News



More than 50 Marquette University students, staff and faculty rally on campus Nov. 8 in Milwaukee, in support of the unionization effort of non-tenure-track employees from Marquette's Klingler College of Arts and Sciences. (Ericka Tucker)



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By day, students at Marquette University may have Daniel Collette as their philosophy professor, but at night, he could be their Uber driver or DoorDash delivery person.

The divorced dad of two also has had to give blood to make enough money to make ends meet.

Collette is a full-time faculty member at the Jesuit university in Milwaukee and he has a doctoral degree. But as a "non-tenure-track" employee, he makes about a third less than other faculty on the tenure track. The typical non-tenure-track salary at Marquette is about $43,000, according to faculty who spoke to NCR. (Marquette does not publish salary information.)

"I am truly tired to the bone," Collette told NCR. "It affects me, my health, my kids — and my students as well. The fact of the matter is that I'm not able to give them the same attention I would if I could just do my one job."

Collette has joined other non-tenure-track faculty from Marquette's Klingler College of Arts and Sciences who are seeking to unionize to address issues of salary, workload and other disparities between tenure-track and non-tenure-track employees. He says the union could be "life-changing" for him.

But Marquette is using a religious exemption to refuse to recognize the union — a move the pro-union faculty and their supporters say goes against the school's own mission and Catholic identity.

"Continuing our strong partnership with faculty and staff — without needing to engage the union as an outside third party that may not share our same values — is the best way to deliver our Catholic, Jesuit mission and serve our students," Monica MacKay, senior director of university communication, said in a statement provided to NCR.

Catholic social teaching strongly supports the right of workers to unionize. Pope Francis has spoken out in support of unions, as have the U.S. bishops. "Catholic social teaching supports the right of workers to choose whether to organize, join a

union, and bargain collectively, and to exercise these rights without reprisal," says the bishops' document "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship."

Marquette faculty and their supporters — including nearly 600 students and 75 tenured faculty who have signed petitions of support — question how the university's decision squares with its Catholic identity and mission. One sign at a Nov. 8 pro-union protest asserted: "Jesuit values = livable wages."

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"They are essentially claiming a First Amendment right for a Catholic university to not follow its own mission," said Chris Gooding, an assistant teaching professor of theology and member of the union's steering committee. "That is not so much a right to religious freedom as it is a right to hypocrisy."

In October, more than 65% of full-time, non-tenure-track faculty in the college of arts and sciences signed authorization cards expressing their desire to collectively bargain with the university through the United Campus Workers-Wisconsin union. On Oct. 25, university administration announced it would not sign an agreement to recognize the union.

Religious colleges and universities don't have to accept elections overseen by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), thanks to a decision during President Donald Trump's first administration that broadened the definition of religious freedom. They can, however, voluntarily choose to recognize unions and negotiate with them.

Since that NLRB decision in 2020, Boston College, Seattle University, and St. Leo University in Florida have claimed the religious exemption, while St. Louis University instead chose to recognize a union of graduate student workers. St. Louis, Fordham, Loyola University Chicago, Georgetown and Santa Clara universities also all collectively bargain with faculty unions, according to Marquette's union organizers.

Fr. Matthew Kemp, an Episcopal priest who taught in Marquette's theology department, said he noticed a "clear dissonance" between the values and ideals he taught in his classes and the university's institutional decision not to recognize the union.

He left the university after two years because he couldn't afford to support his family, which includes five children. "To be honest, I'm on the low end of what most full-time Episcopal clergy jobs offer, but I'm still making more than I made at Marquette," said Kemp, who is now vicar at St. John's Episcopal and Redeemer Lutheran Church in Centralia, Illinois.

"It would be great if the university were so committed to those principles that the faculty didn't feel the need to unionize," he said.

In 2019, after a previous unionizing attempt, the university formed a Participating Faculty Task Force to address the concerns of non-tenure-track faculty. Among its recommendations were to offer three-year contracts instead of one-year contracts, although implementation of that practice has been uneven, faculty members say.

They also say the task force has not adequately addressed pay equity issues.

According to Gooding, a comparison of salaries at other Jesuit colleges and universities where non-tenured faculty are unionized shows that compensation is approximately $15,000 per year lower at Marquette. At Loyola University Chicago, for example, an entry-level professor with a doctorate would start at $61,000, according to its negotiated collective bargaining agreement.



The ivy growing up Marquette Hall can be seen on the Milwaukee campus of Marquette University in this undated photo. (CNS/Courtesy of Marquette University)

After 22 years at Marquette, Giordana Poggioli-Kaftan, an associate teaching professor of Italian, makes less than that. Her $53,000 salary is comparable to what an entry-level grade or high school teacher in Milwaukee Public Schools earns.

For Poggioli-Kaftan, unionization would be a recognition of workers' dignity. "To restore dignity, we need a just working environment that would give us a fair and just pay and secure jobs," she said.

Earlier this year, Marquette announced plans to cut $31 million from its budget by 2031, a 7% decrease. Last week the University Academic Senate announced plans for a no-confidence vote in the executive leadership team. Two days later, acting president Kimo Ah Yun was named as the school's 25th president.

In their decision not to recognize the union, administrative leaders cited financial concerns.

"We have a shared responsibility to make decisions that reflect the reality of the higher education environment nationally," their statement said. "That includes improving compensation for faculty and staff while being vigilant about keeping a Marquette education affordable for students."

Marquette's tuition will be $50,070 for the 2024-25 academic year.

Union organizers say faculty pay disparity is not the result of the university's financial difficulties, but rather a matter of spending priorities.

In an independent financial analysis from 2021 that compared Marquette with 18 other peer institutions, Marquette was found to spend less on instruction and more on upper-level administration than other schools. It was second to last in its percentage of total salaries spent on instruction and research, and first in percentage of salaries spent on administration.

The report, titled "Not Close to Any Type of Financial Trouble," was commissioned and paid for by a group of 54 Marquette faculty. A copy was provided to NCR.

"Whenever Marquette makes austerity cuts, the bucket they always cut from is instruction," said Gooding. "We could easily meet what the union is asking for if we just adjusted things so our upper administration was making the industry standard."

As the number and proportion of non-tenure-track employees rises, both at Marquette and nationwide, faculty who want to unionize say they will continue to try to convince the university to recognize their right to collectively bargain.

Collette, the philosophy professor, says he is torn by the university's decision. "One of the reasons I love Marquette is that it's a true joy to be at an institution where its stated values are so closely in alignment with my own," he said, adding that the students are "fantastic" and colleagues are "great."

"It would be nice not to have to choose between having all those things and having a livable wage."

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