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(908) 232-4487
press@wjleader.com

Union Protests Kean's Privatizing of Maintenance

By **THOMAS FORTUNATO**

Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

UNION — Kean University campus workers belonging to the International Federation of Professional Technical Engineers (IFPTE) Local 195 on Monday protested the University's Board of Trustees decision to hire a private company, Meridian Property Group, to manage the grounds and maintenance of two of the university's satellite campuses prior to a Board of Trustees meeting. In addition to the workers, several Kean students and professors joined in to show their support.

Even though the University will not have to pay Meridian's workers the same benefits that the IFPTE workers receive, the Meridian workers receive a higher hourly wage, which over time will cause the University to spend phenomenally more money, resulting in higher tuition rates, union representatives said. Kean is hiring a large company to do its maintenance rather than hire employees directly, which incurs myriad administrative costs on Meridian's side, which are then factored in to the total amount that the University is billed.

"Kean sure knows how to spend its money," stated Steve Pinto, an auto mechanic for the University, "I shouldn't say [the university's] money, it's money that comes from the students and the taxpayers of New Jersey," since Kean is a publically-funded school.

"Kean has spent \$1.8 Million for [Meridian's] maintenance of two buildings," Mr. Pinto stated. At the Board meeting, Kean President Farahi explained that the new buildings are "some extremely sophisticated facilities" which requires the expertise of Meridian and its employees.

"If [IFPTE workers] could do the work at a much lower cost, we would have no reason to go to another union," explained Mr. Farahi.

Other protesters argued that hiring Meridian workers would not be as safe for the students than if Kean hired workers directly. Gerald Newsome, the vice-president of Local 195, explained that as a state institution, all employees Kean hires will undergo a state police background check, and that IFPTE employees "have a vested interest in the job" and "can do it better, cheaper, and safer."

However, Meridian explains on its website that the company has a long history of being contracted by the state and other state-owned institutions and corporations, such as NJ Transit.

"Usually you complain about fiscal problems [when you start laying off people]" commented Meteorology Professor Charlie Murphy, "but Kean has had a surplus over the past couple of years. [This is about] getting rid of senior people and replacing them with younger, cheaper folks—exercising control."

Tony Velez, Kean University photography professor and Vietnam veteran, shared how he felt about Kean University's Board of Trustees Chairman Eugene Enlow: "The Enlows of America are really the ones who are destroying this nation... and its working force. [Enlow] doesn't represent the people, he represents private interests."

"Wealthy Americans are doing more damage to me than any Vietnamese ever did," Mr. Velez continued, making a comparison to his service in the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. "I fought against the wrong people, the war was here [on the home front] all along. It's class warfare."