

Current State of GTFF-University of Oregon Bargaining as of October 16, 2014

After opening collective bargaining negotiations in November, the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation (GTFF) and University of Oregon Administration called for state mediation in early July. The two sides met with a state mediator twice in late August and early September to attempt to reach a finalized contract before the academic year began, but so far these discussions have not brought negotiations to completion. Only two items have not been resolved: deciding who at the University has the authority to ratify our collective bargaining agreement and the financial package which includes all financial aspects of the contract.

The GTFF continues to push for the Board of Trustees to be the body that ratifies the agreement between the GTFF and the University, just as the state Board of Higher Education was the body that did so previously. The Administration has continually put forth proposals without consultation from the new Board that give that authority to the University's President, an unprecedented change in our own collective bargaining agreement and in graduate student CBA's nationally as no other University President has the sole authority to do so. The Administration's proposals that came out of mediation return the power to the Board, or its designee, but specifically cut the Board out of communications from the GTFF. The GTFF is troubled that the Administration does not want to keep the Board informed of negotiations, a belief that the current Board Chair Chuck Lillis seems to agree with, as he has continually refused to include a public discussion of GTFF negotiations (or any other union's negotiations) on the Board's agenda and has limited formal contact channels between the Board and graduate students, filtering emails to the Board's official email address and informational documents submitted to the Board at its meetings. As the public body that runs the University of Oregon and oversees its mission, priorities and values, the Board of Trustees should play a key role in overseeing how these are reflected in collective bargaining agreements rather than the President, a position with turnover that is much faster than that of the Board. The Board, just as the Board of Higher Education had done, can delegate the negotiations to other parties, but the GTFF believes that the Board should hold the final ratification power to guarantee the University is living up to its values with respect to its employees.

The major point preventing a finalized contract is the financial package. During the spring academic quarter, graduate teaching fellows (GTFs), the members of the GTFF, voted 98% in favor to authorize a strike (following all state of Oregon labor laws) without a contract that contains:

1. 2 weeks of paid medical-hardship leave and 2 weeks of paid parental leave,
2. an increase in GTF minimum wage of 5.5% for both years of the new contract,
3. language guaranteeing graduate student fees would be limited to \$61/quarter, as in the current CBA,
4. an increase in University spending on GTF health insurance to allow for major dental coverage and improved vision coverage, and
5. language that preserves the 95%-5% split in health insurance premium payments by the University and individual GTFs.

The bargaining team of the GTFF is acting on the guidance of its members and cannot agree to contract language that does not contain these items. These proposals are aimed at making the University accessible to all types of graduate students, including those who do not feel they should be forced to put off their plans to have children. Many graduate students, especially women, are driven away from academia due to these issues. The proposals are also intended to protect GTFs who have serious medical issues – emergency surgeries, major accidents, severe illnesses – from being cut off from their health insurance and wages, compounding the already difficult situation they find themselves in. Additionally, the proposals are aimed at closing a more than 200 dollar gap between what the UO

financial aid office states is necessary for a graduate student to live in Eugene and the minimum wage of GTFs –by directly increasing their income and not shifting financial responsibilities from the University onto GTFs, who already are not paid a living wage. Our fellow graduate students at Oregon State University do not have this problem - their wages cover the cost of living in Corvallis and even allow for a monthly windfall of \$17 (before taxes). Together, these proposals will better not just the situation of graduate students, but also improve the ability of the University of Oregon to attract a deeper pool of graduate students who might otherwise choose other institutions, retain those graduate students who risk being left behind due to family or medical issues, and provide a better undergraduate education by ensuring physically and mentally healthy GTFs who teach nearly 1/3 of courses at UO. While many of these items have been worked out since the spring, none of them have officially been signed off on for inclusion as part of the new collective bargaining agreement as they are packaged together.

The GTFF Health and Welfare Trust, the group of 5 GTFs and a member of UO's Administration which manages the health insurance plan of GTFs, worked out a new plan with their insurance provider (PacificSource) which addresses some of these issues. This new plan includes major dental coverage, a major change to vision benefits that meets the needs of GTFs, as well as improved prescription coverage – all while *decreasing* premium costs by 3%, saving the University of Oregon around half a million dollars over the next two years. These savings allowed the Administration to agree to a limit on student fees as well as increase their wage proposals, but not to levels that GTFs had asked for. Additionally, mediation produced a proposal in which the Administration agreed to drop language that would create a cap on increases in University payments for health insurance premiums and therefore increase GTFs' contributions to insurance premiums. These advancements since the strike vote took place leaves just minimum wage increases and paid leave as items still on the original strike platform.

