

## Guest Columns

### Unionization will hurt UNM's tenured faculty

By Yemane Asmerom / Professor Of Geochemistry, University Of New Mexico

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When I was young, I was part of the United Auto Workers Union. I was working on a car assembly line, part-time, while going to school. One day, a shift supervisor came down hard on me. My union brothers and sisters stopped the assembly line – this was a big deal and of much comfort to me.

I believe in the importance of unions for workers who have no protection otherwise. As a result, I have always supported progressive political candidates because they are likely to support enlightened labor and environmental laws. It is thus painful to find myself arguing against unionization of tenure-track and other permanent faculty at UNM and raising concerns about the process so far.

I believe part-time and adjunct instructors need to unionize because they have defined work expectations and very little protection or job security. In contrast, tenure-track faculty life at a research university is meant to be entrepreneurial in nature. Thus, beyond the required expectations for teaching classes, the research and scholarly profiles are highly variable, depending on the individual initiatives and areas of opportunity. Given this diversity and the protection of tenure, whatever challenges these individuals face are fundamentally different than those without tenure or long-term contracts. As a result, unionization is going to have a profound negative effective on our ability to attract and retain highly-productive faculty.

UNM has been losing ground steadily over the years. We just have not had the vision and the resources to keep up with the tremendous transformation that has been taking place in American higher education. Institutions who at some point were peers are now at a whole different stratum. As a result, we have been losing productive faculty to them in droves. These institutions, such as Arizona State, have the flexibility to move decisively to snatch leaders in their fields from institutions like UNM.

I believe the rigid unionized regime will make it even harder to regain our standing. Of the 62 members of the elite group of research universities that belong to the Association of American Universities – UNM is not a member – only five, Rutgers University, Stony Brook University-SUNY, University at Buffalo, University of Florida and University of Oregon have unionized faculty; not the most dynamic of the group. In this regard, I wish our state leaders had considered this aspect of unionization before they threw in their support.

The faculty is due to vote on unionization Oct. 16 and 17. The process has moved forward with a very well-organized union campaign supported by the national unions – the American Association of University Professors and the American Federation of Teachers, an affiliate of the AFL-CIO. The amount of promotional materials on campus and the frequency of personal contacts in favor of unionization are indicators of the depth of this external support. In contrast, those on campus who have concerns about unionization of faculty have not had the organizational structure and support to make their arguments.

Our UNM administration finds itself in an awkward position of being the entity that is supposed to be the negotiating party and yet having to act as a neutral party; the fact that the governor and almost all local and state elected officials that have connections to the congressional district have endorsed the unionization effort has to be a factor.

Crucially, there is not a group, administrative or faculty, mandated to make a robust representation of the perils of unionization as configured. There has been a rather late and very limited grass-roots faculty response. It is unlikely to have a meaningful reach to the rest of the faculty given the timeline. At this stage, delaying the vote and giving an opportunity for a fair representation of some of the deep concerns about the structure and process of unionization would be in the best interest of the university and the community it serves.

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