

Neshaminy teacher: 'Gang' of union members using intimidation to quell dissent

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By Manasee Wagh

Staff writer

A letter from a Neshaminy High School teacher to members of the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers condemns the union leadership for using "terror and fear tactics" to keep teachers in line.

David Ferrara, a football coach and ninth-grade American history teacher, describes harassment and intimidation by elected union officials during the struggle over the last four years to forge a new teachers contract.

The letter accuses NFT leaders of targeting teachers who speak out against union directives or act contrary to union decisions.

Ferrara wrote in his letter that a "gang" of NFT members stay after school to see which staff members are disregarding the work-to-contract instruction.

He also noted a union member close to the leadership has told fellow teachers to "confront or shun" individuals who are not following along.

"This is definitely not professionalism in action," Ferrara added. "It is a terror and fear tactic and I call on all professionals in our union to stand up and not allow for this attitude and behavior to seep into our professional work place. Most of all, I call on our elected (union) officials to openly condemn the shunning just as they held a press conference to denounce what was perceived as attacks on teachers."

Ferrara went on to say in a separate NFT posting that vandalism has occurred at several schools after individual NFT members questioned union officials or failed to demonstrate their full support.

"Cars were keyed, tires had screws put into them, tires were slashed, and windows were smashed in vehicles," he wrote.

The newspaper was unable to confirm these allegations Thursday.

School board President Ritchie Webb said Thursday night that he was not aware of any police reports about vandalism being filed and that he was looking into the matter.

One NFT member received several written threats - including a death threat - left on his desk in a teachers-only area, Ferrara wrote.

NFT spokesman Bob Schiers said the union has no comment, but added the letter from Ferrara didn't come as a surprise to the union.

"We won't comment on the content of the letter, except to say he's entitled to his opinion. With an organization this size, with 654 members, not everyone has exactly the same opinion on anything," said Schiers.

Webb, who shared Ferrara's letter with the newspaper on Thursday afternoon, said it was posted on Facebook briefly Wednesday night before being removed.

Turbulence within the district has been growing over the last four years. Teachers have been working under the old contract since 2008. While the board says there isn't enough money for retroactive pay and the health care and salaries the NFT wants, the union says teachers are being bashed for wanting what's fair.

The NFT has been taking stronger measures to swing the contract in their favor, but not all teachers have conformed to union policy.

For example, some teachers showed up to Back to School night, despite NFT instructions not to do so. Some haven't conformed to the union's decision to work to contract, which means educators can't do any extra work

beyond the duties stated in their contracts. Among other measures, that means not taking any work home, and not staying extra hours before or after school to help students.

William O'Connor, a former school board member, said board members have always heard rumors that there are unhappy teachers, but have heard from one directly only occasionally.

"Mr. Ferrara has quite courageously decided to speak up, and he is giving a voice to other teachers," he said.

Ferrara asked in his letter:

"What is our goal? A fair contract? Do the means justify the end goal? My definition of professionalism includes open discussion of specific items in our contract debate."

But that's not what's happening, he went on.

For example, teachers are entitled to equal say on educational issues raised by the administration, but in reality, they wield the power to veto new ideas they don't like, he wrote.

Teachers in the union who openly support exploring changes in the programs are ridiculed by NFT leaders and their supporters, because new programs would change the way teachers are used to doing things, Ferrara wrote.

Ferrara declined to speak to the Courier Times on Thursday.

However, he posted a message on the NFT Facebook page the same day, stating that one of his car tires was slashed at Neshaminy High School during the school day.

Ferrara noted the incident occurred one day after he posted his letter lambasting the NFT leadership online.

The NFT can't say what its response to the letter will be, union spokesman Schiers said.

"There's nothing we can or would do, because he's entitled to his opinion," he said.

Schiers said he has no knowledge of the reports of vandalism to Ferrara's car.

"I won't comment on rumors. As a policy we don't talk about employees or internal issues," he said.

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