The Administration has offered a variety of wage proposals, splitting raise amounts in various ways among the levels of GTFs and years of the contract. GTFs are classified at 3 levels, depending on their academic progress: GTFs with just a bachelor's degree are level 1, GTFs with a master's degree are level 2, and those who have advanced to PhD candidacy are level 3. One administration proposal would offer larger raises to level 1 GTFs (6.1%), those with the lowest minimum wage, than to level 2 and 3 GTFs (3%). Another administration proposal would offer a universal raise (5%) to all levels of GTFs for the 2014-2015 academic year and a smaller raise (4%) for the following academic year. Both of these proposals would increase the University's spending on GTF wages by a little over one million dollars over the life of the contract, and the Administration has stated they are open to other suggestions for how to split that pool of money to increase wages for GTFs, as long as the pool does not increase in size. To meet the GTFF's strike platform, 5.5% increase in wages for all levels for both years, the Administration's offer would need to increase by around \$250,000, around 2% of the 11 million dollar surplus in education and general funds the University obtained in the 2014 fiscal year.

After much reluctance, the Administration's position on paid leave shifted during mediation. Prior to mediation, the Administration refused any suggestions of paid leave - always counter-proposing contract language identical to the current contract – a GTF who, for any reason, is unable to fulfill all of the hourly requirements of their positions will have their pay reduced and are at risk of losing their health insurance and tuition wavier. Through the mediator, the GTFF was able to make a few pieces of our paid leave proposal clear to the Administration. First, the proposal for medical leave would only apply to serious medically documented illnesses or injuries that require GTFs to miss more than 1 week of work – GTFs who are able to return to work within a week do not qualify for this leave. Second, the membership was very concerned with GTFs losing their health insurance and having their pay cut. In response, the Administration offered language that would decrease the workload requirement for GTFs

to qualify for health insurance and which required a number of other solutions to be investigated before reducing a GTFs pay if they cannot make up work missed. The GTFF bargaining team was excited for the insurance language, but without a guarantee that protections against reductions of pay for GTFs who experience serious medical emergencies or add children to their family, the bargaining team could not agree to the language offered by the Administration.

The GTFF estimates that to provide full paid leave to GTFs, and to fairly compensate GTFs who fill-in for GTFs on leave, would cost the University around \$35,000 per academic year. The Administration has stated plainly that they recognize that this is not a serious financial burden to the University, but rather cannot accept the proposals on principle. The Administration has stressed that no other academic employees hired for under 20 hours/week have paid leave, so it is unfair to give this to GTFs. The GTFF sees this as an opportunity for the Administration to make some social progress particularly because UO's previous Provost and current interim-President, Scott Coltrane, is a nationally recognized expert on the importance of paid parental and paternal leave – having published an article in *The Atlantic* in December 2013¹, and, in June 2014², participating at a White House panel on fatherhood and interviewed by NPR, all specifically on the importance of wage replacement for new parents. It is strange that in his academic and public career that Dr. Coltrane supports leave, but when given the opportunity to directly apply his research to benefit nearly 1500 graduate student employees he is unwilling to do so.

The GTFF executive council has called for an Emergency General Membership Meeting on Friday, October 17th. At this meeting, the GTFF leadership wants the membership to give continued direction to the bargaining team: do the current proposals offered by the Administration make sufficient progress towards addressing the needs of the members as detailed in their strike platform from the Spring? If so, which proposals for wage should be accepted? If not, what kind of adjustments, if any, should be made to the strike platform in order to further encourage the Administration to address these needs? After the meeting, some form of vote would take place the following week. What this vote is, either a ratification of a new CBA or another strike authorization vote, will be decided on at the meeting on Friday October 17th. If the union's membership decides to continue towards a strike in order to address their needs and a strike authorization vote passes during the next week, a possible strike would not occur until the middle of November at the earliest. This still gives the GTFF and Administration ample time to continue to work and try to finalize a contract before a strike occurred.

1 "The Risky Business of Paternity Leave." Scott Coltrane. *The Atlantic*. Dec. 29, 2013. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/12/the-risky-business-of-paternity-leave/282688/>

2 "Provost speaks at White House panel discussion on fatherhood." Greg Bolt. *Around the O*. June 9, 2014. <http://around.uoregon.edu/content/provost-speaks-white-house-panel-discussion-fatherhood>