What is the University’s Position on a Contingent Faculty Union?

Many contingent faculty have asked what the University’s position is regarding the possible formation of a contingent faculty union at PLU under the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

The PLU administration opposes SEIU’s efforts to form a contingent faculty union on our campus. In considering this issue, we have asked three questions: (1) would SEIU be good for the quality of education; (2) would SEIU be good for our students, and (3) would SEIU be good for our faculty? This FAQ provides more detail as to why we oppose this union.

Q: Why is the Administration opposed to this contingent faculty union?

A: The Administration has concluded that this proposed contingent faculty union is a very bad idea for three primary reasons. First, SEIU typically takes a very adversarial and confrontational approach to collective bargaining and we are very concerned that this approach will radically change our campus culture. Second, we do not believe that putting a third party between PLU and our contingent faculty will result in any material economic gain for our contingent faculty, or at least no gain that would be sufficient to offset the significant cost to our contingent faculty of having to pay union dues. Third we believe our existing collaborative process that has led to initiatives already under way is a better approach toward addressing faculty issues at PLU.

Q: Does that make the Administration anti-union?

A: No. We understand and agree that unions have an appropriate place in American society. Indeed, the University has longstanding and productive relationships with many members of the labor community. In this specific situation, however, we do not support this union’s attempt to organize our contingent faculty.

Q: Who is SEIU and what do they do?

A: We encourage you to do your own research about SEIU. Read the results of a Google search about SEIU’s bargaining with Sodexco on college campuses or with Kaiser in California. Google “SEIU bargaining tactics.” There is a lot written on all of these topics from many political perspectives, but a consistent theme is a very adversarial and confrontational approach by SEIU.

Closer to home, SEIU Local 503 has been bargaining with the University of Oregon system. The “University Workers” tab on the SEIU website (http://www.seiu503.org/category/worksites/ous/) starts with a picture of a banner entitled “NO CONTRACT? NO PEACE!” and describes the bargaining process as a “fight” with “management” in which faculty are asked to “take sides.” SEIU has stated its plans to go on strike. You can read about their strike planning at the same link.

When you do your own research, we are confident you will find SEIU’s approach to be extremely adversarial.
Q: How could this approach impact PLU?

A: We see many possible negatives (and no positives) from this approach. Legally, our faculty will be divided into two separate groups. Contingent faculty would be represented by SEIU and governed by a union contract, while our tenure-line faculty would continue to be governed by the Faculty Assembly. We see this as being very divisive for our faculty, and we have seen no evidence to suggest that this approach by SEIU can improve the quality of teaching and learning; in fact, we think it may hurt the quality of the education we provide to our students.

Q: Does SEIU understand PLU?

A: No. SEIU routinely refers to faculty as “workers” and the administration as “management.” They don’t understand the collaborative process by which academic decisions are made at PLU. In the NLRB hearing, SEIU also argued that all contingent faculty were the same, thereby disrespecting the unique differences that exist among our several different contingent faculty communities whose needs and expectations are all different. Perhaps worst of all, SEIU also argued that there is no difference between our mission statement and the mission statement of the UW or Michigan State. SEIU’s view has been that all universities are the same – that there are no unique qualities that set us apart from any other school – and that all faculty are “workers.” There has been no recognition of the unique qualities that make PLU the special place that it is.

Q: What are we trying to preserve at PLU?

A: All faculty at PLU – whether contingent or tenure-track – pursue our craft in a collegial environment. Our students surprise us every day with new insights and tough questions, and our highly accomplished faculty colleagues help us grow and learn even as we teach and share our love of learning. To us, the life of the mind is a profession, a craft and a vocation. We do not see any appreciation for the life of the mind in the published materials put out by SEIU or in its history. The approach it has taken at other institutions reflects a very different and adversarial approach. Please visit the website http://www.seiu503.org/category/worksites/ous/ to get a flavor of this.

It invokes great sadness to think of our campus and our profession as a battleground. Our culture at PLU is one of rigorous inquiry, dialogue, debate, and care for one another. Members of our faculty have been working very hard on policies and positions which will continue to strengthen the fairness and respect with which we view our contingent faculty colleagues. Having an outside organization that does not understand our University is not going to be helpful to a collaborative approach to the issues.

Q: But won’t contingent faculty get more money if SEIU comes in?

A: No. Although some people who are pushing the union effort seem to think there is a hidden pot of money available for contingent faculty, it is just not true. However, there is a new university initiative already underway to enhance faculty compensation, and all faculty – tenure-line and contingent – would benefit. Having a union contributes nothing to that university initiative, and having a union does not mean more money.
Q: What happens if there is a union?

A: Having a union simply means that wages, hours and working conditions will be determined through collective bargaining between a union and the University administration rather than handled through our shared governance system. There is no guarantee that having a union means more money for contingent faculty. Bargaining could mean more, less or the same compensation as contingent faculty would receive without bargaining. Most academic studies show no significant difference in pay and benefits with or without a union, and certainly not a large enough gain to offset the cost of union dues.

Q: If SEIU comes in, can a contingent faculty member “opt out?”

A: No. If SEIU is voted in, then it becomes the legal bargaining representative for all contingent faculty. PLU is required by law to only deal with SEIU on “wages, hours and working conditions” for all contingent faculty. There is no way for any individual contingent faculty member to “opt out.”

Q: If SEIU comes in, will contingent faculty have to pay union dues?

A: Almost certainly, yes. Unions always demand in bargaining a clause that requires all covered employees (here, all contingent faculty) to join the union and pay dues. If such a clause were bargained in, then all contingent faculty would be legally obligated to pay union dues.

Q: How much are union dues?

A: We understand SEIU usually charges 1.5-2.0% of the person’s annual salary, plus a monthly fee. For someone making $20,000 per year, that’s at least $350 per year in union dues. As each contingent faculty member considers how to vote, they should ask:

“What can I get for hundreds of dollars per year that I can’t already get for free by participating in the collaborative process already in place at PLU?” That’s a question we hope contingent faculty will answer very carefully before voting for a union and paying dues.

Q: What is the process from here?

A: In mid-September, the contingent faculty who are eligible to vote (see the Provost website for a list) will receive a ballot from the NLRB to vote on this important issue. Like any political election, the outcome will be decided by a majority of the votes actually cast. If only 20 people vote, and 11 vote for the union, then all contingent faculty will be represented by the union.

Therefore, it is important that you mail your ballot back to the NLRB. The election is by secret ballot so no one will know how you vote. Over the next few weeks, we will provide you with more information to help you make this important decision. We are certain that the union will campaign for your vote. Above all, we want you to make an informed decision. We want you to do your own research and to have conversations with your chair, your dean or another trusted colleague. If they cannot provide the information you need, let us know and we will get it to you. Our goal in this process is to provide factual information so that you can decide for yourself what is in your best interest and in the best interest of Pacific Lutheran University.