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Workers Swarm Trenton on Benefit Changes

By **RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA**

Thousands of angry government workers swarmed New Jersey's Capitol on Thursday and some were briefly arrested, one day after Gov. Chris Christie and legislative leaders agreed to sharply increase the contributions public employees must make into their health insurance and pensions plans.

The proposed deal, which has yet to come to a vote in either house, would be a major victory for Mr. Christie, transferring billions of dollars a year in expenses from the government to its employees, and once again curbing the power of the governor's favorite foil, the public employee unions.

It would eliminate the longstanding practice of negotiating health care payments in contract talks with the unions, instead imposing those terms through legislation. The proposed deal puts Mr. Christie firmly in the ranks of fellow Republican governors who have curtailed public workers' collective bargaining rights this year, including Mitch Daniels of Indiana, John Kasich of Ohio, Paul LePage of Maine and Scott Walker of Wisconsin.

But the recent conflicts in those states have been strictly partisan affairs, with Democrats opposing moves made by Republican majorities. In New Jersey, the battle over pensions and health care has turned into an intramural fight among Democrats, who control both houses of the Legislature, threatening to shake up the party's leadership and weaken it in coming elections, thereby

strengthening Mr. Christie's hand.

Currently, most state and local employees pay 1.5 percent of their salaries for health insurance. Mr. Christie's proposal would phase in a sliding scale, requiring higher-income workers to pay a bigger share of their insurance premium. For a typical worker making \$65,000 a year, the cost of full-family coverage would rise to about \$3,600 a year, from about \$1,000.

Employees' pension contributions would rise immediately from 5.5 percent of their salary to 6.5 percent, and then, in stages, to 7.5 percent. On a \$65,000 salary, the increase would come to \$1,300 a year.

Union members packed a State Senate hearing in Trenton on Thursday, the first one to take up the proposal. Like thousands of their compatriots in the State House hallways and on the lawn outside, they noisily protested what they called an assault on collective bargaining and a betrayal by key Democrats.

At one point, chanting protesters brought the hearing to a halt, which lasted until the State Police forced about two dozen of them out of the chamber. They were arrested, but then released.

"There is a campaign across the country to use this economic crisis as an excuse to destroy the rights of working people," said Robert Master, regional legislative and political director of the Communications Workers of America, the union that represents the largest number of state employees. "Real Democrats would not have collaborated with Chris Christie to make this attack on the democratic rights of public workers."

Another official from the union, Christopher Shelton, compared the governor to Adolf Hitler, telling the crowd "Welcome to Nazi Germany" and "It's going to take World War III to get rid of Adolf Christie," according to the Associated Press. Mr. Shelton later said his remarks were inappropriate, and apologized.

The bill would affect about 400,000 state and local workers and is expected to go to a vote next week

in both the Senate and the Assembly, where legislators say most Democrats will vote against it. With Republicans sure to line up behind the measure, however, even a minority of Democrats could help pass it.

Mr. Christie is negotiating with state employee unions for a new set of contracts, and with the Legislature over a state budget, and aides said he viewed the health and pension provisions as prerequisites for both.

At a conference of county officials in Atlantic City, he said that with the pension and health care agreement his office announced on Wednesday night, "New Jersey is setting the model by dealing with it in an honest way."

Some of the Democrats' most important power brokers outside the Legislature have lined up with the governor on this issue, including George M. Norcross of Camden County; Joseph DiVincenzo, the Essex County executive, and his mentor, Stephen N. Adubato Sr. Mr. Sweeney, a Gloucester County Democrat, has pushed for years to curb the cost of employee benefits, and the proposed law resembles his original plan more than the governor's.

"We could either oppose the governor or craft our own revolutionary response to reform," he said Thursday. "Reform is needed now."

But at several points in recent weeks, when a deal seemed imminent, Ms. Oliver held back, unable to overcome her own objections and those in her caucus. Even after the governor's office announced the deal, she made no public statement on it.

The deal infuriated the unions that are usually the Democrats' most important allies. "He keeps talking about shared pain and sacrifice," said Matthew Koczur, 47, a member of the communications workers union. "But if you put our pain and sacrifice on a scale with their pain and sacrifice, we give far more."

In the last decade, Democratic elected officials, party bosses and unions have formed a mostly united front, electing governors and senators, and ensuring that Democrats retained legislative majorities even when Mr. Christie defeated Gov. Jon S. Corzine in 2009.

Now, as labor considers withholding support from Democrats, Republican strategists hope to exploit those divisions in the legislative elections this year, as well as in the 2013 race for governor.

Nate Schweber contributed reporting.



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