

NEWS

Edward Waters University shuts down faculty union, claiming religious exemption

The historically Black university cited its “core values and Christian tenets” in its decision to stop recognizing the faculty union.



by **Andrew Pantazi**

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Edward Waters University [The Tributary]

Felicia Wider-Lewis was grading the final assignments for her spring classes at Edward Waters University when her phone started buzzing. She needed to read the latest email from the college's administration, her fellow professors told her.

Over the last 15 years as a professor at the school, she had tried to improve herself. She'd earned a Ph.D. from the University of Florida to improve her teaching credentials. She was elected president of the faculty senate and chosen as the faculty union's chief negotiator. She had received grants to support her work as a mathematics professor.

She had also pushed her coworkers to become more militant in demanding the school honor its union contract.

But then in May, the school made a sudden announcement: effective immediately, the college administration would no longer recognize its faculty union. The union contract was canceled. Faculty could now be fired at

will. And the school would no longer bargain with its faculty, citing its “core values and Christian tenets.”

The announcement came just six weeks after [the school announced it had hired an executive director](#) of its new A. Philip Randolph Institute to honor the legacy of one of the most prominent and militant labor leaders in U.S. history.

The decision has prompted criticism from faculty, alumni and labor leaders who say the school is hypocritical for fundraising off of the legacy of Randolph while busting its own faculty’s union.

Wider-Lewis decided she’d had enough. Fifteen years after she first took a job at the school, she resigned.

Over the last month and a half, EWU President Zachary Faison and the college’s board chair, Bishop Frank Madison Reid III, have not responded to The Tributary’s interview requests.

In a written statement last month, the college said it stopped recognizing the faculty union “in support of the University’s strategic vision.”

“The assertion of the University’s rights as a religious educational institution, acknowledged by the Supreme Court of the United States and the National Labor Relations Board, will also allow EWU to be driven by its faith-based Christian mission, rather than the political agendas often associated with federal labor policies,” the statement said.

EWU’s attempted decertification of its faculty union is part of a growing trend, said Rebecca Givan, associate professor of labor studies at Rutgers University. A [2020 decision by the National Labor Relations Board](#) and a [federal court decision](#) that year cleared the way for religious schools to stop bargaining with faculty unions.

Charles Spencer, one of the school’s board members and a leader in the longshoremen’s union, said the school’s decision to stop bargaining with its faculty wasn’t a news story.

“There are a million schools in these continental United States,” he said. “There are many that have unions. And many that don’t have unions.”

He said he supported workers having bargaining rights only if “they and their employers” agree.



But Kenneth Davis, a criminal justice professor and president of the faculty union, said academics will suffer when faculty worry about retaliation.

“De-recognizing the union is a union-busting tactic, so it makes it harder to keep people engaged,” Davis said. “The union is a bargaining organization for the faculty. It helps to support academic freedom, which involves free speech, the ability to challenge and speak out and do research and present that research without fear of retribution.”

Rahman Johnson, the union’s vice president and a communications professor, said the faculty wanted a “strong and effective relationship with the administration,” which included ensuring the bargaining rights for professors.

Other professors who spoke to the Tributary said they were too afraid of retaliation to speak out publicly.

The EWU faculty union, which first formed in the early 1990s, had been operating under a **21-year-old contract**. For the last two years, Wider-Lewis and other faculty negotiated with the school to update the contract, which sets salary minimums of \$28,000, \$31,000, \$34,000 and \$38,000 for instructors, assistant professors, associate professors and professors, respectively.

Wider-Lewis and Davis said the school administration wanted the right to exercise more control over faculty.

Spencer, the school’s board member, said the faculty union was unwilling to compromise with the school. “At the end of the day, you reach an impasse and they [the faculty] weren’t willing to give in.”

The decision to stop bargaining with faculty surprised those who had lauded EWU for launching the school’s A. Philip Randolph Institute to honor the Jacksonville native who led the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

In fact, **Tameka Bradley Hobbs**, who was hired earlier this year as executive director of the school’s A. Philip Randolph Institute, resigned last month, saying the school’s decision to stop recognizing its faculty’s union was “one of many contributing factors” that led to her resignation.

Decertifying the union is “definitely not what Mr. Randolph would have stood for,” said Tony Hill, a former Jacksonville state senator and former secretary-treasurer of the Florida AFL-CIO. “That is shocking.”

But EWU wasn’t alone in its decision. Elsewhere in Florida, Saint Leo University, a Catholic school, **also notified its faculty that it would no longer recognize its faculty union**, similarly citing the 2020 decision by

the National Labor Relations Board to stop exercising jurisdiction over faculty at religious schools.

The Saint Leo faculty filed charges with the NLRB, which has since taken on the case, filing a complaint in August that is still pending.

NLRB General Counsel Jennifer Abruzzo, who acts as a chief prosecutor within the agency, **highlighted the 2020 board decision as one of many she would like to see overturned** now that a majority of the board's members are Democrats and seen as more friendly to labor.

