

Emotional appropriations committee session turns into budget hearing preview

By [Max Pizarro](#) | March 18th, 2010 - 6:06pm

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TRENTON - Pent-up anger spilled into the Assembly Appropriations Committee room this evening as a hearing on Public Employees' Retirement System (PERS) reform turned into a preview of public sector pushback against Gov. Chris Christie's 2011 budget.

Futilely attempting to derail a bipartisan bill that would eliminate accidental and ordinary disability retirement for PERS employees, nurses and probation workers bashed the legislature - then savaged Christie for - in their view - disrespecting their ranks in his budget speech.

"I have been kicked, stabbed... I guy with a black belt wrote he was going to assassinate us," said Barbara Esser, a public employee nurse at Reynolds Hospital.

"The double-dipping and other games have nothing to do with us, and I totally resent being characterized as a greedy, selfish public employee."

Esser said after a lifetime of hard service, she moved to 22 and a half hours a week - "on paper."

"When you add it up, I put in full-time hours," she said.

Her spouse works full-time.

To get singled out as a part-time worker unworthy of benefits irks her and could end up doing worse to her and her family, she said.

Dwight Covalleskie, first vice president of the Probation Association of New Jersey, backed her up from his perspective.

"This package breaks collective bargaining and sets a dangerous precedent," he said of A-2459. "Armed with nothing more than pepper spray, we go into our state's most dangerous neighborhoods to do our jobs, and we have been broadsided these past four years with constant reductions. Where will the constant so-called reforms stop?"

Covalleskie noted Christie's budget proposal for government at every level to be able to opt out of civil service. This is a proposal that's generating early anger as people see the potential for chunks of government workers to be fired and replaced with cronies.

"And I should remind you that just last year Wall Street executives received record bonuses," Covalleskie said.

In the face of their testimony, the bill received unanimous support from the Appropriations Committee.