

Christie and unions poised to do battle over budget cuts

By Star-Ledger Staff

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Matt Rainey/The Star-Ledger

Gov. Chris Christie glances as he kisses his wife, Mary Pat, after delivering a major budget speech, laying the groundwork to make a range of cuts that will include \$475 million in state aid to schools, according to people familiar with his plans. New Jersey Democrats, however, are infuriated that he had not consulted with them.

The radio ads started running last week.

"When it comes to New Jersey politicians, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Governor Christie promised a new direction, but after a few weeks he's back to the old Trenton ways of doing business..."

The spot by the New Jersey Education Association was just the latest salvo in a rapidly escalating battle over Chris Christie's efforts to cut the benefits and pensions of state and municipal workers.

It could be a long, drawn-out war.

A Star-Ledger analysis of campaign-finance data shows state and municipal employee labor unions have no shortage of firepower at their disposal, and no reluctance to use it. It also shows why the governor has little political reason to cater to the unions.

While it's no surprise the unions have favored Democratic candidates, the records show just how lopsided that support has been.

The big unions funneled more than \$814,400 in campaign contributions to Democrats in New Jersey last year — nearly four times the amount that went to Republicans, according to the records.

The unions' political action committees put even more into television ads and direct mail attacking the Republican

candidate for governor, Christie.

And over the past six years, they have given \$5 million to Democratic candidates and election committees that still control the Legislature, compared with \$1 million given to the Republicans.

With Christie now in office, they may have zero political leverage with the state's chief executive as the pension battle heats up.

When told of the ads, the governor dismissed them, and with some attitude.

"The NJEA loves spending their teachers' dues criticizing me," Christie said last week. "They spent \$3 million of it trying to make sure I couldn't win the election. You saw how successful that was. They're just going to put more lies and distortions on the radio, on TV and all the rest of it."

Members of the Democratic-controlled Legislature may be far less likely to face down the unions.

With a four-bill package of pension-and-benefits changes pending in the Legislature, the Assembly Democrats, all recently re-elected with the help of union money, have not rushed to introduce the pension bills and meet stakeholders.

In the Senate, at least, Christie enjoys enough bipartisan support to get the reforms.

Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester) — an ironworkers union leader and the chief architect of the reform bills — said in an interview his caucus would not be swayed in its efforts to change the pension system.

"My colleagues are moving forward with these bills," he said.

Sweeney acknowledged the campaigns by the unions have an impact. "But we have to fix these things," he said.

OPEN ANTAGONISM

Most politicians and political experts agree the war between Christie and the unions is unique in Statehouse history. No previous governor ever opposed the unions so directly and with such gusto, and the unions never fought back so readily.

Previous efforts to confront the unions and tackle the state's skyrocketing pension benefits costs have been likened to going up against an 800-pound gorilla. Alan Rosenthal at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, who studies state legislatures and politics, remembered a special legislative session four years ago, during Gov. Jon Corzine's tenure, when lawmakers renewed their effort to do something significant on pension costs.

"Corzine pulled the rug from under them," Rosenthal said, recalling how reform efforts died after the governor, in the face of strong union pressure, failed to support the Legislature.

Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute, said the power of the unions remains significant despite their lack of leverage with the new governor.

"Their power depends on their ability to control the debate and convince the larger public that the governor is unfairly targeting hardworking folks and their families," he said. "They've done this before."

Both Rosenthal and Murray noted Christie cannot do everything by executive fiat. "He'll need legislative action for some things — and there the unions' sway is still evident," Murray said.

MULTIPLE APPROACHES

The four-bill package is aimed at trimming pensions and benefits, as well as banning part-time workers from participating in the pension system. The legislation also would cap sick-leave payouts and constitutionally require the state to fully fund its pension obligations each year, as well as eliminate multiple pensions.

Many of the unions are already ramping up lobbying efforts, such as the NJEA commercials, to shore up public support

for their members.

"Despite the fact that Chris Christie thinks he can rule by executive order, much of his agenda will have to go through the Legislature, and Democrats will have to start acting like Democrats," said Bob Master, a spokesman for the Communications Workers of America, which represents more than 40,000 state workers and 15,000 county and municipal workers.

NJEA spokesman Steve Baker said his organization is still trying to work with the new administration, and he downplayed the idea of a war with Christie.

"We advocate for our members and for public education. We do that regardless who is there," Baker said. "We're in the beginning stages of trying to build relationships."

He added the NJEA does not apply a party litmus test on any candidate. "We look and see who has the best record and endorse on that basis," he said.

Christie, meanwhile, has already started looking for ways to significantly curb the influence of the public labor unions. On his first day in office, he issued an executive order sharply limiting their ability to contribute to statewide political campaigns.

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