THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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We will live to fight another day

Anthony F. Wieners

The passage of S-2937 equates to the saddest day in New Jersey history for the public employees, the middle class and the labor unions who have fought tirelessly over the years to ensure a decent wage and benefits package for the police officer, the correction officer, the firefighter, the teacher and the state and municipal employee.

I have always made it a practice that when I am upset or angry over any particular issue, I'd allow myself to, over time, calm down and gather my thoughts before communicating about the issue either verbally or in writing. Unfortunately no amount of time will heal the wounds opened by the events surrounding the passage of this bill. Being angry, frustrated, betrayed and totally disappointed with many of our elected officials and the process in which these bills were brought forward, you're going to witness a side of me that many of you have not seen before.

The cast of characters that stepped up against us under the guise of reformers is an unbelievable group. We have a governor who promised not to touch law enforcement officers benefits, a Senate President who touts his union credentials and a Speaker of the Assembly who goes against her own members. I know I warned many of our members when Gov. Christie was running for office that my instincts told me he was not a pro-law enforcement person. Many members pointed to a letter Chris Christie wrote saying he would not alter our benefits or pension as proof I was misinformed. Many said they were supporting Chris Christie and some even helped get him elected. I wish I had been wrong about my instincts but this legislation just proves my worst fears about the governor. HE LIED!

Senate President Steve Sweeney is one of the biggest disappointments in recent political history. As a senator, he came into office as a union leader and advocated, to me personally and to our membership, for many of our issues as Law Enforcement Officers. The crafted legislation he put forth showed his true allegiance, not to any union roots but to the political bosses. He put language in the original bill that would have prevented cost savings to towns by limiting who could enter the state health plan. Only after the *New York Times* exposed his true motivation to help his power broker friend George Norcross did he pull the clause. He even wanted to prevent our members from being able to access the best public health care in the nation outside the state. The testimony we placed on the record and the public outcry pressured legislators to also pull that clause. Senate President Sweeney is nothing like the man he was when first elected. The power of politics has altered his union credentials beyond recognition.

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PHOTO BY JOHN HULSE

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During this torturous process to fight off the attacks on our health care and pension, many characters have jumped on the bandwagon of attacking law enforcement, the first group being the New Jersey League of Municipalities headed by Bill Dressel. Bill stands before legislative committees touting reform, but what Bill fails to reveal is that he has never worked a single day in public employment. He serves as the head of the League of Municipalities, a position in which he receives a pensionable salary of $199,244. The League then put forth another one of their brightest stars to reinforce the need for the legislation, Eldridge Hawkins. For those who say, "That name sounds familiar," you're right. Hawkins, the advocate for pension change, was a member of PBA Local 25. He took a leave of absence from the West Orange Police Department, was elected mayor of the City of Orange, and appointed himself to a director's position. When Mayor Hawkins settled in to his positions with the City of Orange, he applied for an accidental disability in PFRS. Are you kidding me? Hawkins and Dressel are the perfect examples of the pension abuses the State PBA has been attempting to correct over the years.

Sitting next to them was Linden Mayor Richard Gerbounka. Gerbounka is, himself, a beneficiary of all the work the PBA has done because he is also a former member of the Linden Police Department, retiring with the rank of captain. It seems to me that both Gerbounka and Hawkins forgot the struggles we have endured as police officers and the benefits they have obtained from their local and state associations. It's apparent that the League of Municipalities had serious credibility issues when it came to producing witnesses for committee hearings about the bill.

Our hope to prevent passing of the bill laid with the General Assembly where Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver publicly announced to our members that she would not post the bill without the majority of her Democratic Assembly caucus. The State PBA, our members and our supporters flooded the members of the General Assembly with calls to advocate our position.

We detailed the significance of our concerns and requested the health care and pension issues be separate bills. We even provided alternate bills with immediate cost savings. We knew that Speaker Oliver would be in a difficult position to show leadership because her full-time job in Essex County with an annual salary of $85,000 a year is controlled by Essex County Executive Joe (the double-dipping hypocrite) DiVincenzo, the very man whose ultimate goal is to crush the public employee. Our worst fears were realized when we learned that some elected officials in the legislature had to answer to a higher authority, Joe (double-dipping) DiVincenzo in the north or aligned themselves with those who are controlled by South Jersey kingmaker George Norcross. It was the perfect betrayal. Together with our illustrious governor, they make up the New Jersey Triangle.

