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Bentley University's part-time faculty votes to form union

Wide effort cites low pay, benefits

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By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 26, 2015

Part-time professors at Bentley University have voted to unionize, officials announced Thursday, making them the fifth group of adjunct faculty from area colleges to organize in the last year and a half.

A previous unionization effort by adjuncts at the Waltham school, in the fall of 2013, fell two votes short of passing.

The latest vote, organized by a group of the part-time instructors, was conducted over the past two weeks by mail-in ballot. This time, 108 Bentley adjuncts voted in favor of unionizing and 42 voted against, out of about 220 who were eligible to vote, according to the Service Employees International Union, which

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over the past two years has run a national campaign to unionize faculty.

“The unionization effort was really about giving us a voice and improving our working conditions,” said Joan Atlas, who has taught writing and public speaking part time at Bentley for 13 years. “We have people who have worked here for many years, but don’t have benefits and are paid very little.”

Atlas said that it was difficult to persuade some part-time faculty “because Bentley is a business school and there are a lot of conservative people here.”

But after watching adjuncts successfully unionize at other Boston area schools, many Bentley professors “started seeing things differently,” she said.

“It was a hard fight to get to this point. But it’s a relief that we did finally succeed and with such a wonderful result: a more than 2-to-1” ratio.

Bentley spokeswoman Helen Henrichs said in a statement that “while Bentley has consistently stated its belief that having a union is not in the best interest of the faculty or the university, the university will, of course, bargain in good faith over the terms and conditions of employment for unit members.”

In the fall of 2013, adjunct professors at Tufts University became the first local group to organize after the SEIU launched its faculty unionization campaign. About 200 part-time faculty at Tufts reached a contract agreement in October that will give most a 22 percent pay raise over the next three years and better job security.

Earlier this month, more than 750 part-time professors at Boston University voted to unionize, and will soon enter contract negotiations.

About 960 adjuncts at Northeastern University voted to unionize in May, and about 700 part-time faculty at Lesley University unionized last February. Both of those faculty groups are in the midst of contract negotiations with their respective institutions.

Full-time, nontenure-track faculty at Tufts voted to unionize this month, and similar campaigns are underway at other area schools, including Brandeis and Lesley universities, officials said.

The newly unionized professors from Boston area schools have joined Faculty Forward, which is a part of SEIU Local 509 and now has nearly 3,000 members, officials said.

Nationally, the number of tenure-track positions has dropped as colleges have become increasingly dependent on the low cost and flexibility of contingent faculty.

Today, about 76 percent of higher education instructors hold nontenure-track positions.

Adjunct faculty are paid on average about \$3,000 per three-credit course, the SEIU said. About 80 percent of them do not receive health insurance from their colleges, and about 86 percent do not receive retirement benefits.

Full-time, nontenure-track faculty are typically eligible for benefits, including health and retirement insurance. However, they typically do not have long-term job security, and they are often paid less than tenure and tenure-track faculty.

While average annual pay nationally for tenured and tenure-track faculty is roughly \$85,000, the median salary for full-time nontenure-track faculty falls around \$50,000, according to surveys by the American Association of University Professors.

Meanwhile, National Adjunct Walkout Day was held this week on campuses across the country. But in the Boston area, where the adjunct unionization push has been an overall success so far, many part-time faculty decided against walking out or holding big demonstrations, officials said.

“Faculty in Boston are in a very different place than they are in other parts of the country,” said Jason Stephany, a spokesman for the local SEIU campaign.

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