

MICHIGAN

MSU, UM Flint's faculty seek to form unions, 'take the university back'

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Tenured faculty members at two Michigan universities are lobbying fellow professors to support the formation of labor unions, fueled partly by wanting a stronger voice in university policies and decisions following turmoil on both campuses.

Efforts to form a union for tenured and tenure-stream faculty at Michigan State University are close and could come to fruition by spring, organizers said, while organizing is underway for tenured faculty at the University of Michigan-Flint.

Besides a larger voice in shaping the universities, organizers say the reasons for labor unions of tenured professors at both schools are numerous. They range from protecting academic freedom to addressing increased workloads and less control of what is taught in the class curriculum.

"These sound like little things, but little things have become tipping points," said Robert Maleczka, an MSU chemistry professor involved in the organizing effort. "As issues have developed and an increasing disconnect between us and the administration, it has tipped us to the point where we need to take the university back."

MSU and UM-Flint negotiate contracts with labor unions representing other employees working in areas such as service, patient care and building maintenance. But union representation for tenured professors would be a first at MSU and UM-

Flint. If successful, they would join tenured faculty at 10 Michigan public universities that are represented by unions, including Central Michigan, Eastern Michigan, Western Michigan and Wayne State universities.

There are 480 collective bargaining units nationwide in higher education, including 149 representing tenure-track faculty that have been represented by unions over the past 50 years, according to the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions at Hunter College, City University of New York.

The MSU and UM-Flint drives come as the United Auto Workers union has sought to organize other higher education workers, such as graduate student instructors and non-instructional workers. The University of Michigan's graduate instructors union waged its longest strike in history that ended as classes prepared to begin in August.

What the growing influence of higher education workers means for the UAW's future

Driving unionization of tenure-track faculty across the country in recent years are attacks on tenure, academic freedom, pay and benefits and the decline of faculty's historic role in shaping the values and policies of the institution, such as curriculum, priorities and development of programs, said William Herbert, executive director of the Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education at Hunter College in New York City.

"In general, the further away from being at the locus of authority on campus among faculty, the more likely they are to seek to unionize," Herbert said. "There has been a movement over the past 40 years of a centralization of authority in administrators. And that takes away the authority that faculty had where they were involved in making decisions and by removing them from the process. That has led to a degree of viewing it that if administrators are making decisions without our input, we need to have a union representative to negotiate ..."

'Shockingly low' morale stirs MSU effort

The organizing comes as MSU, the state's second-largest university by enrollment, has grappled in recent years with sexual misconduct scandals, several presidents leaving under pressure, factions among the governing board members that have led to public acrimony and a new president who is set to begin March 4.

The effort at UM-Flint follows a University of Michigan study to reform the Flint college as enrollment and revenue have declined. A search is underway for a permanent UM-Flint chancellor, and university officials reached an agreement with unionized graduate student employees last year after a long and contentious strike.

Why did UM-Flint's former chancellor walk away with a \$700K payout?

But the rate of union membership slipped to 10% last year, a record low, even as the number of workers in a union increased to 14.4 million across the nation, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported this month.

One of the top reasons that MSU tenure and tenure-stream faculty are organizing is because morale "has been getting shockingly low in the past 10 years," said NiCole Buchanan, an MSU psychology professor who is part of the organizing effort.

The effort is coming amid the aftermath of the Larry Nassar sexual assault scandal, criticism of the university's Title IX investigations and continual turnover in the president's office since 2016.

"We've seen the aftermath of a variety of scandals, and we want to see those things change," Buchanan said. "Faculty have no say in any of these governance decisions or any policy decisions. ... We are the group that should be at the table. We are the ones who are writing the research papers and getting the grants, but most importantly, we are the ones who are directly in line working with the students."

MSU's Faculty Senate is only an advisory group, and numerous issues have emerged without their input, she noted.

Some MSU professors have been working on unionizing their tenure and tenure-stream faculty since 2019, but the effort has picked up more steam in the past few years, Buchanan said. So far, more than 54% of MSU's faculty, or nearly 1,000 individuals, have signed authorization cards, and that includes support from the colleges across campus, she added.

The organizing professors recently filed a request for recognition from the university's Board of Trustees and incoming President Kevin Guskiewicz, and five of them spoke Friday before the board during its regular meeting. They also submitted

a request to the Michigan Employment Relations Commission to oversee the counting of the authorization cards and, if necessary, holding an election.

Two avenues to a union

MSU spokeswoman Emily Guerrant said the board approved a resolution on collective bargaining in 2021 to ensure neutrality.

A potential union has two avenues in its organizing efforts at MSU, she said.

"The union must demonstrate more than 50% support of the bargaining unit, which leads to a mutually agreeable process for a card check," Guerrant wrote. "If the union is successful in this demonstration of majority support, the university recognizes the union as the representative of the bargaining unit."

For the MERC election process, Guerrant said, the union must demonstrate more than 30% support of the bargaining unit. The commission verifies and then administers a confidential ballot election. If the union obtains more than 50% of the votes in the election, MERC certifies the union as the representative of the bargaining unit.

"We continue to work with the bargaining unit on this process," Guerrant said.

But Buchanan said there is hope that MSU will recognize the union without an election since organizers have gotten signatures from more than 30% of the potential unit.

The Michigan Education Association, on behalf of the faculty seeking to unionize, filed a petition with MERC on Dec. 26 for an election after more than 30% of the potential unit showed support, according to officials with the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO), which oversees MERC.

A date is still pending to decide the time and date of an election and whether it will be in-person or by mail, said Sean Egan, deputy director of labor for LEO. Often, the vote is by mail, and a deadline is given. Ballots are sent to MERC, which counts and certifies the results. Majority rules in the process that can take up to 60 days, Egan said.

If the vote is to form a union, the employer must begin collective bargaining in a reasonable time period, he said.

At UM-Flint, university officials through the public affairs office and organizer Sarah Rosaen, a communications professor, declined to comment. The union is being organized by the American Federation of Teachers — American Association of University Professors.

Sixteen UM-Flint faculty members have been working to unionize the 164 tenured faculty because of concerns about workload, campus climate, pay equity, alleged administration attempts to quash dissent and more faculty input into university decisions as opposed to only by administrators, according to a 2023 article by East Village Magazine.

UM-Flint has been struggling with declining or stagnant enrollment and worsening finances. Between the fall semester of 2012 and the fall of 2022, Flint campus overall enrollment dropped by 28% compared with a 9% loss for UM-Dearborn, according to the Michigan Association of State Universities. But UM-Flint recorded a 2.4% enrollment increase in enrollment this fall to 6,130 students, the first year-over-year increase in a decade.

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