

R U mad about the merger?

Community is incensed by NJ governor's proposed reorganization of higher ed

NEW JERSEY GOV. Chris Christie's proposal to merge Rutgers University-Camden, the southernmost campus in the state's flagship research university system, into the heavily debt-leveraged Rowan University has generated a firestorm of opposition, led by students, alumni, faculty, staff, unions and local residents in the community.

Rutgers-Camden has been part of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, for 60 years. It has 6,000 students, a law school and a business school.

Rowan University was formerly Glassboro State College, a teachers college, but after a donor made a gift of \$100 million 20 years ago, its profile changed, along with its name. Now, many say mismanagement of the new Rowan-Cooper Medical Center is behind the urge to merge. The chair of the hospital is politically powerful, and many assume his connections with Christie and members of the New Jersey Legislature are what's fueling the merger.

When he announced the merger in January as part of a statewide higher education reorganization, the governor was setting into

motion an idea that had been floating around for a decade. It had never found traction, however, because no official had been strong enough to muscle it through. But, as media reported in January, Christie said there was one factor that could make it happen: "It's me."

The pushback was immediate and powerful. "The whole community was outraged," says Patrick Nowlan, executive director of the Rutgers Council of AAUP Chapters/AFT.

"No one could have predicted that this would be the issue that would start to break the Christiecrats' hold on power, that it would mobilize the southern [New Jersey] region," says Lucye Millerand, president of the Union of Rutgers Administrators/AFT.

Students have circulated an online petition that has garnered more than 13,000 signatures. Documents gathered on another website, saverutgerscamden.org, show that the proposal is opposed unanimously by the faculty of Rutgers-Camden; the vast majority of students, staff, and alumni; Rutgers-Camden's Chancellor Wendell Pritchett; Rutgers' President Richard McCormick; the Rutgers



University Senate; the faculty councils and many departments of Rutgers' other two campuses; the Rutgers-wide student government; the Rutgers faculty union; 71 percent of the citizens of South Jersey (57 percent of New Jerseyites statewide); and a great many other individuals and organizations.

Christine Deguzman, 20, a junior at Rutgers-Camden, joins other students as they rally against a proposed merger with Rowan University.

Protecting the right to bargain

Unions under attack seek constitutional change

AFTER MONTHS of organizing graduate research student assistants (GSRAs) at the University of Michigan, the Graduate Employees' Organization/AFT was within hours of receiving a ruling from the Michigan Employment Relations Commission on March 14 when it got word that the state Legislature had acted to pre-empt the board. Rather than wait to see if MERC would rule that assistants are employees with the right to collectively bargain, the Legislature passed a law banning them from bargaining.

This was just one of 80 or so anti-labor, anti-workers' rights bills that have rained down on Michigan working families in the last two sessions of the Legislature. In 2010, both the Michigan House of Representatives and the governorship were taken over by the Republican Party, which already controlled the Senate.

"We're in even more trouble than states like Wisconsin and Ohio," observes John McDonald, president of the Henry Ford Community College Federation of Teachers. "Our

governor is bringing things out in piecemeal fashion, so it doesn't galvanize the public."

Unions are fighting back. Two GSRAs filed suit in April to have the law banning their right to vote overturned. And this spring, AFT Michigan joined with labor and community group volunteers to gather signatures to place a constitutional amendment on the November ballot to protect collective bargaining rights. The amendment outlines the collective bargaining rights to be incorporated in the state constitution and then specifies that "no existing or future law of the state ... shall abridge, impair or limit" these rights.

The amendment campaign is called Protect Our Jobs. "Now, more than ever, workers need the right to speak up to protect our wages, our benefits and our voice—and that's what this proposal is all about," says John Armelagos, a nurse from Ann Arbor.

Democrats in the Legislature are fighting back too. They sued the House Republicans for ignoring Democrats' request for roll call votes on some measures. On April 3, a county

circuit court judge ruled that the Republicans' actions violated the state constitution. As a result, the ban on organizing graduate research student assistants has been stopped.

"We're celebrating that the courts are recognizing the way this was done was completely anti-democratic," said James Henderson, a statistics graduate assistant seeking to unionize at the University of Michigan, speaking to the *Detroit News*.

One effect of the anti-union onslaught, says Bonnie Halloran, president of the Lecturers' Employee Organization/AFT at the University of Michigan, is that unions like hers are forming broader coalitions, known as Community Action Teams. Among other things, her team, based in Washtenaw County, has been working to get an initiative on the ballot to repeal the Emergency Financial Manager Act. "The crisis is fostering more connections between unions and community groups."

The Protect Our Jobs site has more information about the campaign, including the text of the proposed constitutional amendment.