

Hundreds of Wright State faculty protest at Board of Trustees meeting

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Hundreds of faculty members took to the Board of Trustees meeting last Friday to protest a contract proposal offered by university administration.



Photograph courtesy of AAUP-WSU's Facebook page

Members of the Wright State chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP-WSU), Wright State's faculty union, have been negotiating a new contract with university administration since January 2017.

Negotiations came to a halt in March 2017 when administration hired an attorney to negotiate on their behalf – a point which came under scrutiny at the meeting by Sirisha Naidu, an associate professor of economics and Executive Committee member of AAUP-WSU.

Administration has proposed a three-year contract that includes no raises and reduced health benefits, according to Martin Kich, professor of english and president of AAUP-WSU.

The Board of Trustees recently shared with the faculty union the materials that they sent to the fact finder – a neutral party who has been tasked with issuing a recommended settlement between administration and the faculty union. This prompted an open letter to the university from Rudy Fichtenbaum, professor emeritus of economics.

In the letter, Fichtenbaum said the union would be willing to make concessions on health benefits, raises, early retirement and other areas. He also wrote that they asked administration to rescind their demand that faculty give up their right to negotiate healthcare.

“The choice they gave us was we could keep tenure only if we gave up the right to bargain over healthcare,” Fichtenbaum wrote. “We will not bargain over the existence of tenure at Wright State University. There is no other University in Ohio, either unionized or not, that does not have tenure.”

Faculty union members arrived at the meeting donning their blue AAUP shirts and carrying picket signs. Some voiced their concerns during the question and answer session, during which they were given five minutes each to speak.

“There was never any need for this tension,” said Noeleen McIlvenna, a professor of history and Executive Committee member of AAUP-WSU. “You can end this today and you should,

because you will not win the fight you pick with us.” Many of McIlvenna’s remarks were met by cheers from other members of the faculty union.

“The board now appears to be engaged in direct attempts to undermine the academic mission of the university,” Naidu said at the meeting.

Board of Trustees Chair Douglas Fecher said that the board would be willing to reengage negotiations, but that university is currently concerned with budget remediation.

“This board has worked – despite what has been said publicly – with union leadership to try to find a way forward,” Fecher said. “We stand willing and ready to continue to work to try to find that way forward.”

Wright State spokesman Seth Bauguess has previously stated that university administration would not comment on ongoing contract negotiations. However, President Cheryl Schrader released a campus-wide email in September stating that, “talk that a strike is imminent is still premature.”

“The university is committed to maintaining the quality of its academic programs and preserving the opportunity it provides to students to achieve their goals,” wrote Schrader in an email announcement.

Last week, a campus-wide email was sent out by Walt Branson, Wright State’s vice president of finance and operations and chief business officer, detailing the status of the university’s financial situation.

“We finished FY [fiscal year] 18 with a \$10 million operating surplus. This is the first operating surplus that Wright State has shown since 2011,” Branson wrote.

Branson reported that the university’s prospects of avoiding fiscal watch are high. The State of Ohio will announce Wright State’s FY 18 Senate Bill 6 score in spring 2019. It must be above the 1.75 threshold in order to avoid fiscal watch.

“Based on our preliminary calculations we believe that the university’s score will be 2.20, well above the 1.75 cutoff associated with fiscal watch,” Branson wrote. “Due to the cut backs and sacrifices that every has made we can say with much certainty that we have avoided fiscal watch.”

Branson also expressed that the coming fiscal year would be challenging for the university. “In my opinion we have stopped the financial free-fall of previous years, a significant feat in and of itself. However, we have not yet re-established a solid financial foundation. It will likely take several years before we fully accomplish that,” he wrote.

Before the union can initiate a strike, both they and administration must vote on an independent fact-finder’s report, which is scheduled to be released Oct. 29. At that time, the union will consider the findings and decide on whether or not they will strike.