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Privately, Public Employees See Cuts as Inevitable

By DAVID M. HALBFINGER

UNION, N.J. — The meeting of the public-workers’ union had ended, the rallying cries about hostile lawmakers and ominous contract deadlines had given way to a buffet dinner.

Sitting down to eat, Andrea Douglas, a claims representative for the State of New Jersey for the past 10 years, quietly conceded what few union leaders say aloud: Government workers have to give up some of their benefits. “I’m a realist,” Ms. Douglas said. “The private sector is looking at us, and we do look good. I know we’ll have to give. Everybody else is asking, ‘How am I going to pay rent?’ ”

Around the table, fellow workers stared, taken aback by her talk of concessions.

“You don’t see it coming?” she said to them. “We’re going to have to give. I’m more than willing to pay more to support my benefits. But you can’t ask me to give so much that I can’t afford to live. At least negotiate with me on that.”

Public-sector workers these days are under assault, their hard-won salaries and benefits depicted as drains on the body politic. Labor unions have responded angrily to that sort of talk, pledging to fight to keep what is theirs.

But in interviews and discussions among themselves, public employees express more complicated feelings. The police officers, teachers and workers are struggling with anger and fear. But many also acknowledge that the world they have known and the assumptions they have built their lives on are crumbling before their eyes.

Nowhere has the environment for public workers been more stinging than in New Jersey, where Gov. [Chris Christie](#) has earned folk-hero status for his aggressive antiunion posture. And the public has responded: a [Quinnipiac University](#) poll released on Thursday showed voters here favored by wide margins wage freezes, furloughs and pension cuts for those on the state payroll.

To be sure, unions have won many victories over the years: current state workers contribute only 1.5 percent of their pay for health care, for example. Mr. Christie wants them to pay 30 percent of the cost of their insurance.

Straining the conversations among neighbors and in bars, breakfast joints and bowling alleys is the growing rift between government workers and their brethren in the building trades: under-employed laborers, carpenters, ironworkers and others who no longer see the powerful public-sector unions as allies.

“It goes back to the idea of divide and conquer,” said Calvin McCullars, a disability-claims processor for 22 years. “A few years ago, nobody really cared about state workers. And now, since the economy went bad, other people are getting laid off, and everybody’s attacking us like we’re doing something wrong. We’re getting picked on, like a scapegoat.”

William Elliott, a state revenue agent, said people seemed to have forgotten that Wall Street greed and deregulation caused the financial meltdown, not working people. “I feel like the public is being played,” he said. “I remember hearing someone say, ‘Why waste a perfect crisis to advance your cause?’ ”

As others filtered out into the icy night, Naomi Monroe, a principal clerk for the Board of Nursing, lingered. She said she was eligible to retire but recently learned that she needed to work another five

years to be able to live on her pension.

“The way things are going now, I’ll probably have to look for another job,” Ms. Monroe said. “I keep praying they’ll lay me off, because I’ll make more on unemployment than working, and then at least I can go to school to learn something new.”

Thanks to earlier cuts, people calling her office sometimes have to be put on hold, she said, and at least two or three erupt each day over the delay. “They’re yelling and screaming about how lazy public workers are,” she said. “When I came here, I had hypertension. I’ve been carried out by ambulance before. It’s so stressful.”

A few miles from the State House at JoJo’s Tavern in Hamilton, N.J., an always-crowded gathering place, the pizza is thin-crust but the atmosphere is thick with griping and dread.

Robert Haupt, a retired electrician, was a member of a union, but he has issues with state workers. “I object to them squawking about getting the day off after Thanksgiving with pay,” he said, referring to a perk the governor tried but failed to revoke. “They can bank sick days to the point where they can leave work two years ahead of time. I never had that privilege. If I didn’t get work, I didn’t get paid.”

But across the bar, Tim Connery, 59, a middle-school music teacher, shared his own fears for the future with Wayne Lonabaugh, a retired colleague. Mr. Lonabaugh remembered the calculations he made starting out.

“I only made \$4,200 a year, but older people said, the pension is the big thing,” Mr. Lonabaugh said. “So I had two jobs. I worked in a cement plant. But I got my pension.”

“I got 38 years in,” Mr. Connery said softly over his drink. “But everything’s up in the air. They’re taking 10 percent out of the principal every year to pay existing retirees. I’m worried that it won’t be there for me.”

The two said that they had always accepted earning less than they might have made in another job,

partly because the benefits were so good. Mr. Lonabaugh, who taught math and science for 35 years, now enjoys free health insurance. “Twenty-five years ago, a Democrat told me, ‘You’ll never get free health for retirees, because it would bankrupt the state,’ ” Mr. Lonabaugh, a Republican, said with a slightly rueful smile. “And we got it. And he was right.”

George Dzurkoc, a detective who leads the police officers’ union in Trenton, was at the next bar stool with his fiancée, talking about his struggles to calm his fellow officers’ anxieties. “It’s horrible,” he said. “You have people’s lives hanging in the balance, and you can’t give them answers. They ask me every day: ‘Are they laying us off?’ ”

Mr. Dzurkoc did not take issue with the governor’s [measure that caps property taxes](#), but said there were better ways to cut costs. “Do we need two-day-a-week garbage pickup in the wintertime?” he said. “Do we need 500-plus school districts and superintendents? The problem is no one wants to give up their own fiefdoms.”

Down the block, where retirees gather at Fred & Pete’s delicatessen, the easy banter now gives way to serious concerns.

“Teachers are being downgraded,” said Joan Schutts, who gave up her kindergarten class eight years ago. “My daughter’s a middle-school teacher now, and she’s hearing things from people. Even from children: ‘You’re making too much money.’ ”

Mrs. Schutts’s husband, Richard, a retired utility worker, said that politicians who took fiscal shortcuts like [skipping payments into New Jersey’s pension system](#) created the crisis.

“And nobody wants the solution to come out of their pocket,” he said. “It’s that simple.”

“I don’t feel that way,” said their friend Bettie Herzstein, who retired from teaching elementary school in 2004. “Do it to me, but do it evenly to everybody.”

Ms. Herzstein said she was willing to pay for part of her health care. “I think that’s only fair. But

somebody has to do something to the medical profession, too,” she said. “My husband and I were just recently in the hospital. One test, just for the doctor to read the test, was \$2,400. And my bill for two weeks in the hospital was \$100,000.” Her share of that? “Not a penny,” she said. “Thank God for the teachers’ union.”

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