

BCC faculty union employs job action to press for contract settlement

By Jim Therrien jtherrien@berkshireeagle.com @BE_therrien on Twitter
Updated: 12/05/2015 12:04:34 PM EST

BerkshireEagle.com

PITTSFIELD — Faculty union members and the Berkshire Community College administration are hoping for an end to protracted contract negotiations that have resulted in work-to-rule actions by professional staff across the community college system.

Faculty and professional staff members in the union have been without a new contract since the previous statewide pact expired on June 30, according to Liz Recko-Morrison, coordinator for assessment and testing at BCC and the Massachusetts Community College Council director on the Pittsfield campus.

With talks with the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education dragging on, Recko-Morrison said the full-time faculty and other professionals here voted in September to initiate a work-to-rule action at BCC. She said all 15 community college union groups have now approved similar actions on their campuses.

Because they are barred by law from striking, the job action — working only to the exact language of the union's contract — is a method of applying pressure for a new contract agreement. The union members are currently working under terms of the prior agreement, and negotiators for the two sides have been meeting since the spring without reaching an agreement.

Recko-Morrison recently explained the union's position in a Dec. 1 letter to The Eagle, which asked the public to support the effort. She said union members, along with representatives from other unions in the Pittsfield area, will hold a stand-out at Park Square from 4 to 5 p.m. Thursday to seek support from the community for a fair contract.

"We are not doing this lightly," she said of the work-to-rule action, adding, "At community colleges, we do not do this for the greater glory; we do it because we care about the students ... But when [contract talks] drag on, this is one way we can express our displeasure at not having a fair contract on the table."

Among activities the union members are not performing during the action, she said, are attending additional campus meetings not specifically listed in their job descriptions and adhering to official work hours, which she said is not normally the case.

"We are doing what we are required to do," she said.

In her letter to The Eagle, Recko-Morrison said in part, "Our students often have multi-dimensional lives that include work and families for whom to care. We are proud of our students' accomplishments and our role in their academic successes. We also believe that we deserve to be compensated fairly."

BCC President Ellen Kennedy said the college administration and the board of trustees are "pretty separated from the negotiations," which are carried out by MCCC representatives and negotiators for the Board of Higher Education.

"I do understand that the negotiations are moving forward," Kennedy said, "but this is a new [gubernatorial] administration going through it for the first time."

Typically in terms of contract settlements, she said, "we don't really know it until they are approved."

At BCC, Kennedy said, there are 56 full-time faculty members and 22 unit professionals, meaning coordinators for tutoring, counseling, testing, learning disability support or other services.

"Our faculty are committed to our students, first and foremost," the president said. "This is a way for them to show solidarity."

She added, "I think our students are being well served, and I know everyone is doing what they can to resolve this [contract impasse]."

Joseph LeBlanc, the president of the MCCC, said in a telephone interview that salary and several other issues remain to be settled before a new contract can be agreed upon. He said the union members have been offered a smaller raise than bargaining units representing state college and state university faculty in recent negotiations and less than in a multi-year pact covering adjunct faculty.

For instance, LeBlanc said, part-time faculty are due for a 4 percent raise in January and state college and university faculty and professional staff received a contract with 3.5 percent raises per year over three years.

Meanwhile, he said, the state board, which is appointed by and represents the governor in negotiations, is offering MCCC members a pact with raises of 2 percent the first year and 2.5 percent raises in years two and three.

"We hope to have a tentative agreement in place before the holidays," LeBlanc said, "but we will have to wait and see."

He added that another negotiating session had been planned this week, but no new financial package has yet been offered in place of the offer the union finds unacceptable.

In a press release issued Friday afternoon, LeBlanc said MCCC members will be airing their concerns about the state's contract proposals on Dec. 8 on campuses across Massachusetts and during a Board of Higher Education meeting in Framingham.

There also will be informational picketing and demonstrations that day on community college campuses, he said.

In addition to salary issues, LeBlanc said sticking points include a proposal allowing colleges to require faculty to teach online courses and proposed additional work in gauging student learning outcomes without a reduction of other job requirements.

"Everybody has been talking about the importance of community colleges," he said, referring to the two-year schools' role in providing an affordable education, improving the career prospects of low- to moderate-income students and in skills training to meet the technical needs of employers. "But talk is cheap," LeBlanc said. "It is time for them to show they [believe that]."

It is important to note, LeBlanc said, that the current talks are taking place amid a continuing decline in the percentage of full-time faculty members at community college, which has taken place over a generation. He said two-thirds of community college courses are now taught by adjunct faculty, which LeBlanc said leaves more of the extra duties associated with teaching to fewer full-time faculty members.

In an emailed statement on Friday, Katy Abel, a spokeswoman for the Department of Higher Education, said, "The Department of Higher Education respects the rights of union members to present their position to the public. We have no further comment as negotiations are ongoing."

Contact Jim Therrien at 413-496-6247.

On the Web ...

A copy of the current MCCC contract with the state, which expired June 30 and has attached information on current salary levels, can be viewed at www.mccc-union.org/CONTRACTS/Day_2013-2015/2013-2015_contract.pdf