

Unionization and Academic Staff

Answers to Common Questions

The passage of collective bargaining rights represents an unprecedented opportunity for academic staff and faculty in the UW System to have a voice in their working conditions. As we start building towards collective bargaining on each campus, it's common for a number of questions to arise about unionization. Here are some answers to common questions academic staff have shared with us about unionization.

How can a union help academic staff?

A union can help academic staff by giving them a strong voice on campus and with the University of Wisconsin System. Unlike shared governance, a union is not “advisory”—it is an organization with the legal power to represent employees as equals with the university. Through the bargaining process, we can negotiate over our wages and benefits, as well as a large number of other issues. Among these are paid leaves and holidays; hiring and job security, including appointment and reappointment language; seniority; furloughs; layoff and recall procedures; discipline and discharge; evaluations; and workload. Once these topics are included in a contract, they cannot be changed without agreement from the union.

What has unionization done for academic staff in other institutions?

Plenty. Unionization has given academic staff in a variety of public and private institutions a voice in their workplace. It has allowed those workers to create a type of job security not available in the University of Wisconsin System. It has improved their wages and benefits so that employees are paid in line with their peer institutions. It has also protected them in times of financial crisis. But don't take our word for it; look at the websites of unions such as the United University Professions/SUNY system (<http://www.uupinfo.org/>), the Professional Staff Congress/CUNY system (<http://www.psc-cuny.org/>), the Rutgers AFT/AAUP chapter (<http://www.rutgersaaup.org/>), and the University of Minnesota Technical Workers Union (<http://www.afscme3937.org/>). In these places, the work lives of academic staff have improved as they've organized into a union and gotten a real voice in their institutions.

Can faculty and academic staff work together in a union?

Yes. In fact, the most successful academic unions are those that represent both faculty and academic staff on campus. At institutions such as Wayne State University and Rutgers, as well as in the CUNY and SUNY systems, faculty and academic staff have made the conscious decision to remain a part of the same union. Because academic employees on campus are not divided, these unions have negotiated exceptionally good contracts that reflect the needs of all academic employees on their campuses.

Will a union only be concerned with faculty issues?

No. The union represents all of its members equally and will not be focused on one classification. We recognize that faculty and academic staff are part of the same campus community and are facing the same issues of increased workloads, decreased job security, loss of pay, and erosion of benefits. We must work together to ensure that these trends do not continue. If we're divided and focus on only faculty or academic staff, our effectiveness at the bargaining table will be lessened.

Can the union bargain for job security for academic staff?

Yes, a union can bargain over any issue that it wants to bring to the negotiating table. For example, at Wayne State University the faculty and academic staff union has negotiated employment security provisions into their contract, including the provision that appointments after the initial appointment must be for a period of time longer than a year. At Eastern Illinois University and the University of Vermont, the faculty and academic staff unions have contract language requiring appointment length to progressively increase for academic staff. Job security for academic staff is a common provision in union contracts at universities—it's about time that those provisions are extended to academic staff in the University of Wisconsin System as well!

Will I be punished for supporting a union?

No. This is a question that AFT-Wisconsin takes very seriously. It is against the law in the state of Wisconsin to retaliate against faculty and academic staff for engaging in union activities. There are legal procedures in place to ensure that your right to express your support for a union is not compromised. Furthermore, the university will never know of your support for the union unless you choose to publicly express that support. But the best protection we've found against any form of retaliation is working together with a large number of engaged faculty and staff to change your workplace. There is safety in numbers. While it is easy to single out one or two people as activists, the university can't afford to retaliate against a large number of people.

How will academic staff have a voice in the union? At the bargaining table?

The internal working of each local union will be developed as we move through the organizing process. There are a number of different models available to ensure that all classifications of employees have a say in the operations of the union and at the bargaining table. However, we remain committed to creating a democratic union that ensures all employees—regardless of classification—are treated equally and are given a voice in their workplace. Without union democracy, we can't attain workplace democracy.

Unions Work for Academic Staff