

LABOR PAINS

The path to unionization at UO

BY DAVID K. BAEZ

A spirit of revolution stirred on the UO campus in the spring of 2007.

That's when a small group of activist professors — led by math's Marie Vitulli and political science's Gordon Lafer — began meeting in vacant classrooms to discuss starting a faculty union.

The profs had watched with a growing sense of powerlessness for years as the university reduced their benefits, stuffed reams of cash into athletics as faculty salaries stagnated and lagged against comparable institutions, and welcomed tides of low-paid adjuncts to teach an ever-expanding student body while attrition steadily chipped away at the ranks of tenured professors. The group also had come to see the University Senate — ostensibly representing the views of faculty — as having been neutered and co-opted by the administration, leaving faculty with virtually no say in decisions at the university.

"It was just lip service from the administration," Vitulli recalls today about administration's response to faculty concerns. "Nothing really changed."

Vitulli and Lafer soon realized that they had nowhere near the time and resources that would be necessary to move beyond the classroom sessions and educate and organize a large and diverse body of faculty into a union. So, toward the end of the year, Vitulli sent an email to the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), a massive union based in Washington, D.C., and asked if they would help unionize the UO faculty.

To AFT organizers, it must have felt as if their ears were burning. For most of its nearly 100-year history, the union had focused on K-12 schools, but more recently it had begun to organize higher-ed institutions. It had had success teaming with the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), which is less a union than an academic standards and practices commission, to organize faculty at the Universities of Alaska and Vermont, and ever since then the two had been looking for another major research university to jointly work with. UO was especially attractive because of its location: If they could establish a union here, it would give them a "high-research" school in the Pacific Northwest, where their presence was slight in comparison to other regions of the country. (All the public universities in the state except Portland State and Oregon State now have faculty unions, but UO is the only one of those universities considered a top research institution.)

The AFT quickly hired a consulting firm to survey the campus and feel out the level of support. It determined that Eugene was a good investment (faculty union campaigns can cost upward of a million dollars, though the AFT would not confirm what they have spent here), and sent reps to talk with Vitulli and Lafer. By 2008, the AFT and AAUP had signed a contract to jointly organize the UO faculty into a collective bargaining unit they named United Academics of the University of Oregon. Not long after, AFT organizer Dennis Ziemer flew in and rented out office space above the Red Rooster Barber Shop on East 13th. Organizers set up huge charts to track support in schools and departments across campus, and the fledgling union began to plot its strategy to win over the critical mass of supporters (50 percent of the proposed bargaining unit, plus one) needed to be certified by the state Employment Relations Board and set up the first collective bargaining agreement between faculty and administration in the university's 130-year history.

By 2007, there had already been a number of attempts to get a faculty union going here, but all those efforts had flared out. Grad students had unionized, as had classified employees — but any union sentiment among professors remained vague and unformed, abstract. So what was different this time? For one thing, the march of history.

In 1935, the Wagner Act protected labor's right to collectively bargain with management, but for many years unions were largely a blue-collar phenomenon, the province of factory hands, electricians, plumbers, coal miners — folks who got their hands dirty at work and whose backs and knees went out too young. Elementary and high school teachers, who often worked under factory-like conditions, had formed unions, but the Ivy Towers long remained apart, immune. Professors studied and chronicled the labor movement, but it didn't seem to relate to their situation and working conditions. Compared with other workers, professors were doing fine — salaries

'I really hope that when the contract is negotiated positive changes will happen.'

— MARIE VITULLI,
UO MATH PROFESSOR

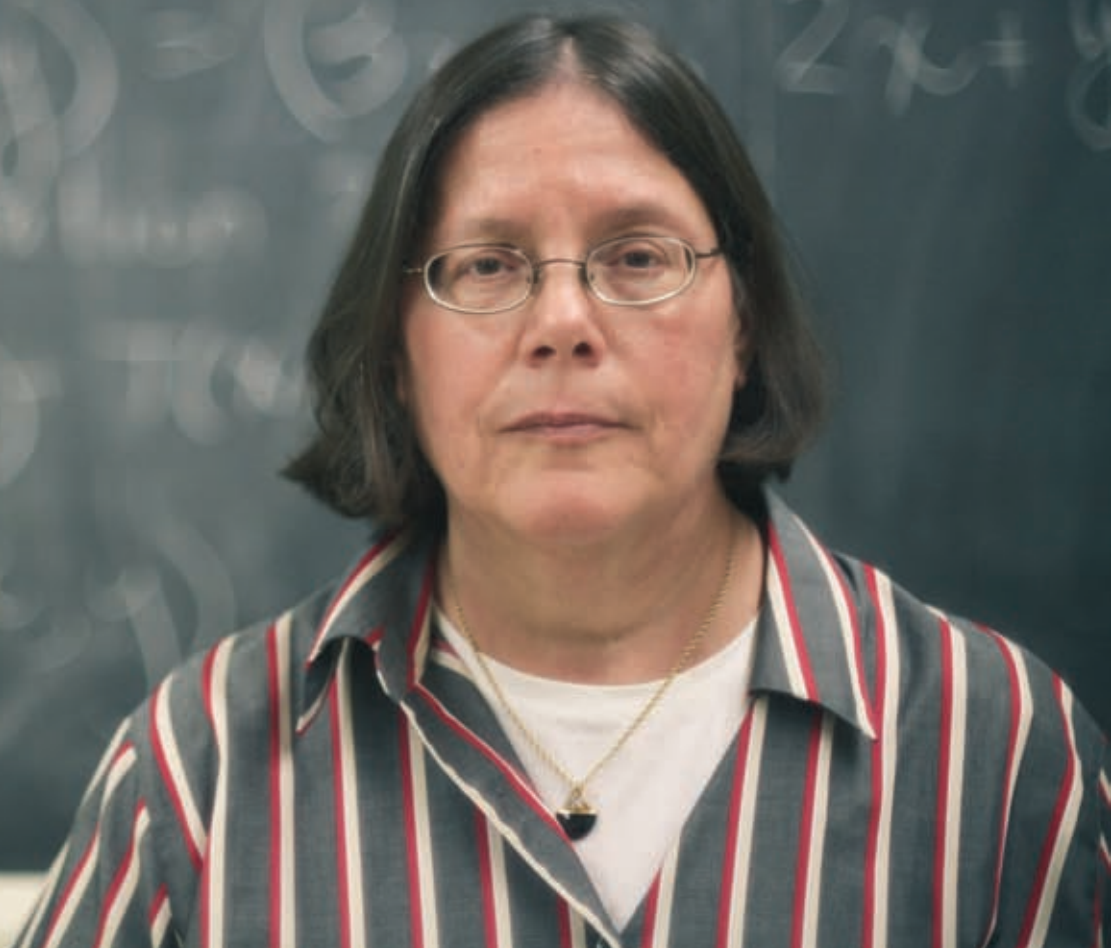


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