

Opinion: Non-tenure track faculty treated shabbily by USD leaders

By Joseph Babcock, Deniz Perin Coombs and Antonio Iannotta

May 22, 2025

We — non-tenure track faculty in the University of San Diego's College of Arts and Sciences — entered labor contract negotiations in the fall feeling hopeful. We had just won a historic union election with a 93% majority, and we thought USD would see this as an opportunity to align its labor practices with its stated values of fairness, equity and social justice, and its branding as a “changemaker” campus.

So far, we've been wrong. That's why nearly 200 professors in College of Arts and Sciences, all members of SEIU Local 721, walked off the job in an unfair labor practice strike on May 7 and 8. We were joined on the picket lines by hundreds of students, alumni, faculty colleagues and community supporters.

We didn't make this decision lightly, but we felt we had no choice. The administration has violated labor law that is meant to protect us as union workers, and we cannot reach a fair first contract if university leadership continues its illegal behavior.

We're particularly concerned with USD's decision to abruptly cancel our members' courses this semester without bargaining over the effects — meaning that hardworking, dedicated faculty members lost work with no opportunity for us to protect them.

This failure wasn't just cruel and unethical, it was illegal. Under U.S. labor law, an employer is required to bargain with union workers over changes that affect employees' working conditions.

It's unacceptable for USD administrators to ignore their obligations under the law, and it gives us little confidence that they're working with us productively at the bargaining table.

What's more, we fear the university is using the same tactic to substantially cut our members' classes in fall 2025. Our union's review of USD's course schedule found that 60 faculty members who taught last semester are not listed for courses next fall. It would be unconscionable — and, again, illegal — for USD to drop these classes and fail to negotiate over the effects on faculty.

USD's administration feels entitled to take these actions because over the decades faculty working conditions have been eroded.

Most people think of university faculty jobs as prestigious, as employment that comes with good pay, benefits and strong protections. What they don't know is most of us are hired in non-tenured positions that offer substantially lower pay than tenured faculty with none of the job security or benefits. Many of us work semester to semester, with the university able to cancel our courses at will for good reasons, bad reasons or no reason at all. Our jobs are more akin to temp workers or gig workers, not protected academics.

Many of USD's contract proposals and counters at the bargaining table show just how little regard they have for their non-tenured faculty members. The university — which has an endowment that grew 8.4% over the last fiscal year, to \$714 million, and that plans to spend tens of millions on buildings and luxury amenities — has refused to come anywhere close to offering us the pay, benefits and job security that we need to survive in San Diego.

In numerous bargaining sessions, non-tenured faculty members have shared their stories. Some have broken down in tears. They've spoken about relying on food stamps to feed their families, about working second jobs at Target, Vons or Trader Joe's, about the heartbreak of loving their students and their classrooms but feeling crushed by the economic toll of this work. The admin's response? A shrug.

Babcock is an adjunct assistant professor of English at USD and lives in La Mesa. Perin-Coombs is an adjunct assistant professor of English at USD and lives in La Mesa. Iannotta is an adjunct assistant professor of Italian at USD and lives in San Diego.