



Tulane University non-tenured faculty vote to unionize in push for higher pay, job security

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Staff file photo

A group of non-tenured Tulane University faculty members have voted to form a union, adding to a growing list of U.S. universities where adjuncts and other academics have sought to organize for higher wages and better working conditions.

Tulane Workers United, which filed for recognition with the National Labor Relations Board earlier this year, announced on Tuesday that the measure to form a union passed with a vote of 146 to 29.

The union will represent about 300 instructors, lecturers, professors of practice and visiting professors at Tulane across its schools of liberal arts, professional advancement, science and engineering, architecture and business.

Organizers said that Tulane and the NLRB had recognized the union after the votes were counted and that they hope to begin contract negotiations with university administrators in the fall.

"We could not be happier with the results," David Kumler, a non-tenured professor in Tulane's English department, said after the vote was counted. "To win and to win in such a landslide really shows how important this is to faculty at Tulane and how many of us know what a difference this will make in our lives."

In a letter to faculty, Tulane Provost Robin Forman said that once the vote is finalized, the university would work with the union to determine the logistics of bargaining and other matters.

"As we have throughout, we remain committed to supporting a fair, transparent, and informed process in full accordance with the NLRB regulations," Forman said.

The union, which formed as an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union, asked for voluntary recognition from Tulane in April. Tulane declined and the faculty members filed for recognition with the NLRB and held the election in May. The results of the election were tabulated on Tuesday at the NLRB office in New Orleans.

Tulane Workers United is the first federally recognized union of academics in Louisiana. As state employees, faculty and staff at public universities are excluded from federal labor protections and not federally recognized by the NLRB, but many schools across the state have chapters. The University of New Orleans formed a chapter of Campus Workers in 2021, which includes tenured and non-tenured faculty, staff and graduate and undergraduate employees.

The vote at Tulane follows a trend of non-tenured faculty at private institutions across the U.S. who have formed unions, according to William A. Herbert, head of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions at Hunter College in New York City.

Recently, non-tenured faculty at Loyola Marymount University in California, Wellesley College in Massachusetts, and Elon University and Duke University in North Carolina formed unions. In April, non-tenured faculty, postdoctoral scholars, fellows and research assistants at Harvard University voted 1,094-81 in favor of unionization.

A decline in tenured positions at colleges and universities across the country has prompted many non-tenure track professors to organize, Herbert said. Most of the elections have gone overwhelmingly in favor of unionizing, with faculty across the country voicing concerns about job security and low wages.

Erin Keppeler, who was hired at Tulane in 2019 as an assistant professor in the English department on a tenure track, said Tuesday that she has decided to leave the university after five years because of pay and working conditions.

Non-tenure track faculty usually teach three courses each semester, she said, while tenure-track faculty teach no more than two. Often, there is a big pay discrepancy between people in each track, she said.

Kumler said some non-tenure track lecturers and adjuncts at Tulane have time-limited appointments that create a lack of job security. They also aren't able to participate in Faculty Senate and departmental voting, which he said makes it hard for them to make their voices heard.

“Many of us have spent a decade in school to prepare for these jobs only to find that the wages are not livable,” he said. “But for me the most important thing is to have a voice in the decision making process in how our roles are defined.”

Editor's Note: This article was updated to clarify comments from David Kumler regarding the job security of lecturers and other staff.