

Democratic Senators Sweeney, Norcross lose support of AFL-CIO

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By

TRENTON — Two of the most prominent Democrats in the state legislature — both labor leaders — lost the support of a major union coalition Thursday, spelling possible trouble for their November reelection fights.

The statewide AFL-CIO, representing 30 unions of public and private-industry members, voted in the annual endorsement conference not to support Senate President Stephen Sweeney, D-Gloucester, Salem, Cumberland, and Sen. Donald Norcross, D-Camden. Losing endorsement means those legislators would not likely receive campaign funds direct from AFL-CIO's political fund and any campaign help from coordinated labor volunteers.



Star-Ledger file photos

The statewide AFL-CIO voted not to support Senate President Stephen Sweeney (right), D-Gloucester, Salem, Cumberland, and Sen. Donald Norcross (left), D-Camden.

The move was seen as a success by public-sector unions, led by Communication Workers of America and AFSCME, who moved to pull support from legislators who voted against union interests in a recent fight over public pensions and benefits.

With Sweeney as prime sponsor, Gov. Christie signed a combined pensions and benefits bill on June 28. The bill only passed the Legislature after Democrats -- 8 senators and 14 assembly members -- sided with Republicans.

Public workers now must pay more toward health care and pensions, and lost the right to collectively bargain health care terms until 2014. All Democrats who voted to support the bill were denied support Thursday, as was John Amodeo, a Republican Assemblyman and crane operator.

But Thursday's decision caused a split with private-sector union members, whose benefits were not affected by the legislation and who fought to lock endorsements for Democratic legislators who work in

construction trades.

Sweeney, a member of Ironworkers Local 399, and Norcross, member of a electricians' union and outgoing head of the Southern New Jersey Central Labor Council, are two of six current legislators who have risen through the ranks of building trades unions to political careers in the state legislature.

Sweeney and Norcross stood at the side of the room as the votes were cast.

"I believe I've earned the AFL-CIO's support over 10 years of service," Sweeney said before the vote. To delegates, he said the coalition had endorsed governors who failed to pay into state pension funds, bringing them close to collapse.

"We got a governor who hates many of the people in this room to agree to make a pension payment," he said.

But in the packed conference room, Rae Raeder, head of CWA Local 1033, urged the approximately 1,000 delegates to vote against the senate president.

Swiveling to look around the room to lock eyes with Sweeney, Raeder said, "I'm turning round to look at the person who stabbed us in the back."

Hetty Rosenstein, CWA area director, said she preferred to view the day's vote as a positive endorsement of every lawmaker who voted against the pensions and health changes.

"It shows it makes a difference to us, what they do," she said. "Collective bargaining is a red line."



Jennifer Brown/The Star-Ledger

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AFSCME members abstained their votes on Sweeney and Norcross, while Teamsters and firefighters unions were among the other unions to vote against them.

Each lawmaker needed support from 67 percent of the room's delegates.

Norcross, when his turn came, told delegates "It's not about one vote, it's about a lifetime."

Both legislators pointed to their push for

Building Trades and Construction Council President Bill Mullen, at podium, has threatened to walk out of the AFL-CIO's candidate endorsement conference if the Democratic incumbents are not endorsed

what they called pro-labor policies – card-check, minimum wage legislation and paid family leave.

Norcross later said he would stand on his record: “We got the support of the majority of labor,” he said, “but we’ll also have the support of the majority of voters in our district.”

Once Norcross and Sweeney were denied, around 100 members of building trades delivered on an advance pledge to walk out of the conference.

“We walk in as a group, and we walk out as a group. Agreed?” shouted Bill Mullen, head of the state Building Trades Council.

Charlie Wowkanek, AFL-CIO state president, left the meeting acknowledging the split between public and private sectors, and calling it “a terrible day.”

“There are disagreements, like in any family,” he said. But he pledged the union would work between now and November to preserve the Democrats’ majority in the legislature.

By Juliet Fletcher/Statehouse Bureau

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