

# Union donations for NJ Democrats dry up after pension overhaul

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THE RECORD

Three major public worker unions' committees stopped donating to state lawmakers while the legislators — who face elections in November — were preparing to vote on a landmark overhaul of pensions and health benefits.

The Communication Workers of America, New Jersey Education Association and AFSCME halted what had been historically steady donations to candidates and to political parties between January and March. The reform bills were introduced in February.

Instead, the unions waited until the benefits fight was nearly over, holding their resources to fund last-minute donations in late May and early June to individual politicians before the party primaries.

In June — weeks after primary day — eight Democrats in the state Senate and 14 in the Assembly sided with Republicans and voted yes on changes to government workers' pensions and health benefits.

The public employee unions who had opposed the measure promised retribution.

"We'll remember in November," shouted angry workers who gathered in viewing galleries. Some union leaders are especially angry because their groups had already poured financial resources into those Democrats' coffers for the November elections.

Today, campaign finance reports covering donations from April through June — records that cover the final union donations before the primary — are scheduled to be released.

Reports made public on Tuesday, however, showed that the Democratic State Committee received no contributions from the CWA, NJEA or AFSCME.



RECORD FILE PHOTO

This June file photo shows thousands participating in a rally to protest a Senate Budget Committee hearing on employee benefits at the State House Annex in Trenton, Thursday.

A spokesman for the Democratic committee, Jason Springer, confirmed those unions had not contributed, but declined further comment. Assemblyman John Wisniewski, chairman of the committee, voted against the bill package, which raised workers' contributions to health and pensions and removed unions' health care from the collective-bargaining table until 2014.

The CWA instead made \$98,800 in individual contributions to candidates in late May and early June, according to reports filed with the state Election Law Enforcement Commission. That included \$8,200 to state Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, before he became one of the eight Democrats who supported the pensions and benefits changes. Likewise, AFSCME made \$126,500 in donations just days before the June 7 primary, including \$7,000 to Van Drew and \$1,000 to Republican Sen. Michael Doherty of Warren County, who also supported the bill, the reports showed.

### **Hesitant donors**

Union heads say the pensions and benefits bill passage prompted soul-searching, not only among members disheartened by lawmakers' decisions, but among the union-led committees that have given more in recent years than all other PACs combined and now have to decide what to do with their money.

"I don't actually care for that word, 'retribution,' " said Hetty Rosenstein, CWA state director, recalling the chants that informed the union's strategy. "But I don't think we're going to fall into the pit of supporting anyone who destroyed collective bargaining, just out of fear of losing a [Democratic] majority."

Unions' hesitation to support rank-and-file Democratic lawmakers was not on the horizon one year ago, when many of those same unions began making donations — sometimes small but in regular increments — to candidates who had already formed campaigns aimed at 2011.

Between 2008 and 2010, those same unions typically made small routine contributions that totaled more than \$133,000.

Any hesitation in giving represents a break from election tradition. In 2009, union-led PACs accounted for 68 percent of all PAC giving, according to figures from ELEC.

From January to March, in the run-up to the vote, NJEA's committee reported giving nothing to statewide political candidates. That broke a pattern of contributions that often kept campaign accounts active for months after an election. When all 120 legislative seats were last up, in the first three months of 2007, the NJEA's committee gave \$45,070 to more than 50 candidates' campaigns.

Instead, the union has this year spent its members' dues on a campaign against Governor Christie's education policies, coupled with his refusal to tax millionaires. The campaign, fronted by a website MillionairesForChristie.com, was paid for out of general union funds, according to Steve Baker, an NJEA spokesman.

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