UO faculty win raises and job security in first contract

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EUGENE — "We're excited here," cheered associate professor Jane Cramer from her office in the University of Oregon's Political Science Department. Capping an effort that began in 2007, United Academics (UA), the union representing more than 1,800 professors, instructors, researchers, librarians and other academic employees, reached a tentative agreement with the university's administration Sept. 18 on a first contract that provides wage increases, job security, and other benefits to UO faculty.

UA, which is affiliated with both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), AFL-CIO, and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), won union represenation on the basis of signed authorization cards in April 2012 after a long organizing campaign. The agreement is subject to ratification by a membership vote that is scheduled for Oct. 8. Approval is expected.

A strong contract campaign helped win the tentative agreement. The union's "Contract Action Team" organized campus rallies and helped pack the room for bargaining sessions — which were open to the public at the UA's insistence. As many as 130 members turned out for an August bargaining session. [Bargaining team caucuses remained private, as did a few "sidebar" off-the-record meetings between the spokespersons of both sides.]

A UO economics professor also blogged live accounts of the talks from his laptop.

Nancy Bray, a member who observed most of the sessions said, "We couldn't make comments, but we could roll our eyes and use body language" to express reactions.

Once the contract is approved, faculty will receive raises averaging 11.75 percent percent between now and June 2015, when the contract expires. Salaries at the UO rank near the bottom when compared to other institutions belonging to the American Association of Universities (AAU).

"We're not trying to compare with Stanford and Yale," Cramer explained. "We're behind the universities of Oklahoma and Tennessee."

Besides across-the-board raises, faculty will receive 8 percent increases when promoted, and the contract sets aside pools of money to be used for equity and merit increases.

Wage increases have been "hit or miss," said Cramer, who has gone five years without an increase even though she was promoted. She pointed out, too, that she has been forced to pay much more for health insurance, so she's "earning less in real terms."

The new agreement is especially notable in that it covers both tenure track and non-tenure-track faculty. Moving up from assistant to associate to full, professors follow a path to tenure, meaning the right to keep their position unless terminated for just-cause. But universities have more and more come to rely on much cheaper "adjunct" or "contingent" faculty who lack job security, are paid less, are often part-time, and usually have no benefits. Non-tenure-track positions now account for 68 percent of all faculty appointments in U. S. higher education, according to the AAUP. More than half the faculty at UO are non-tenure track.

Exploitation of non-tenure track faculty — a national issue — became vivid on Sept. 18, when the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette broke a story about an adjunct professor who died destitute at age 83 on the lawn of her house that was falling down around her, after teaching at Duquesne for 25 years.

"She was not even clearing $25,000 a year and she received absolutely no health care benefits," wrote reporter Daniel Kovalik.

At some places like Kent State, tenure-track faculty have jealously guarded their status and have opposed non-tenure track employees' efforts to organize. But UO academics decided early on that their common interests as faculty were more important than their different economic situations.

"The tenure-track faculty and non-tenure-track faculty were very united," said Ron Bramhill, a non-tenure-track senior instructor in the College of Business. Bramhill served on the United Academics bargaining team. Having determined that rolling back the tide to put all faculty on a tenure track was unrealistic, Bramhill says the union's goals for non-tenure-track employees were to "stabilize" employment conditions and make them "predictable" so as to provide better job security.

The contract will define two kinds of non-tenure-track positions. Truly temporary adjunct positions will be allowed for no more than three years. After that, they will have to become "career" non-tenure track.

United Academics, the faculty union at the University of Oregon in Eugene, credited strong membership participation for reaching a tentative agreement on a first contract. A "Contract Action Team" organized numeous campus rallies like the one pictured above on Aug. 28. The team also helped pack public bargaining sessions with members. One bargaining session in August drew 130 members. A ratification vote is scheduled for Oct. 8.

"The career concept has been around in policy since 2008," Bramhill explained. With the union contract, it will be "transparent and enforceable," he said.

Employees hired into career non-tenure-track positions can be offered one-year appointments for only the first four years. Starting with the fifth year their appointment will have to be for a minimum of two years (or three years if the employee is promoted). University management will have to notify career non-tenure-track employees if their appointments will be renewed by May 1, or keep paying them. If a career appointment is not renewed, specific reasons will have to be provided in writing.

Current employees with more than three years of service will have their positions reviewed for reclassification as career. Some 400 non-tenure-track faculty (some of whom have been working on a year-to-year basis for 15 years or more) will be able to gain career status and multi-year appointments as a result.

Unfair compensation for the non-tenure-track was addressed as well. Some full-timers have been paid as little as $20,000 per year. Under the tentative contract, money will be set aside to establish a floor (about $36,000) salary for full-timers.

Keeping positions below half-time to avoid paying benefits will be prohibited. Faculty committees in each department will define full-time equivalents. Non-tenure track employees will participate in these committees. The university will continue to pay 95 percent of health insurance premiums for the term of the agreement.