

Rutgers, workers reach accord to keep union campaign civil

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Rutgers University and the American Federation of Teachers announced a truce yesterday, ending a feud over a drive to unionize mid-level administrators.

The parties signed a neutrality agreement just weeks after Gov. Jon Corzine demanded Rutgers stop sending employees e-mails extolling the virtues of nonunion employment. A handful of state lawmakers also had threatened to cut state funding for the university if Rutgers President Richard McCormick didn't cease "anti-union" activities.

"This removes any shadow of a doubt on campus that the university is going to remain neutral and the employees' decisions whether or not to form a union are protected," said Charles Wowkanech, president of the New Jersey AFL-CIO, who helped negotiate the agreement.

The pact forbids the university from sending employees letters opposing a union and bans all university employees from questioning or monitoring workers about the drive to unionize some 3,000 administrative, supervisory and professional employees. The university also must provide union organizers with access to facilities on its campuses in New Brunswick, Newark and Camden.

Union organizers, for their part, cannot disrupt educational functions at Rutgers and must communicate with employees in a nonadversarial manner that does not denigrate the university, according to the agreement.

The agreement underscores both parties' legal obligations to refrain from coercive tactics during the union campaign.

McCormick yesterday called the agreement "a positive step forward."

"I would like to express my thanks to all who have worked to make it possible," he added in a statement.

In a message e-mailed yesterday to nonunion workers - about one-third of the university's employees - McCormick assured them they should "feel free" to engage in the process of gaining union representation.

"No member of the Rutgers staff should feel reticent about speaking openly about the union at work or displaying union paraphernalia in an appropriate way," the letter states. "Supervisors who speak on behalf of the university will be instructed to make no statements about the unionization effort."

McCormick and union leaders hammered out a five-page agreement after a marathon six-hour negotiation, without a dinner break, on Thursday night, just hours before details of the feud and Corzine's plan to visit workers at Rutgers next week were published in *The Star-Ledger*.

A spokesman for Corzine said yesterday the governor is "pleased" with the neutrality pact and still plans to attend a workers meeting next Wednesday on campus.

"He pushed this forward all along because he believes this is an important step toward a mutually beneficial resolution," said Brendan Gilfillan.

Corzine's involvement in the fray follows a year of tension with McCormick, which began after the university president was critical of the governor's first budget and its cuts to higher education.

Among the issues most angering union organizers were three e-mail missives, sent to employees on Oct. 18, Nov. 16, and Dec. 7. One memo said, "We believe the facts strongly support the conclusion that union representation would not benefit you."

The union effort is directed at administrative assistants, directors, program coordinators, some library employees and chefs, among others, but not high-level administrators.

Union organizer Nat Bender, a manager at Rutgers' Small Business Development Center, said he is looking forward to a series of meetings that the agreement calls for, where the AFT at Rutgers and university staff

will be able to talk to workers together.

"Essentially we got what we should have got in the first place," Bender said, "which is cooperation and essentially having a level playing field so that the staff here can make an informed decision about an important decision that's going to affect their conditions of employment."

Jane Oates, executive director of the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education, who sat in on the negotiation of the neutrality pact, said she is glad the two sides came to a truce, avoiding the potential for the union to start informational picket lines.

"We wanted to avoid any disruption to the students," Oates said.

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