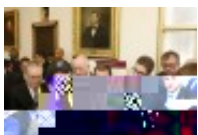
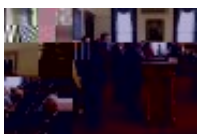
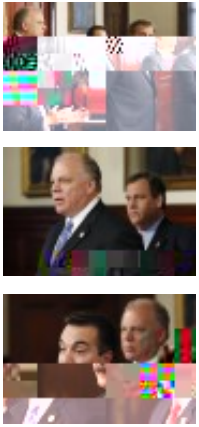


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Gov. Chris Christie, center, holds a press conference in his office with Senate President Ste

Positioning Sweeney as close as possible to Christie

blocking legislation for state involvement in Atlantic City in an attempt to deny union support to Sweeney. Whether the governor's implicit defense of Sweeney helped the Senate president or provided another opportunity to depict him as too cozy with the chief executive is open to debate.

The speaker has steadfastly maintained that a state takeover of the financially beleaguered casino city must recognize the sanctity of public-employee labor contracts while giving the city government more time to reduce spending and solve its own problems.

It places Prieto -- and, by extension, Fulop -- squarely on the side of public-employee unions while serving as a subtle reminder that it was Sweeney who joined forces with the governor in 2011 to muscle a series of pension-system reforms through the Legislature, including mandating an increase in employee contributions to the benefits system. The greater contributions and the freeze on cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) for retirees are all that remains of the reforms after the administration -- with support from a Supreme Court ruling -- failed to meet its funding obligations in their entirety.

Sweeney re-ingratiated himself with organized labor by proposing a constitutional amendment to guarantee pension and benefits rights, but there remains some residual hard feelings over his alliance with Christie in the first place.

Prieto has also expressed his opposition to eliminating the state's inheritance or estate taxes unless it's part of a larger package to increase the motor-fuels tax to replenish the Transportation Trust Fund. His position places him on the side of the party's liberal base and in line with advocacy groups who fear the loss of tax revenue -- estimated at as much as \$700 million -- will lead inevitab-

