

Professors get contract after PSU drops takeaway demands

Averting a strike, AAUP improves salaries and job security

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

American Association of University Professors (AAUP) reached tentative agreement on a new contract with Portland State University (PSU) April 6 — three days after the union announced that a strike would begin April 16.

The deal was made possible when PSU's administration dropped demands for concessions, and agreed to modest improvements in pay and job security.

AAUP represents 950 full-time faculty at PSU. They were scheduled to vote on the agreement April 15-16 (after this issue went to press), with AAUP leaders predicting approval.

The agreement addresses union members' top concern — lack of job security. At PSU, hundreds of "fixed-term" faculty have never felt like permanent hires, because they serve under one-year employment contracts, which sometimes aren't renewed until just before a new academic year. The new agreement commits PSU to offer employment contracts of two or three years duration to all but the 20 percent least senior fixed-term faculty, once they've taught at least four years. AAUP had proposed that all fixed-term faculty get multi-year contracts after four years — something University of Oregon guaranteed in its first-ever faculty union contract last year — but in the end settled for 80 percent in order to get a deal.

The new PSU contract also provides a variety of salary increases: a 1.5 percent across-the-board raise retroactive to Jan. 1, 2014 that's intended to bring

members closer to salaries at comparable institutions; two 2.5 percent cost-of-living raises on Jan. 1, 2014, and Jan. 1, 2015; and a new salary floor of \$40,000 for all full-time faculty and academic professionals. PSU also agreed to form a labor-management-student task force to look at improving academic quality at the school.

The agreement contains no concessions by AAUP. PSU dropped a proposal to eliminate AAUP's say over faculty evaluation and promotion policies, as well as a proposal to give management broad discretion to change anything not specifically spelled out in the contract.

"We stopped 100 percent of the bad and got 90 percent of what we were looking for," said AAUP spokesperson Jose Padin, a professor of sociology. "We're still not being rewarded commensurate to our service relative to our peers in comparator institutions, but in terms of stability there are big improvements."

If ratified, the agreement will be retroactive to Aug. 31, 2013, and will run through Nov. 30, 2015.

The contract settlement comes after a long season of frustration: The previous contract expired Aug. 31, 2013, and on Feb. 24, 2014, AAUP authorized a strike by a margin of 94 percent, with about 796 members casting a ballot. PSU's administration could have settled months ago, but instead adopted a bellicose posture. It demanded concessions, and deployed a management-side labor attorney — Brian Caufield

— who allegedly cursed and screamed at members of the AAUP bargaining team. Caufield was not part of the 20-hour-long mediation session that produced the tentative agreement. For those final talks, PSU President Wim Wiewel consulted by phone, having canceled a planned trip to Turkey.

Padin attributes the administration's turnaround to a big increase in public pressure — and a realization that AAUP was serious about going on strike for the first time ever.

"It was no longer inside ball," Padin said. "There were a lot of eyes on the president."

Sister higher-ed union American Federation of Teachers-Oregon passed a resolution calling on members not to teach struck classes. Oregon Education Association scheduled a joint press conference with AAUP for April 7 outside Wiewel's office.

PSU had announced it was planning to remain open in the event of a strike, but a letter to the administration signed by the heads of 25 academic departments said it would be "almost impossible," to replace strikers with instructors capable of teaching their courses.

"I'm teaching an upper division and graduate-level class in U.S. economic history," said AAUP President Mary King. "Try putting that on Craigslist."

Up to 70 percent of classes were expected to be cancelled if the strike went forward, idling about 30,000 students.

The contract dispute also saw the

emergence of a large and active pro-union student group — the PSU Student Union — with about 800 signed-up supporters led by 30 student activists. About 500 of them turned out for a pro-union rally Feb. 27. Two students also sat through the entire contract negotiation as observers.

Padin called the contract settlement a first step in a long campaign in which faculty are in conflict with administrators over resources and decision-making.

"The crisis of quality of education as we feel it locally is the product of a scissors effect — state level defunding, and crooked priorities," Padin said.

Those issues were examined in detail at an April 3 Workers' Rights Board hearing that painted a pretty unflattering picture of Portland State. The Board, a project of the union-community coalition Portland Jobs with Justice, consists of panels of community leaders who hear testimony about union struggles. State Sen. Chip Shields, a PSU graduate, and State Rep. Jennifer Williamson, whose Oregon House district includes the PSU campus, were among the April 3 panelists.

PSU has always been a "scrappy underdog" that has done more with less, said AAUP President King, but in recent years it's lost focus on its mission of quality, affordable university education: Classroom instruction has fallen to just 33 percent of its budget, while administration, athletics, and real estate devel-

opment have grown, along with tuition and class size.

Grad student Joyce McNair said she was shocked to learn that her professors make just \$5,000 a year more than she earns at her union job making Oreo cookies as a member of the Bakers Union; it made her question her decision to go into debt in hopes of an academic career.

At the close of the hearing, Shields read the panel's recommendations: that instruction should make up 39 percent of the university budget in three years (back to the level it was six years ago), and 50 percent of the budget in eight to 10 years.

AAUP leaders said they'll be campaigning for that, and also for a reduction of tuition and student debt, and an increase in state funding. Only three states spend less per student on higher education than Oregon.

"I have heard you, and I'm listening," said PSU president Wim Wiewel April 7, addressing the faculty senate the day after the deal was reached. Wiewel said he had "not fully appreciated the extent of frustration and disagreement from the faculty about PSU's direction. Of course I read AAUP's statements, but my own interactions with faculty and staff over these years gave me a more positive impression of the campus mood. Probably this was some combination of your 'Portland polite' and my perennial optimism."

All are invited to UA #290 seminar on 'Union Heritage' April 22 and 24

Plumbers and Fitters Local 290 is hosting a two night seminar on "Union Heritage" April 22 and 24. The free event is open to all union members, families, and nonunion friends and neighbors.

"George Santayana, a Spanish citizen and philosopher, once said: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' Unfortunately, that is exactly what workers in America are doing — repeating the past," said Dennis Coplin, Local 290's director of political and legislative affairs.

"The only way we can hope to combat this attack on the American worker is to educate everyone regarding what has happened, who is behind the attack on workers, and why," Coplin said.

The seminar will cover the Davis Bacon Act, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), the Taft Hartley Act, and right-to work (which is incorporated in the Taft Hartley Act).

Through the use of charts and graphs, Coplin will illustrate how Davis Bacon and the NLRA helped create a strong middle class in the United States, and how the Taft Hartley

Act was designed to harm unionized workers. He will also talk about current legislation designed to destroy unions and the working middle class.



"I want people to know why unions are being attacked by the top 10 percent of the wealthiest people in America who feel threatened by an educated workforce who have rights at work," Coplin said.

"That is the reason that I want to invite everyone from every trade, craft or union that is out there," he said. "I also want everyone to reach out and invite nonunion workers to attend this seminar, as well."


The seminar will be held at Local 290's meeting hall, 20210 SW Teton Ave., Tualatin, from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. on Tuesday, April 22, and Thursday, April 24. Pizza will be served.

The seminars also will be available via remote broadcast to Local 290's training centers located in Salem, Medford, Springfield, and Redmond, Oregon, and Eureka, California.

For more information, or to register, call Jodi at 503-612-4922 or email to jhurdle@ua290.org.

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1220 SW Morrison Street, Suite 300
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Phone 503.224.0048
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