

## **Opinion: Let's Stop Waiver Rule Benefiting Favored Few**

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**By Joyce Sagi**

Let's say you or someone you know works in or owns a small or medium-size business.

You know that if that business complies with public safeguards that protect employees, customers, the surrounding community and the environment, it won't have to worry about unfair competition. After all, every business has to follow those safeguards. There is a fair, level playing field because the rules are established by law and apply to everyone.

But now, Gov. Chris Christie has issued an executive order that drastically tilts that playing field in favor of a few wealthy, politically connected corporations and jeopardizes jobs for the rest of us.

Christie's Executive Order No. 2 directs every state agency that enforces public safeguards to start granting waivers to some corporations, even though other businesses must comply.

The first agency to implement this new policy is the state Department of Environmental Protection. Christie's appointees at DEP will now have the largely unchecked power to allow some big corporations to dump toxic substances into our water or the air we breathe. Certain favored companies may no longer have to publicly disclose the hazards of the chemicals they use or develop and share effective plans to prevent or contain a spill or explosion.

These waivers will be granted without any public hearing or opportunity for comments from communities and families that will be affected.

The second agency in line is the Division of Consumer Affairs. It oversees public safeguards that have to do with insurance companies, loans, new and used cars, cellphones, home construction and other products that are sometimes subject to fraud by irresponsible businesses. Under Christie's waiver policy, these consumer protections will no longer apply to every company — just to those that don't have enough political clout to get an exception.

Other state departments and agencies will follow, including those that provide public oversight to protect workers' rights, public safety, children and families, seniors, veterans and much more.

Common sense tells us that it will be the richest corporations — often from out of state — that will be able to get these special waivers to increase their competitive advantage over more responsible local businesses. Wealthy corporations are able to raise a lot of money in campaign contributions for the governor or other elected officials. They also have the resources to pay the lawyers, lobbyists and experts-for-hire who will be needed.

By rolling out this new policy one department or agency at a time, the Christie administration apparently hopes that the public won't notice or won't unite to maintain the well-established safeguards that protect us at work, at home and in our communities. But if that's the plan, it's not working.

Twenty-eight organizations have joined together to file a lawsuit against implementation of the waiver rule. That includes unions like mine, the Union of Rutgers Administrators (AFT Local 1766), the New Jersey Work Environment Council, environmental advocates, community groups and others. Thousands of New Jersey residents understand that if Christie can take away safeguards for your job, your business or your health today, he can take away theirs tomorrow.

The public safeguards we all take for granted weren't enacted overnight. They came from years of hard work by grass-roots organizations that believed the public interest should be put before the special interests of big corporations.

At a time when Wall Street and corporate CEOs have more power and wealth than ever before, many of our safeguards need to be strengthened, not weakened. The first step is to stop this new waiver rule that serves only the favored few at the top.

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