

Lack of teacher contract threatens OU's opening

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

With a possible faculty strike threatening the start of classes Tuesday, the Oakland University Board of Trustees is expected to meet today in a special session.

The meeting was called to update trustees on contract negotiations with the OU chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), which represents about 95 percent of the full-time faculty.

Both sides met in closed session Wednesday, in the presence of a state mediator. But results of that meeting were not immediately available.

As expected in 11th hour negotiations, both sides talked tough, while leaving room for the possibility of reaching a settlement.

"I'm not optimistic," said James D. Llewellyn, OU media spokesman. "But at least they're still talking."

Edward J. Heubel, spokesman for the OU chapter of AAUP, said members of the unit were unanimous when they authorized a strike earlier this week unless a new contract is negotiated by next Tuesday.

"It DOESN'T LOOK good," said Heubel, a professor emeritus of political science. "I wouldn't call it a no-contract, no work situation, because we've worked without a contract before. But we don't like to do it... we want a contract."

Heubel, a resident of Bloomfield Township, said pickets would likely go up unless there's a settlement by Tuesday. Yet as talks entered the critical stage, he did not want to sound pessimistic.

"We've pulled a settlement out of the hat at the 11th hour in previous years," he said.

The previous three-year contract expired Aug. 14, and both sides have since placed an offer on the table. But the respective contract proposals are far apart.

The university offer, for example, calls for wage hikes of 1, 2 and 2 1/2 percent in the first, second and third years of the agreement. Those hikes would be in addition to step increases of nearly 2 percent that accrue to faculty members as they move from one classification into another.

The university offer also calls for a reduction in retirement and health

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— Edward J. Heubel
spokesman for OU faculty union

Insurance benefits.

The AAUP offer calls for wage hikes most closely linked to wage settlements at schools like Eastern Michigan University, Wayne State University and other regional campuses where Heubel said increases averaged about 6.5 percent in each year of the contract.

The AAUP also rejects any changes in fringe benefits, Heubel said.

TRUSTEES CONTACTED declined to comment about negotiations or the possibility of a strike. But they were concerned about faculty demands at a time when state financial assistance is dubious and after tuition was raised by 7.8 percent.

"This could be a cold winter," said trustee L. Brooks Patterson. "That's not a threat. We just don't have the money."

Trustee Stephen Sharf hopes classes will begin as scheduled. "But somewhere down the line we have to hold the line on spending. These are difficult times."

Sharf, of Bloomfield Hills, was referring to recent action by the state which deferred fourth quarter aid payments to public universities, including OU. University officials fear those payments have in fact been canceled and they worry about future assistance.

Heubel, however, said the administration usually complains about poor finances around contract time, presumably as a negotiation ploy. "They always claim they don't have any money."

His bargaining unit had a financial expert from the national AAUP offices examine OU's budget and related documents, Heubel said. "We know they're in better shape financially than they claim. They've actually got a surplus."

As for the tuition hike, Heubel asked, "Would they refund any of it

If we accepted their offer?"

FACULTY NEGOTIATIONS have been a highly visible process over the last decade, with mixed results. In 1988, for example, a settlement was reached on the day classes were scheduled to begin.

There was a three-day strike in 1985. In 1982 faculty members rejected a proposed contract, but continued teaching while negotiations continued.

During that decade enrollment remained steady at about 12,200 students.

One circumstance is different during these negotiations. Unlike previous negotiations this year's are taking place under the direction of an interim president while a professional search firm looks for a replacement for Joseph E. Champagne, who resigned effective Aug. 1.

The interim president is John De Carlo, OU's vice president for governmental affairs, secretary to the board and general counsel. At the time trustees named De Carlo to the interim post, they said his experience would be especially valuable during labor negotiations.

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