



"FEAR" FACTOR

Union organizers, employees say university officials are stifling union efforts with 'threatening' letters

Kejal Vyas

Posted: 12/12/06

Attempts at organizing a union for administrative assistants at Rutgers University are being put down by university administrators using "hostile" and "threatening" tactics, university employees and union organizers claim.

Union organizers told the Observer that language in an e-mail sent out by a university human resources administrator to deans, department heads and employees, was designed to stifle unionization by staff.

The e-mail, sent out Oct. 18 by Sandra Russell, the associate vice president of human resources at Rutgers, warned of "aggressive" and "intrusive" efforts by labor organizers trying to recruit employees into a union.

Administrative assistants remain one of the few university employees who are not part of any labor union. Administrative assistants include departmental secretaries, vice provosts, who are not part of the faculty, and some library employees.

"That e-mail is a great example of a message designed to instill fear without using any quotable threat," said Jim Pope, professor of labor law at the Rutgers-Newark Law School, commenting on the vagueness of the message.

No names of employees or unions are given in the memo.

Sandra Russell did not return several phone calls and e-mails seeking comment last week. Newark campus human resources vice provost Carol Martancik was not available for comment late last week either.

Newark provost Steven J. Diner, R-N's chief executive official, said the university would not hinder employees' right to organize a union.

"We cannot and would not interfere with the staff's right to unionize," he said.

But Russell's e-mails are sending a different message to staffers looking to join a union, organizers said.

"It didn't faze me, but some people were scared by it," said Dorothy Grauer, an administrative assistant in Dana Library, referring to Russell's e-mail.

"Some thought they might lose their job if they join a unit, or if their supervisors find out, they might get in trouble," she added.

Another administrative assistant, who spoke on condition of anonymity said, "If you weren't aware of any organizing efforts, hearing that union representatives were essentially stalking staff would be off-putting to say the least. The memo's primary purpose seemed to be to scare staff from joining the unionizing effort."

The Human Resources department headquartered in New Brunswick sent out two other messages after the October memo. A Nov. 15 e-mail from Russell answers questions about signing a union authorization card and what its implications are for staff. The e-mail gave staff some issues to consider before signing a card such as signing a union authorization card.

"You should consider that signing a card is casting a vote to unionize. Before you sign a card, explore the issues as you would before voting on any important matter. You should consider that you have been treated well as your unionized counterparts in the past, without paying dues or a representation fee," Russell's email said.

Currently, union organizers are distributing authorization cards to recruit members. Under state law, signing an authorization card indicates that an employee is willing to be represented by a union. This law was amended last year. In the past, signing an authorization card simply meant that an employee was willing to have an election about whether or not to unionize.

The memo concludes by saying the administration believes "the facts strongly support the conclusion that union representation would not benefit you and we will be providing information that supports our belief."

The latest memo, which was posted on the Human Resources Web site on Dec. 7, shows that between July 1, 1999 and June 30 of this year, members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the largest staff union in Rutgers, averaged a 2.91 percent salary increase while non-unionized administrative employees averaged 3.77 percent without having to pay union dues. The e-mail also claims that "administrative employees have been treated, as well as their unionized counterparts" and they enjoy the same health and pension benefits.

But some employees questioned the timing of this memo and said that salary is not the only concern among staff.

"Of course they are going to want to be able to say that when there is a union drive going on," Pope said. "Administrators have been willing to keep the wages up, but what a union is about is having a voice," he said. In early November, Pope was one of 24 law professors who signed a letter supporting and publicizing the unionizing effort on campus.

He said many non-unionized employees "lack basic protections" and "lack basic due process rights." Appeal and grievance procedures are flawed because in the end it is management that passes judgment on their own initial decisions, Pope said.

Grauer, who has worked as an administrative assistant for the last five years, said that unionizing would help administrative assistants address issues that affect their workplace, ranging from building security to heating.

"It's about being able to negotiate our jobs. We could be going to Trenton and have a say in what goes on down there," she said.

© Copyright 2006 Observer