



Everything Jersey

N.J. Gov. Christie, public workers union fight over changes in employee health benefits

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By **Ginger Gibson/Statehouse Bureau**

TRENTON — Gov. Chris Christie and the state's public employee unions can't agree on much, even history.

Christie is pushing to bypass the bargaining table and head straight to the Legislature to force state employees to pay 30 percent of their health care costs, arguing that unions took the same routes when seeking increases in the past.

The unions counter that the only increases they've ever received by the Legislature were for pensions, which by law can't be negotiated. Legislating health benefits will eliminate their ability to collectively bargain over them again, the unions argue.

The fight over how to change employee health benefits is the first public breaking point between the two parties as contract negotiations begin today.

Thursday morning in a radio appearance on WOR 710 AM, Christie disputed the union's claim, saying they have turned to the Legislature for health and pension increases.

"There are at least eight different instances in the health benefit plan where the levels of benefits in those plans are statutorily required, that means they went to the Legislature and got that statutorily required so it can no longer be bargained," Christie said.

When asked for documentation of those eight instances, 12 hours later Christie's office provided a list of five that include a change in pension benefits, the implementation of a 2007 health care study, and a 2007 laws that included several insurance changes, such as requiring insurance companies to cover hearing aids for children younger than 15. The law, which spokesman Kevin Roberts said included "dozens" of mandates,



Aristide Economopoulos/The Star-Ledger

N.J. Gov. Chris Christie in this Feb. 15 file photo.

was not exclusive to public-sector employees.

The implementation of the study was opposed by unions at the time because it limited the amount of sick pay that state employees could receive when they retire, prevented some elected and appointed officials from collecting pensions, and required local governments and employees to contribute to the pension.

According to a statement by the Communications Workers of America, which represents most of the state workers, all increases that applied to just state workers and approved by the Legislature were first hammered out at the bargaining table.

"Governor Christie is entitled to his opinions but not his own facts," said Hetty Rosenstein, state director of the CWA. "The truth is he is consistently misrepresenting and distorting the facts in order to further his assault on unions and divide middle-class families."

Susan K. Livio contributed to this report.

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Chris Christie talks pension reform and spending cuts at Hopatcong town hall

At a filled-to-capacity town hall meeting at St. Jude Parish Hall in Hopatcong, Gov. Chris Christie brought his popular traveling show to Sussex County for the first time. With humorous anecdotes and his trademark bravado, Christie continued to push his reform agenda, focusing on spending cuts in his proposed budget and the need for pension and benefits reforms for state workers. (Video by Nyier Abdou/The Star-Ledger)

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