

August 2006

Lessons Learned

You cannot force people to bargain in good faith. This is one of the painful lessons we have learned. Good faith bargaining is possible only if there is trust and genuine respect. At no time in this process were we treated with anything resembling respect. Our efforts to negotiate were rebuffed. The administration's goal from the beginning was to give us the least amount of money, health care, and autonomy—and to convince us to like that treatment. That is the height of arrogance and condescension. In effect, we were told that the other unions accepted (bad) contracts; therefore, in a spirit of fairness, we, too, should accept a bad contract. The administration, in word and deed, suggests that it knows what is best for us and our students—and what is fair.

Previous administrations made it difficult for us to look at the university's financial books; now we are told, "You *can* look at the books, if you must, but you cannot believe what you see." The administration cries poverty when that suits its aims.

In his August 25, 2006, web link, "Ferris President Affirms Confidence in Negotiations," President Eisler referred to the "wonderful faculty" who ensure "that our students receive a world-class education." Those are nice words, but they contradict the way we have been treated throughout this process. Why subject the faculty to an administration bargaining team that never actually bargains, that regards the faculty bargaining team with disdain? Disagreement, even contentious debate, is to be expected during a negotiation process; but the administration's bargaining team has treated our faculty representatives as if they were, in a word, insignificant.

Nor is the administration's contempt reserved only for faculty. Look at the way many staff members at this university are treated by their bosses. The faculty will get a fair and equitable contract, because we will fight for it, but one truth looms large: there is a campus-wide pattern of disrespecting workers.

The administration portrays the current troubles as a battle between just a few faculty members and the "university." This is inaccurate. The administration is opposed by other unions—who now have the wisdom earned from signing bad contracts. The administration took solace in the fact that not all faculty attended the vote to authorize our negotiation team to call a job action if necessary. They had to find some way to explain the 92 percent yes vote. The administration is blinded by a "blue skies" philosophy which refuses to recognize that resolving complex issues requires diligence and hard work.

President Eisler spent his first year meeting with every faculty member he could—now he avoids settings where faculty may ask difficult questions. President Popovich and President Sederburg, despite their faults, were willing to meet with the faculty and listen to our concerns—even when they knew that their ideas would be challenged. Since President Eisler's arrival, the FSU faculty has wanted him to succeed, to lead. We had high hopes. Those hopes have been replaced by profound disappointment, and President Eisler, ironically, now finds himself heading a truly "politically engaged" university.

The administration has spent thousands of dollars on a negotiation strategy that has produced this fruit: newly arrived faculty members now realize that FSU must have an effective faculty association. If the administration had negotiated fairly, the new faculty might have wondered about the need for a union. Well...now they know what veteran faculty already knew. We are not respected. Empty words of praise, and little red cards, do not demonstrate respect. Respect is reflected in actions.

We want to stand before and sit with our students. However, we have been pushed into a corner. If we accept a bad contract—an unfair contract—we hurt ourselves today and in the future. We must not be afraid. We deserve better. The way many union and non-union employees are treated at this university is simply wrong. We have a chance to make a stand for ourselves, our families, and our students. President Eisler recently told an assembly of adjunct instructors that they are the “backbone of the university.” We will not be pitted against these respected colleagues, but now we must show our own backbone.

Most of us accept, as an axiom, that bullies only respect people who stand up to them. It is regrettable that the administration has left us only one effective way to protect ourselves and our families. Let us stand together.