NLRB decisions often swing back and forth depending on whether a majority of the board is appointed by Republican or Democratic presidents. Mark Gaston Pearce, a former NLRB chairman and the executive director of the Workers' Rights Institute at Georgetown University Law Center, said the issue of religious schools' unionization rights is one of many the board's members want to address.

"This board has a lot of fish to fry. There are a lot of corrections they feel they have to make relative to the slash-and-burn experience of the last term" when a majority of board members were appointed by Republicans. "This is one of many situations that have to be contended with. Where it is on the list of this board's priorities we don't know."

The **EWU faculty filed their own NLRB charges** earlier this month, arguing the university must honor the professors' right to collective bargaining.

Even without a decision from the agency, Pearce said the professors could fight back to pressure the college to restore their bargaining rights.

"Some bargaining units have in the past had a degree of solidarity sufficient for them to say, 'Hey, we're going to walk. We're going to engage in job actions. We're going to protest and run the risk of termination, and roll the dice that a Democratic majority [of NLRB members] and a progressive general counsel will file charges and issue a complaint and litigate this matter and drag this out in court.' Can a small college like that afford that kind of noise?"

Even if EWU is legally allowed to decertify its union, it doesn't have to, said Givan, the labor studies professor.

"They're taking a really anti-labor position if they're refusing to recognize a unit that they have the ability to recognize if the majority of those workers want to be represented by a union. It's a very typical position [for

management] but it does not reflect any pro-worker values. It doesn't really seem to reflect the legacy of A. Philip Randolph."

Faison became EWU's president in 2018, [vowing to fully staff fundraising, enrollment growth and student retention, even if it meant cutting elsewhere in the budget](#). Since then, Faison has boasted of increasing enrollment and eliminating a financial deficit.

According to the school's [2020-2021 financial audit](#), the school, which is the oldest historically Black college in Florida, brought in about \$38 million and spent about \$28 million. The audit also showed the school spent about \$45 million in federal, state and local grants.

Under his tenure, the school, formerly known as Edward Waters College, was accredited to grant master's degrees as a university, and it formalized a partnership with the University of Florida that allows up to five nursing students each year to transfer and earn a UF degree.

But the school has also seen its share of controversy.

In 2019, [19 students were evicted from Southside apartments](#). The students said they were promised scholarships to cover rent, something the school administration disputed.

Then earlier this year, [News4Jax reported](#) on poor housing conditions on campus, including mold, rodents and malfunctioning heating and cooling systems.

Eric Arnesen, a George Washington University professor working on a biography of Randolph, pointed to EWU's recent fundraising off of Randolph's legacy as hypocritical in light of the college's anti-union stance.

"From the moment Randolph entered public life and spoke publicly about political issues, he was a crusader for African American trade unionism," Arnesen said. "No one stands out more than Randolph as a crusader for unionization in the Black community."

If EWU thinks it can honor Randolph without honoring his commitment to bargaining rights, he said, the school is presenting "a very incomplete and very misleading view of A. Philip Randolph."

EWU didn't say how much it had raised for the new institute, only saying it had brought the college a multi-year six-figure commitment. In the initial news release, a quote from Faison misspelled Randolph's name.

Randolph himself, along with protege civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, started a national A. Philip Randolph Institute in the 1960s, a labor organization still going strong with chapters across the country, including in Jacksonville. EWU's institute is not affiliated with the labor organization, even though they share a name.

Marguerite Warren, treasurer for the EWU Alumni Association and a 1965 graduate, said that eliminating the faculty union makes it more likely the school will stop professors from publicizing real concerns at the school.

“Without the faculty, who’s going to teach the students? They should have a strong union,” she said. “... The alumni will care about whether or not teachers are treated fairly. ... Nobody wants to go to a job where you can be willfully fired.”

Faison has said he wants to elevate the school’s stature, and in the school’s statement ending the union’s contract, the college administration justified its decision by pointing to a passage of scripture, Jeremiah 29:11: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

Eliminating the faculty’s right to bargain over a contract, the statement said, allows the college “to present a more equitable outcome for our deserving faculty.” The statement said faculty would be receiving a raise.

“I know what Mr. Randolph fought for and I know what I fight for,” Spencer, the board member, said. “But I’m also a realist. What you’re talking about [with the faculty union]: They’re idealists.”

Without a union to protect faculty’s right to speak out against the administration, Wider-Lewis said there’s now no check on Faison’s authority. “When the administration does something wrong, who’s going to check him? It’s not going to be the board. It’s not going to be the faculty. The college suffers overall and who loses out in the end? It’s the students.”

“The true sense of a university to me is where you have the dialogue of a true exchange of ideas,” she continued. “You’re not dictated to where it’s this or else.” But at EWU, “it’s either [Faison’s] way or the highway. There’s no true shared governance.”

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