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Connecticut Workers Approve Contract They Had Rejected

By **PETER APPLEBOME**

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HARTFORD — Two months after Connecticut workers rejected an agreement meant to save \$1.6 billion over two years, union leaders said on Thursday that they had accepted the same deal, bowing to the threat of layoffs in a year full of battles between unions and state governments.

After the June vote, unions representing 45,000 state workers changed the voting rules to make approval more likely. But with 3,000 layoff notices already sent out and 2,000 or more still possible, all 14 unions that have completed a new vote have approved the deal, officials said, meaning it would have passed even under the old rules.

The agreement includes a two-year wage freeze and concessions on health care and pension benefits. In exchange, the unions secured a four-year no-layoff clause and a promise that the state would not demand unpaid furloughs. The changes are expected to save about \$1.6 billion over two years and \$21.5 billion over 20. Pension and compensation packages for workers hired after July 1 will be reduced even further, and will not include the “longevity pay” that had rewarded workers for staying on the job.

The votes played out against a now-familiar backdrop: a state government under fiscal stress, pushback against public-employee unions, and an economy struggling to create jobs.

But in a liberal state with a strong union tradition, the process involved little of the anti-union rhetoric seen in places like Wisconsin and Ohio and instead reflected an effort to reconcile longstanding attitudes and political alliances with changed times.

Gov. **Dannel P. Malloy**, Connecticut’s first Democratic governor in 20 years, had staked his balanced budget on spending cuts, broad tax increases and union givebacks, and after the June vote, he began the process of laying off thousands of workers while planning even larger cuts. On Thursday, he and union leaders said that, despite the tumult, Connecticut had managed to set an example of shared sacrifice.

“We have achieved something the skeptics said was unachievable: we’ve made the relationship between the state and its workforce sustainable,” Mr. Malloy said in a statement. “And unlike in most other states, we did it without going to war with public employees.”

The agreement, which came on the heels of one approved in New York this week, reflected a changed climate in which even strong union states are exacting concessions from state employees and in which lawmakers in states like Wisconsin and New Jersey are taking away benefits through legislation.

“Disaster has been averted, and we are on solid ground to regroup and go forward,” Ron McLellan, a 32-year power-plant operator and president of one of the state’s 15 public-employee unions, said at a news conference announcing the results. “The billionaires and the large corporations who have targeted public-service workers across the country do not always win.”

But some Connecticut employees said they voted “yes” more because they felt they had to than because they wanted to.

“The whole thing is dirty and unjust, plain and simple,” said Robert Mills, a food-services supervisor at Garner Correctional Institution in Newtown, who voted against the deal in June but in favor of it this time. “The government is using intimidation and scare tactics to force people to do what they want.” Of his “yes” vote, he said: “I did it because the threatening and bullying by the governor worked. I don’t want to lose my job; I don’t want my friends to lose their jobs.”

A majority of workers approved the agreement in June, but it failed because of rules requiring that 14 of the 15 unions approve it, and that those 14 unions represent at least 80 percent of the workforce. This time, all that was needed was the approval of eight unions representing more than half of state employees. In all, 73 percent voted in favor of the deal the second time, up from 57 percent the first time.

A big winner was Mr. Malloy, whose attempt to provide a national model of cooperation was almost killed by the June vote. He said at a press conference Thursday that the deal was “the most fundamental restructuring of the relationship between state government and state workers” in Connecticut’s history.

He pledged to rescind the layoff notices already issued as soon as possible, but it remained unclear whether all of them would be rescinded or whether other planned cuts would go forward.

For workers, the verdict on who won was less simple.

At Danbury Superior Court, Kristie Farrington, 31, a clerk in the public defender's office, said she had supported the contract both times. "I don't want to be selfish," said Ms. Farrington, whose second child is due this month. "Working in the public defender's office, I deal every day with clients who are indigent and have it really bad. Who am I to say, 'No, I'm not willing to make a few concessions?'"

James R. Blanchette, 51, a social worker for the Department of Children and Families in Danbury, received a pink slip a few weeks ago. He, too, said he had voted "yes" both times. Mr. Blanchette, a retired Hartford police lieutenant, has worked in both the public and the private sectors, and "working as a unionized state employee is so much better, so much more secure," he said. "I don't think a lot of union workers realize how good they have it."

But another Department of Children and Families employee, a nurse who asked that her name not be used because her supervisor had told workers not to identify themselves to reporters, said she had voted no both times. "Governor Malloy is holding a noose over our heads," she said. "We can't just roll over and be bullied like this. Isn't this America, the land of the free?"

For most workers, though, practical concerns trumped rhetoric. Christopher Shankle, associate director of graduate studies at Western Connecticut State University, said the deal made sense given economic realities. He weighed the wage freeze against the no-layoff provision. "That's a lot more security than most people have," he said.

Elizabeth Maker contributed reporting from Danbury and Newtown, Conn.