

The Star-Ledger

New Jersey's largest police union endorses Trump as lawmakers weigh more policing reforms

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Aug. 20, 2020

New Jersey's largest police union has endorsed President Donald Trump for re-election, as lawmakers and state officials continue to debate policing reforms in the wake of George Floyd's death.

The New Jersey State Policemen's Benevolent Association, which represents about 33,000 people, made the announcement Tuesday.

PBA President Pat Colligan said he was concerned Joe Biden, the Democratic presidential nominee, "isn't in charge of his campaign," and in the pocket of groups hostile to police officers. Biden had ignored calls from the National Association of Police Organizations, Colligan said, despite a decades-long relationship between the former vice president and the union coalition.

"I'm not going to say we don't need change," Colligan told NJ Advance Media Thursday, but "I'm concerned some of the ideas that are being put out there will profoundly affect policing."

Union officials met with Trump and Vice President Mike Pence late last month.

"We're in trouble," PBA Executive Vice President Marc Kovar told the president July 31, according to a transcript provided by the White House.

"Our governor turned a back on us about a year ago. Our attorney general has turned their back on us," and lawmakers are "throwing crazy bills at us," he said.

Colligan lamented calls to "defund the police" and proposals to limit when officers can use force.

Trump said he had their backs.

"You know, what people don't understand is that the people, the voters, are with you guys 100 percent," Trump said. "This radical-left movement is stripping you of everything. And we're not going to let that happen."

The union made the endorsement on its Facebook page, above a Trump banner that read, "Make America Safe Again."

The group also threw its support behind a list of Republicans, including current U.S. Reps. Jeff Van Drew and Chris Smith, Congressional challengers David Richter,

Rosemary Becchi and Tom Kean, who is also the state Senate Minority Leader, as well as state lawmakers running in special elections: Sen. Anthony Bucco and Assemblywoman Aura Dunn, both R-Morris.

They ignored races dominated by Democrats, such as Sen. Cory Booker's re-election campaign.

After Floyd's death by a Minnesota police officer, Gov. Phil Murphy said: "There is no doubt that the centuries-old stain of systemic racism is far from being erased from the fabric of this country." He angered union leaders a year ago when he put the state in charge of investigating fatal police shootings instead of local prosecutors.

New Jersey Attorney General Gurbir Grewal is in a court battle with unions over a plan to name some disciplined cops, and state lawmakers have already passed a handful of police training and recruitment bills, but is still debating broader changes, such as making internal affairs records public.

Colligan said he was supportive of many of the bills, but he was especially wary of giving subpoena power to civilian investigators.

On Wednesday, the state Supreme Court said current law limits citizens' ability to investigate local cops, setting up a fight in the Legislature over whether civilian complaint review boards should be able to force departments to turn over documents.

Another union, the New Jersey State Fraternal Order of Police, will choose presidential and Congressional candidates to endorse next month, President Robert Fox wrote in an email. The national organization endorsed Trump in 2016.