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By DEREK HARPER Staff Writer

This year's battle in the Legislature to change the state's handling of pensions and benefits for public-sector workers is shaping up to be a major issue in November, as public unions choose to back lawmakers who voted against the changes, and notably snub some who supported them.

Those endorsements — and non-endorsements alike — confer a degree of financial and get-out-the-vote support for candidates they favor, said Daniel J. Douglas, director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College in Galloway Township.

Union members can be recruited to knock on doors, drive voters to the polls, and recruit family and friends to help favored candidates.

"Those candidates who are used to that support will have to find a new way to" fill the gap created by the absence, Douglas said.

At the same time, he questioned the ultimate value of the union endorsements. He said he believed this year's reshaped legislative districts will be the biggest variable in the upcoming contests.

The entire Legislature is up for election this year. And about a month before the traditional Labor Day start of campaigning, the New Jersey Education Association and the AFL-CIO announced their picks.

Locally, the million-member AFL-CIO endorsed only 1st District Assemblyman Nelson Albano and 2nd District Assembly candidate Alisa Cooper, both Democrats. Albano voted against the pension and benefits changes.

The AFL-CIO passed over three union members in the Legislature who voted for the changes: Assemblyman John Amodeo, R-Atlantic, and state Senators Stephen Sweeney, D-Salem, Gloucester, Cumberland, and Donald Norcross, D-Camden, Gloucester.

These slights infuriated the 150,000-member New Jersey State Building and Construction Trades Council, whose members left the endorsement meeting in protest and later promised to work for all seven labor candidates across the state.

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