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New right to unionize bothers many in University of Wisconsin System

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The new right to unionize for University of Wisconsin System faculty and staff has set the stage for a fight at the state level, as thousands of System employees could get assigned into specific unions without getting a chance to vote.

Several unions say they plan to petition a state agency to bring some 4,000 to 5,000 academic staff into their folds; whether they want to or not.

Some academic staff — employees like librarians, advisers, financial aid officers, researchers and many others — say they should have a voice on whether to join a union, a concern shared by the System.

"This is not the right they fought for," said David Giroux, spokesman for the System. "Already we've begun hearing from academic staff members who are really concerned."

The Academic Staff Professionals Representation Organization, a Systemwide group that lobbies on behalf of academic staff, sent a letter to Gov. Jim Doyle last week arguing that staff members should have the right to decide whether they want to be represented by a union. That sentiment was echoed by other university groups that represent academic staff.

Under the budget signed by Doyle on Monday, System faculty and staff gained the right to form unions to bargain for better wages and benefits. For faculty members and some staff members, that will mean they will be given an opportunity to vote on their campuses to form bargaining units.

But some unions are poised to argue that thousands of employees have long been wrongly classified as academic staff, and rather, belong in unions that already exist, like the Wisconsin Professional Employees Council, Wisconsin Science Professionals, Wisconsin Physicians and Dentist Association, and Professional Employees and Research Statistics and Analysis.

In all, some 4,000 academic staff members out of roughly 12,000 are in question, said Jill Bakken, spokeswoman for AFT-Wisconsin, an umbrella organization for local unions.

"Because UW administration has been fast and loose with job titles for a long time, thousands of employees who should have been enjoying collective bargaining have not been," she said.

Bakken said they are asking for standard unit clarification, which typically occurs whenever bargaining units are created, although not usually in such large numbers.

Thousands of employees got letters this week from unions telling them they could be re-assigned to their ranks. Heather Daniels, chairwoman of the academic staff committee at UW-Madison and a grant expert, said she would have liked an opportunity to choose whether to join a union.

She's also concerned about being in one with people who may not share a common interest. She was taken aback when she got the letter telling her she could be assigned to the Wisconsin Professional Employees Council with state workers from other agencies.

"We are all here to do our jobs to further the mission of the university," she said. "I certainly don't have that in common with a colleague in the Department of Natural Resources."

Also a potential issue is whether a state agency, the Wisconsin Employee Relations Commission, has the power to re-assign these employees. Peter Davis, general counsel, said he believes the commission has that authority.

But if they choose to contest it, the System or the Office of the State Employment Relations could file a motion to dismiss the unions' petitions, arguing the commission doesn't have the standing to deal with the issue, Davis said.

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