

# Portland State University professors set timetable for strike

**Top issues are low pay, job insecurity, and lack of respect**

By **DON McINTOSH**  
Associate Editor

Portland State University professors have had enough. In 10 months of fruitless bargaining and 40 hours of mediation, university administrators haven't addressed their complaints of low salaries and minimal job security.

So on Feb. 24, the PSU chapter of the American Association of University Professors (PSU-AAUP) filed a formal declaration of impasse with the state Employment Relations Board. The two sides submitted final offers March 3. That triggered a 30-day state-mandated cooling off period, at which point union members could strike or the administration could impose its terms on them.

PSU-AAUP Executive Director Phil Lesch said a strike is likely at this point, given how far apart the two sides are.

In a show of strength that the union called its "best hope for avoiding a strike," faculty members picketed and rallied at the university Feb. 27. They were joined by hundreds of students organized by the PSU Student Union. In the month leading up to the rally, at least 626 students had pledged via text message to attend, even if it meant walking out of classes to do so. Judging from the size of the crowd, most of them kept the pledge.

At the rally and picket, chants criticized administrative bloat, and called for tuition dollars to go toward "instruction, not construction." Picket signs blasted the obscenity of the public university president's salary. PSU President Wim Wiewel gets \$512,786 a year in compensation and lives rent-free in a university mansion.

"This fight is bigger than PSU," PSU economics professor Mary King told rally-goers. "It's the fight for public education in this country."

Faculty "tenure" used to be the norm at universities. In the name of academic freedom, professors once tenured could

not be terminated except for gross negligence. But more and more, American universities are shifting classroom instruction to part-time and temporary instructors who often lack health insurance or retirement benefits. PSU-AAUP is actually the most privileged group at PSU, because it represents full-time year-round faculty; a sister union affiliated with American Federation of Teachers (AFT) represents their coworkers who are "adjunct" faculty, part-time term-to-term instructors.

Lesch said of the 1,270 faculty members in the PSU-AAUP bargaining unit, only about 300 are tenured full professors and thus can consider themselves permanent employees with job security. About 250 more are tenure-track assistant professors on one-year contracts. Lesch described tenure track as a grueling probationary period lasting six years. Another 420 are fixed-term faculty "instructors" who are not on a path to tenure. Most instructors earn about \$37,000 a year, while tenure-track faculty earn \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year. Tenured professors have a starting salary of \$62,000.

"We end up losing most of our tenured faculty members when they get tenure," Lesch said, "because at \$62,000 a year that's less than half what they can earn most anywhere else in the country."

AAUP activist David Osborn said some of the union's top demands are stability and equity. Stability means



Hundreds of PSU students turned out Feb. 27, joining their professors in calling on the university administration to reach a fair contract settlement with the campus chapter of American Association of University Professors.

professors would be regular full-time employees, not seasonal workers laid off according to administration whims. Osborn, for example, has a master's degree from the London School of Economics and has been teaching at PSU for four years. Yet Osborn said he gets laid off every June, and doesn't learn until a few weeks before fall term whether he's been hired back to teach classes.

By equity, they mean they want to catch up to faculty salaries at peer universities.

AAUP executive director Lesch says PSU's wage increase offer — 1 percent a year for two years — would have salaries dipping further behind. And faculty would lose buying power to inflation, which has been about 2 percent in recent years. AAUP is proposing two 5 percent raises.

But behind the union-management dispute is also a struggle for respect and over who controls the university.

"Administrators think that the students and faculty exist for their benefit," Lesch said. "They're really committed

to building an administrative empire. People are frustrated with that."

As for respect, PSU administrators aren't showing it. The administration scheduled two events to coincide with the student-faculty rally: a "party" for students featuring free lunch and bowling to celebrate the 25,000th "like" on the PSU Facebook page, and a lunch for fixed-term faculty with the administration's chief negotiator, university vice president Carol Mack, to talk about "career strategies."

AAUP members' next plan is to take their protest to the PSU Board of Trustees, which meets March 12 1-5 p.m. at PSU's University Place Hotel.

## Barbara Roberts to keynote retirees' club convention March 8

Former governor Barbara Roberts and progressive radio talk show host Carl Wolfson will be guest speakers at the Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans 2014 state convention Saturday, March 8.

The daylong convention will be held at the Madison Grill banquet room, 1125 SE Madison, Portland. It starts at 10 a.m. Registration is \$10, which includes lunch.

For more information, call 503-675-7764.

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