

## Gov. Chris Christie, it's time to negotiate

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By



Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger

Gov. Chris Christie says he's eager to get to the bargaining table with public-sector unions, but he doesn't act like it.

**By Charles Wowkanech**

Gov. Chris Christie says one thing but does another.

During his campaign, Christie called collective bargaining "an important safeguard for public employees" and promised "open, honest and fair deliberations."

Christie says that unlike Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, he "loves" collective bargaining.

"Let me at them. Get me out of the cage and let me go," Christie promises the crowds at his town hall meetings.

So then why is Christie refusing to negotiate over employee health benefits, a contract provision bargained by every New Jersey governor before him?

Christie's insistence on having the Legislature set health benefit contributions for state workers undermines collective bargaining rights just as much as Walker's heavily criticized legislation strips public employees of the right to bargain over benefits in Wisconsin.

With Christie refusing to negotiate, the Communications Workers of America, the union that represents the majority of state workers, has made public the fact that it had proposed doubling its contributions to health insurance. Under the proposal, employees would pay a share of their premium based both on their salary and on the cost of their insurance coverage. This system balances costs so low-paid workers who staff the wards of our veterans homes, psychiatric hospitals and development centers can pay a fair share without falling further below the poverty line, but everyone would pay toward the premium. Overall, with co-pays and other changes, CWA members would cover more than 22 percent of their health insurance costs, compared with approximately 10 percent today.

Christie has refused to consider the CWA plan. His "my way or the highway" insistence that state workers pay 30 percent of their health insurance cost violates the intent and the spirit of collective bargaining .

Christie's promise to honor New Jersey's collective bargaining law is just one of a lengthy list of broken promises — promises to hold down property taxes, not to cut school aid, to make no changes in the firefighters' pension system, and to not take away teachers' pensions or benefits.

Christie's assault on the basic collective bargaining rights of New Jersey public employees by refusing to discuss employee

health benefits is an assault on the collective bargaining rights of all of the 1 million New Jerseyans who are union members, and the millions more we hope will belong to the union movement in the future.

It is as fundamental an assault on collective bargaining as the new law in Wisconsin — and 65 percent of New Jerseyans said Wisconsin citizens and workers were right to protest the Wisconsin plan. Those aren't our poll numbers; they're from the highly respected Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. That same Eagleton Poll shows that 53 percent of New Jerseyans want state employees to pay more toward their health care.

New Jerseyans are clear about what they want. They want public employees to pay more, but they favor collective bargaining.

The CWA has offered a very credible proposal through the collective bargaining process under which public employees would pay more toward their health care.

If Christie is so eager to negotiate and so confident in his ability, now is his chance. He's the one who keeps telling crowds, "Let me at them. Get me out of the cage and let me go."

The unions that represent New Jersey's state employees are waiting. So are their neighbors, who support collective bargaining and oppose Wisconsin-style tactics.

They're waiting to see if Christie will keep his word.

*Charles Wowkanech is president of the New Jersey State AFL-CIO.*

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