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Corzine appears at meeting of union organizers at Rutgers

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After pressuring Rutgers University and a teachers union to sign a neutrality pact recently, Gov. Jon Corzine lent his support to the union's organizing effort on campus yesterday.

"People ought to have the right to make a free choice when it comes to joining a union," Corzine told about 300 workers at a meeting set up by the American Federation of Teachers in New Brunswick.

Although the governor stopped short of telling workers to sign union authorization cards, he said he doubted a new union of midlevel administrators would hurt Rutgers or drive up spending or tuition.

"Rutgers is a seat of excellence in research, advancement of science and intellectual thought, and we should be proud of what's going on there," Corzine said, "and I don't think there is any reason to argue that somehow or other the choice of being part of a collective bargaining unit would undermine the credibility of the excellence of the university."

The event came less than a week after Rutgers and the AFT ended a feud over a drive to unionize some 3,000 midlevel administrators, professionals and supervisors at the university, one of the only such groups in New Jersey public higher education that does not have union representation.

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

Corzine yesterday lauded the neutrality agreement, which forbids the university from sending employees letters opposing a union and bans all university employees from questioning or monitoring workers about the drive. The university also must provide union organizers with access to facilities on its campuses in New Brunswick, Newark and Camden.

Those who joined Corzine, including Assemblyman Patrick Diegnan (D-Middlesex), chair of the higher education committee, and Bill Scheuerman, president of the Union of University Professors at State University of New York, urged workers to unionize.

"You have nothing to fear, the administration has nothing to fear, you'll be better served," Diegnan told the workers gathered in the Labor Education Center.

The union drive is directed at administrative assistants, directors, program coordinators, some library employees and chefs, among others.

Union organizers seek compensation changes so members no longer would be on merit pay. Other issues are job security and more control over health care benefits. To form a union, organizers must collect the signatures on union authorization cards from 51 percent of the nonunion employees in each bargaining unit.

Several workers said a union could protect them from the vulnerability they felt during budget cuts this year, when the university slashed 800 class sections, dismissed 189 employees and eliminated 374 lecturer positions.

Brett Butterline drew gasps when he told Corzine how he was laid off due to budget cuts – he was notified

late last year that his \$51,000-a-year job as a telecommunications analyst will be eliminated – just 10 months shy of his eligibility for retirement benefits.

"Without a union, I'm in danger of losing everything I worked for, and I understand there are workers in similar positions," the 44-year-old father of three from Green Brook said.

Chris Howell, a third-year journalism student at the university, asked Corzine how the union would benefit students and whether tuition would increase.

The governor told workers while "critics" may say collective bargaining will raise costs, he thinks the result would be "neutral."

Howell wasn't convinced.

"Unions come with benefits and guaranteed raises," he said. "The money has to come from somewhere, and with continual state budget cuts, the math shows it has to come from tuition."

The governor's involvement in the fray follows a year of tension with McCormick – who did not attend the meeting yesterday – after the university president was critical of Corzine's budget cuts to higher education. In December, Corzine jumped into the union feud when organizers grew angry over the university's fall e-mails to employees.

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