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UNITED ACADEMICS NEWS RELEASE

Embargoed until 10 a.m., Thursday, September 22, 2011

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Contract Negotiations at UVM Reach Impasse: Faculty disappointed and frustrated by administration's demand

Burlington, VT--Citing irreconcilable differences on retiree health care benefits, UVM United Academics--the union representing UVM faculty--will announce today (Thursday) that its contract negotiations with UVM administration have reached impasse.

The union will make the announcement at a 1:00 p.m. news conference on the steps of the Bailey/Howe Library on the UVM campus.

"We are disappointed and frustrated," said chief negotiator and education professor David Shiman, who is also the president of the faculty union.

"During the nine months that we have been negotiating with the administration, United Academics has sought to be responsive to university concerns regarding salary and health insurance," he explained. "We have offered to accept a zero percent salary increase for the first year of the contract, and we have moved towards raising the age for eligibility for retirement benefits from 60 to 65, having active faculty pay an increasing percentage of medical benefit premium payments, and having faculty who retire pay more for retirement medical benefits."

But when the university proposed that all new hires at UVM would have to pay 100 percent of the cost of their retirement medical benefits, "we balked," Shiman said.

The faculty union didn't just reject the administration's proposal, Shiman noted. "We offered three or four counter-proposals that would not push the new faculty off a benefits cliff. No matter what we offered, no matter what we suggested, the university refused to budge from its position. They simply drew a line in the sand."

"It is their unwillingness to consider alternatives that has brought us to impasse," he said. "They have refused to consider any position regarding retiree health care benefits for new hires other than what they initially brought to the table."

Shiman stressed that this is not just a faculty issue. "The university has indicated there will be only one campus-wide plan for new hires. So it appears that whatever agreement the faculty union makes will apply to other employees as well," he said. "Our fellow workers in clerical, custodial, and maintenance positions would face a bleak future with respect to retirement medical benefits. Most could never pay 100% of the premium cost that the university is now demanding."

"It's about doing what's right by the people who devote their lives to UVM," Shiman said. "This administration needs to restore the public trust and win back the good faith of the campus. Its proposed treatment of all new employees is the wrong message to send."

Professor Shiman is part of a team of six UVM faculty members who have been working since late January to negotiate the fourth 3-year contract for the nearly 700 full-time faculty members represented by the faculty union. With today's declaration of impasse, Professor Shiman explained, a federal mediator will be chosen. Also, United Academics and the university are now free to communicate publicly regarding negotiations.

Full-time faculty voted for unionization in April 2001 after a cut in health-care benefits and a costly down-sizing program that resulted in 13 percent of the faculty moving into early retirement.

Kathy Fox, a sociology professor and vice president of United Academics, said that by going to impasse, faculty have the opportunity to make their concerns public.

"Health benefits are by no means our only priority in negotiations," she said. "With thousands more students and a dozen or more new programs at UVM, United Academics has proposals to safeguard academic quality so that faculty aren't trying to teach and advise more students than we can serve at the high level they deserve. We're also committed to achieving greater job security for long-term lecturers. We owe these things to ourselves and our students."

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Posted on the website: September 21, 2011