

UNIVERSITIES

Furor Over Minnesota Tenure Proposals

The University of Minnesota has been in turmoil for the last 2 weeks over a proposal by the Board of Regents to revise the university's tenure code. Faculty members, including the university's president, have argued that the proposal will effectively destroy the tenure system, and they have even taken the first steps toward forming a union—a move that has temporarily headed off a regents' vote on the proposal, scheduled for 10 October. "This is probably the most serious crisis in the history of the university," says a source close to the university who asked not to be identified. "This is not just another flap."

The tenure crisis came to a head on 5 September, when the regents unveiled proposals that they had developed to counter a revised tenure code approved in June by the Faculty Senate. The changes include more flexible criteria for firing tenured faculty and reducing base pay. According to a letter distributed over the Internet by chairs of several Faculty Senate committees, they "would effectively eliminate tenure." One provision the letter cites would allow professors to be fired if a program is "restructured"; another would allow them to be disciplined for failure to maintain "a proper attitude of industry and cooperation."

The proposed revisions, the letter states, "are drastically outside the norms of ... leading research universities [and would] quickly and inevitably destroy our reputation, our competitive position, and our abilities to serve the citizens of Minnesota." Says law professor Fred Morrison, a member of the Faculty Senate tenure committee, "I have not heard a single person state anything except outrage."

To some regents, the faculty members are overreacting to what regent Patricia Spence characterizes as "suggestions," designed to give administrators "flexibility as resources are shrinking." Spence acknowledges that one has to "expect things to get very passionate" when the subject of tenure comes up, and she insists, "We don't want to hamper academic freedom." Management consultant and regent Jean Keffeler adds: "We've taken pains to indicate that none of the ideas necessarily have the majority support of the board. ... I'm sure that the board will want to discard some of the revisions."

According to political scientist Ed Fogelman, the roots of the furor go back several years, when the Minnesota state legislature told the university's Academic Health Center, which includes the medical school and several

colleges, that it would not release certain funds until the center tightened up its tenure rules and other practices. The tenure changes at the health center led the regents and the university's president, Nils Hasselmo, to push for a university-wide reconsideration of tenure.

By last spring, the faculty had come up with a revision of tenure rules that included innovations such as periodic posttenure reviews. The regents, however, did not think the faculty proposal was adequate. They hired a consultant and the Washington, D.C., law firm of Hogan and Hartson to craft a counterproposal, which sparked general alarm when it was presented to the faculty for comment 2 weeks ago.

Outraged faculty members began a letter-writing campaign to try to sway the regents and enlist support. On 10 September, the university's 23 regents' professors sent a letter to their colleagues criticizing the proposal and warning that it would drive away the "strongest professors." Hasselmo himself urged the regents to accept the earlier faculty proposal. And an editorial in the 12 September Minneapolis *Star Tribune* warned that if the regents don't stop "playing pioneer on tenure ... the best friend the Minnesota economy ever had could be

crippled for years to come."

The most effective faculty tactic, however, has turned out to be the threat of unionizing. By 13 September, 30% of the faculty had signed union "authorization" cards, paving the way for a referendum on unionizing. That triggered a restraining order from the Minnesota Bureau of Mediation Services delaying any action until the faculty holds a union vote, which may not take place until early next year. Minnesota law forbids any changes in employment policy while a unionization referendum is pending.

But the faculty victory may turn out to be a mixed one. Unionization of university faculty is very rare in the United States. And while some professors at Minnesota do want a union, says Fogelman, "in general faculty don't regard themselves as employees, who have to be unionized. ... Many signed [the union cards] because it was the only recourse." Adds one observer, "It reminds me of Chinese peasants who flooded their fields to keep the Japanese from occupying them."

The restraining order may also remove any hope of a compromise in the near future because it could prohibit the regents from negotiating with faculty representatives until after the union vote. At press time, both sides were trying to determine whether they are forbidden from talking. If so, that would be unfortunate, say some faculty members. The regents need to be told just how drastically their proposals threaten long-standing academic policies, say Morrison and Fogelman. As another observer puts it: "You can't say casually at a Vatican conference, 'Let's make abortions legal.'"

—Constance Holden



Tenure defender. Minnesota President Nils Hasselmo.

PLANETARY SCIENCE

Mars Meteorite Quest Goes Global

An international effort is under way to verify or disprove the dramatic claim that an ancient Martian meteorite contains evidence of fossilized life. Last week NASA officials told a congressional panel that they expect research teams in Britain, Japan, and the United States to generate a definitive answer within 2 years to the report last month that life may once have existed on Mars (*Science*, 16 August, pp. 864 and 924). They also sketched out plans to expand that cooperation into space with a joint U.S.–Russian mission in 2001, part of a series of Mars missions to search for more fossil-laden rocks.

The first order of business, NASA space science chief Wes Huntress told a

House Science Committee panel on 12 September, is to focus on the dozen Martian rocks at the agency's Johnson Space Center in

Houston and at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The oldest of that batch is ALH84001, which was analyzed by a team led by NASA geologist David McKay. The other rocks have not yielded fossil evidence, but researchers intend to examine them more closely in coming months.

To find definitive evidence that ALH84001 contained life, McKay says his group will use a tiny needle to pluck the possible nanofossils off the surface of the sliced meteorite. "We will embed them in epoxy, slice them, and get a corner of the



Tales of wonder. NASA's McKay briefs Congress on search for ancient life on Mars.