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Ithaca College prof claims tenure denied due to anti-Israel comments

*By Liz Lawyer
Staff Writer*

An Ithaca College assistant professor is threatening a lawsuit against the college because she says she was unfairly denied tenure and has not received due process of appeal.

Margo Ramlal-Nankoe, a member of the sociology department for the past 11 years, said she has more than met the standards for tenure but has been denied twice — once in 2005 and again in 2007.

Ramlal-Nankoe said she was denied tenure not based on her teaching, service or scholarship, the three areas considered by tenure review boards, but her politics, which she says other faculty members and administrators called anti-Israel.

The Board of Trustees says this claim “is unsubstantiated and at best serves only as a smokescreen for the less than excellent performance by Dr. Ramlal-Nankoe in the areas used as an assessment for the granting of tenure at Ithaca College.”

Ramlal-Nankoe, who is of Indian descent, alleges verbal abuse by other faculty members, including racial comments and gender discrimination and repeated attempts to undermine her work with student groups. She said she faced a hostile environment in her academic department, in which a “wall of silence” was built up around her. Her complaints are outlined in a letter addressed by her lawyer, Lynne Bernabei of Bernabei & Wachtel, PLLC in Washington, D.C., to Ithaca College President Thomas Rochon and the Board of Trustees on Sept. 16.

The professor said her teachings focus on a global view of conflicts and that at the beginning of the second Palestinian intifada that began in September 2000 she really began to focus on the conflict in her classes.

“I want students to understand we all live in diverse areas and that you shouldn't exclude the victims of a conflict from the solution,” she said.

Former Dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences Howard Erlich declined to comment specifically on the case or Ramlal-Nankoe's teachings.

She appealed the decision of her review board to deny her tenure all the way up to the Board of Trustees, which last month decided to let it stand, saying in a letter dated Oct. 28 that Ramlal-Nankoe “received a full and fair tenure review during the 2007-08 academic years” and that “the tenure review was conducted with scrupulous attention to all of the requirements of the Ithaca College Faculty Handbook.”

“It doesn't look like (the Board of Trustees) even considered it,” Bernabei said.

Ramlal-Nankoe has received support from her current and former students, who have written letters

published in the student newspaper, The Ithacan, and from some faculty members. A rally is planned for Nov. 18 to draw attention to the conflict between Ramlal-Nankoe and Ithaca College's administration, Bernabei said.

Beth Harris, a professor of politics at Ithaca College and a friend of Ramlal-Nankoe, said, "I think that there are some discrepancies between her initial review and her second review that require some explanation. I think these tenure cases are hard, obviously, for all kinds of reasons, but I do know the process was problematic — you can see it."

Questioning the process

In 2005, Ramlal-Nankoe's review board denied tenure based on poor scholarship, Ramlal-Nankoe said. She claims then-dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences Howard Erlich intervened when her department peers gave her a positive evaluation, leading to the denial. The provost in 2005, then Peter Bardaglio, agreed to allow the process to be repeated in response to her claims of unfairness, she said.

When Bardaglio extended her tenure probation for two years in 2005, he agreed to oversee the review process, Ramlal-Nankoe said. However, Bardaglio resigned before her second review, and the new provost in 2007 refused to interfere in the department's processes.

She went through the tenure process with the same tenure review board and no one from upper administration overseeing it, she said. Tenure was again denied, this time in all three areas, but Erlich only upheld the department's decision on the basis of poor teaching.

Ramlal-Nankoe maintains there can be no complaint about her teaching, and the board did not consider her student evaluations from almost 11 years of teaching, the majority of which were positive, she said.

"You see, somehow they had to deny tenure," she said. "It's clear (the dean) was not going to let go of his own grievances, his problems with the things I teach."

Ramlal-Nankoe appealed to the Faculty Appeals Committee after her appeal to Erlich failed both in 2005 and 2007, and both times her appeal was denied. In March of this year, her file went to the All-College Tenure and Promotion Committee, which met with the dean and sociology department head before also denying her appeal.

Ithaca College spokesman Dave Maley said allowing an extension for a tenure review is unusual but not unprecedented. Questions about a faculty member's politics are not part of the typical review for tenure, Maley said.

Discrimination complaint

The most recent refusal to reverse the decision, from the Board of Trustees, means Ramlal-Nankoe will move forward with her case, her lawyer said. The first step will be filing a gender discrimination complaint, Bernabei said.

The discrimination complaint will be filed within the month, Bernabei said.

Ramlal-Nankoe is making the complaint based on alleged misconduct of other members of her academic department, including what she calls inappropriate advances by one colleague, leading to his later prejudice against her, and comments about her relating to her "'foreignness' and my being a woman of color," she said in a written appeal to former college president Peggy Williams.

Bernabei said these actions began what Ramlal-Nankoe calls “a campaign motivated by bias” in the appeal to Williams.

‘Political backlash’

Bernabei said the way things have played out show that Ramlal-Nankoe's tenure denial is political backlash.

A letter from Bernabei to Ithaca College President Thomas Rochon and the trustees dated Sept. 18 says, “The college's denial of tenure (was) only because of their desire to impose political orthodoxy on the faculty of Ithaca College who hold differing views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than their own.”

Ramlal-Nankoe said her work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a direct link to her being denied tenure.

“For me it is so clear it is about the politics of my work,” she said. “(The dean) would go out of his way to cut or reject funding for our activities,” especially for the student organization Students for a Just Peace.

When she first arrived at Ithaca College, Ramlal-Nankoe said she was warned by other faculty members to be less forward about teaching about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When she tried to organize events with students, such as bringing in speakers or planning a trip to the occupied territories, she met with resistance and rejection from administrators.

Now that Ramlal-Nankoe has been denied tenure, she is entitled to a terminal year at the college. However, Bernabei said the school is cutting her spring classes, citing problems with her immigration status, problems which Bernabei said do not exist.

Ramlal-Nankoe said, “There is no problem with my immigration status. The college has been sponsoring me with no problem for 11 years, and suddenly they refuse. This has never occurred before. It is clear to me this is retaliation.”

The American Association of University Professors has sent letters on Ramlal-Nankoe's behalf, first to object to the length of her probation before getting a tenure hearing, which lasted more than 10 years, and now to argue that the college is abusing its power by denying her visa.
