Dear Colleagues:

The Service Employees International Union/Faculty Forward is soliciting signatures in support of an election to determine whether non-tenure-track faculty at Northwestern should unionize. We believe that unions play an important role in representing workers, and there are many workers who need the protections that unions can provide. Many of us are supporters of organized labor, grew up in union households, or have been union members ourselves. However, we have genuine concerns regarding the balance of potential risks and rewards of union representation for teaching-track faculty at Northwestern University.

In a recent letter to some teaching-track faculty, union organizers assert that, “For non-tenure-track faculty, ‘flexible’ hiring practices have led to unstable and inconsistent employment, a lack of benefits, and financial insecurity. These practices also prevent contingent faculty from playing a stronger role in their respective departments, give instructors less time to prepare for their courses, and provide less time and resources to focus on the needs of students.” While this statement may describe the experiences of visiting faculty, adjunct faculty, and graduate student instructors, it does not accurately reflect our conditions of employment as members of non-tenure line

Many members of the teaching-track faculty benefit from:

- renewable multi-year contracts of 2-5 years
- health, dental, life, vision and disability insurance benefits that are the same as those available to tenure-track faculty
- retirement contributions and matching contributions that are the same as those available to tenure-track faculty
- spouse and dependent tuition benefits that are the same as those available to tenure-track faculty
- opportunities for promotion through the ranks of Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and Professor of Instruction, with significant salary increases at each promotion
- opportunities every eight years for a one-quarter leave of absence at full salary, or a three-quarter leave of absence at half salary, to support professional development
- reductions in teaching assignments for service activities
- opportunities to obtain internal funding for professional development and travel

In the last ten years, the members of the WCAS teaching-track faculty have enjoyed substantial gains in status, salary, and working conditions, including:

- standardized review for promotion and reappointment by an elected committee of peers according to criteria specifically developed for teaching-track faculty
- standardized review for salary increases by an elected committee of peers according to criteria specifically developed for teaching-track faculty
- inclusion of base salaries in contracts
- conversion of titles from Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Distinguished Senior Lecturer, and Professor of Instruction to Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and Professor of Instruction
- substantial increases in funds available for professional development and travel

These advances acknowledge the vital contributions of the teaching-track faculty to the various colleges and to the University. In WCAS, many have been the product of collaborative efforts
between representatives of the teaching-track faculty and of the Weinberg Dean’s Office. In particular, these efforts have sought to minimize the distinction between the teaching-track and tenure-track faculty, a distinction that a union would reinforce, limiting further progress in a direction that is producing real results.

We believe that the University’s NTL faculty members are part of something special, so much so that it is not appropriate to compare our employment conditions to those of contingent faculty at other institutions, or even to those of other non-tenure-track faculty at Northwestern. We are struggling to understand how unionization would benefit us. At the very moment we are experiencing unprecedented improvements in our terms of employment and status within the University unionizing might stall or reverse the momentum that we have built over the past several years.

As the conversation about unionization continues, bear in mind all that we have accomplished through our direct relationship with our schools and the University. Encouraged by the progress of the past decade, we are optimistic about the next, moving forward as an independent faculty who want only the best for our students, for our colleagues, and for Northwestern.

Sincerely yours,

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