirees, saying, "I feel like the Democrats just sold us out. Sweeney is a Democrat, but he is with the Governor. We put him in there, but he sold us out. He stabbed us in the back."

Linda Harkanson, a state worker with the Department of Motor Vehicles, said, "The rates at which we will have to pay into our health care and pension funds will go way up. These budget cuts will come back to bite us in the butts. If the Democrats were for the workers, they wouldn't do this. I already had to take seven furlough days last year when I didn't get paid. The rich should pay for this."

David Prewitt, a freshman at Kean University, said, "I have lost my scholarship for track and field because of the budget cuts. Christie's budget cuts to education last year cut my athletic scholarship. Now Kean is eliminating the track and field program and eliminating the scholarships for about 10 other track and field athletes as well. Fortunately, I have an academic scholarship, but I need the athletic scholarship. Christie gets on my nerves."

"There have been a lot of demonstrations here in the last weeks. I just learned about the furlough days the state workers have to take. My aunt is a state worker at the Department of Motor Vehicles, and she told me how they are really hurt by the furloughs. I think this is pushing us backward."

"Here is the bottom line," Louis Rivera, a state worker with the Department of Labor, said, "The federal, state and municipal workers did not cause these deficits; yet they are making us pay for them. The workers in New Jersey have made all their payments to the state pension system. It was the state that didn't pay. The state consistently underfunded the pensions system for several administrations including the last two with Corzine and Christie. Now to start to repay it,

it is all put on the backs of the state employees.

“The state employees are actually underpaid compared to private industry. For years, private industry was getting paid more, but we were compensated with good health care and pensions. Now the large cuts in health care and pensions will have a big financial impact on our family budgets.”

“The politicians should take the blame for these budget deficits because they appoint the people who sit on and run the boards. And they all do what their big contributors like the insurance companies tell them to do.

“Look how they benefit company profits in health care. When they negotiate for health care services with insurance or pharmaceuticals for a group as large as state employees they don’t bargain to drive down the company prices. Medicaid and Medicare, by law, are not allowed to negotiate with private industry over prices. It is the profits of the health care companies that keep driving health care up. You can buy the same medicine in Mexico much cheaper than you can buy it here.

“The Democrats and Republicans in Congress are all millionaires so they vote for what helps the millionaires. They are passing tax cuts for their own benefit. How come they don’t set an example by cutting their own pay or take vouchers for their health care? Two percent of the population controls everything.

“They have made out like socialism is a bad word, but what we really have is a dictatorship of the rich, private firms. It is an oligarchy. Socialism means you are for the majority not for the few who are rich.”

A worker at the State Health Department said, “They are taking health care from the firefighters who are complaining of lung problems from smoke and disease. We, state workers, don’t do the job for the money. We do the work with a passion to help people. Now they want to take our pensions.

“One politician said to us at the rally Thursday that what is happening is our fault because we aren’t doing enough. It just bothers me to hear him say that. We are doing our jobs. We work in the communities, and we do volunteer work.

“I am not happy with the Communication Workers of America union. They have done too little too late. And this goes back a few leaderships in the union at least to Carla Katz who had a relationship with Governor Corzine. After she was removed, she tried to defend herself with a robo phone call message. I called to try to find out if our dues were being used to defend her. Our dues are too high. We have to pay \$41 a month.

“The Democrats and Republicans are the oligarchy of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. When Corzine lost the election and allowed Christie to come in, he didn’t really care. You have to really want it, but he didn’t. He just had a

big party and left.

“I have had to start paying an extra \$1,500 to my doctor so he doesn’t have to rush me out in ten minutes to get to the next patient. That is a lot of money, but I think it is worth it. Now they want to decide what our health care is going to be. We don’t have the right to ask about it, fight for it or vote on it. This is terrible. We are not respected.”

Nina, a state worker, said, “I am disturbed by all this. Why do we always have to pay more? There is no reason why the gas companies should have raised the price of gas when they are making record profits.

“The Democrats represent themselves, not those who voted for them. I’m upset about the unions and Sweeney’s role with the Republicans. He did it just to further his own career. The union only gives us some information. I don’t think the NJEA (New Jersey Education Association] president should be paid what she’s paid. I was a school nurse before this and the union did not come out to defend us.”

David, a state worker who has worked 10 years in the fiscal office, said, “I think these cuts to our livelihood are atrocious. I have a problem with it. The family plan health benefits will cost me \$5,000 to \$7,000. We also now have to pay more for our pension benefits. The problem is that the state has not been paying anything into our pension plan for the last fifteen years. It is a shame. This is happening in state after state.”

Jeffrey Donui, a 21-year-old state worker, said, “I have a janitor’s job and clean office buildings. Money is already getting short and these cuts are making things worse. My mom is a senior citizen who lives on a pension, which is too low. She retired about five years ago. She was a lunch aid at a public school in South Trenton. The money was not good when she was working and it is worse living on a pension that is next to nothing.

“Kids in this city have nothing to do. Trenton used to have everything. It used to have a zoo, which has shut down. The skating rinks have been eliminated. And there are definitely not enough summer jobs available for the young people.”



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