At the end of the day, the bills passed both houses with a small group of democrats in the legislature that stood shoulder to shoulder with the republican minority. The sad part of the situation is, when speaking with members of the legislature – both democrat and republican – a vast majority knew in their hearts that the bill unfairly targeted the New Jersey law enforcement and firefighters, but refused to vote "no" for fear of retribution from the front office or the party bosses.

The absolute saddest part of the final outcome is the disappointment that came when members of law enforcement past and present cast their vote in support of this legislation that will affect our members for many years to come. Assemblyman David Rible (a former PBA Local President from Wall), Undersheriff Kevin Ryan (from Essex County Sheriff's Department), Assemblyman "Whip" Wilson (from the Camden Police Department) and Senator Fred Madden (former member of the NJ State Police, Dean of the Gloucester County Police Academy and state senator, the triple-dipper) all supported the legislation. Congratulations to all. Collectively, you managed to fracture the thin blue line we're all so very proud of.

During the process, there were many who proved to be a disappointment. But there were those who went above and beyond and defended our membership with a deep-rooted passion. Their efforts on our behalf will not soon be forgotten. If I did not recognize every one of them I would be doing them a disservice. To start off, the enthusiasm of Joe Cryan and Jason O'Donnell who we shared countless conference calls and who fought for us to the bitter end; Democratic State Chair John Wisniewski; South Jersey Assemblyman Nelson Albano, who is truly a man of character; The Essex County Democrats, Assemblymen Caputo, Giblin, McKeon, Schaer and Assemblywomen Jacey and Tucker, who all refused to fold to the evil forces of Joe D. Thanks to Assemblymen Barnes, Benson, Chivukula, Coughlin, DeAngelo, Diegnan, Egan, Green, Gusciora, Johnson, Mainor, Prieto, Ramos, our very outspoken and passionate Assemblywomen Evans, Pou, Quigley, Quijano, Stender, Huttle, Voss and Wagner. And last but not least the very courageous and outspoken Assemblywoman Bonnie Watson Coleman. In the Senate we also had our champions and send out a special thank you to Senators Buono, Codey, Cunningham, Gill, Girgenti, Gordon, Greenstein, Lesniak, Rice, Sacco, Sarlo, Scutari, Smith, Turner, Vitale and Weinberg. Collectively, you represented yourselves as true professionals sticking to your core values by supporting the middle class and supporting the working men and women of New Jersey. Thank you!

Although the past month was an emotional roller coaster, the positive side was that I had the opportunity to work side-by-side with some of the finest people there are, they being the men and women of the State PBA who have been so supportive throughout this nightmare. I believe that a special recognition needs to go out to my Executive Vice-President, Keith Dunn, who is a true professional and always finds the right words to keep me going. Special recognition needs to go out to our Director of Government Affairs, Rob Nixon, a man who fights for our pensions and benefits as if they were his own; to Jim Ryan (Media Relations) and John Hulse, who communicated with the members at a moment's notice; the State PBA Executive Board; and to the members who burned up the legislators' phone lines and attended the rallies and hearings in Trenton. THANK YOU ALL!

I assure you that our fight is not over; we will continue the battle, taking it from the State House to the Court House.

In closing, during my presidency, Keith and I have had the pleasure and honor of working side by side with a man who undoubtedly will go down in New Jersey's history as one of the finest if not THE finest of labor leaders. FMBA President Bill Lavin has been in the forefront of fighting for, and advocating for, all of New Jersey's workers' rights, not only for the members of the firefighters union. While I was going into the State House during a Public Safety Rally I saw a sign that read "Bill Lavin for Governor." Farfetched? Probably, but wouldn't it be refreshing to have someone in the Governor's Office who served the citizens of New Jersey with honor, dignity and, most of all, honesty?