

NEWS

College faces possibility of tenure lawsuit

By Erin Geismar Editor in Chief | September 25th, 2008

A sociology professor at Ithaca College has threatened to sue the institution after being denied tenure after two reviews in her 11 years at the college. Margo Ramlal-Nankoe, assistant professor of sociology, claims her tenure was denied based on her political views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"I have more than met the standards for tenure, so there is no other reason for the denial than the political reason," she said.

In a letter to President Tom Rochon and C. William Schwab, chair of the board of trustees, sent Sept. 16, Lynne Bernabei, the Washington, D.C.-based attorney hired by Ramlal-Nankoe, informed the college that Ramlal-Nankoe would pursue a "long and protracted legal case" if the board of trustees did not grant her tenure. In the letter she said the recommendations against Ramlal-Nankoe's tenure were not based on "fair evaluation of her qualifications, but constituted violations of basic principles of academic freedom."

Dave Maley, associate director of media relations at the college, said the college is reviewing it for a possible response.

Maley said the criteria for granting tenure — teaching, scholarship and service — are the same campus-wide. He said tenure review is a multitiered process that involves the department, dean, All-College Tenure and Promotion Committee, provost, president and board of trustees, in that order.

Ramlal-Nankoe, who was hired in 1997 but wasn't in a tenure-eligible position until 2000, was first reviewed for tenure in 2006. In the letter, Bernabei said at the time of her first review, then-provost Peter Bardaglio recommended against her tenure and promotion, citing a deficient record of scholarship. Because of alleged irregularities in the review process, as well as an outstanding affirmative action complaint she had filed against the department, Ramlal-Nankoe appealed the decision and Bardaglio called for a two-year extension of the probationary period on her tenure, Bernabei said.

Since the time her tenure was challenged on the basis of scholarship, Ramlal-Nankoe said she has completed an article and co-authored two books. She expects all three to be published this fall. She said she believed her work would be sufficient evidence of scholarship, or even exceed standards.

"What she did was far above anybody else in the [sociology] department," Bernabei said. "[It] is frankly above what most major universities require, which is one book."

Last spring, Ramlal-Nankoe's

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tenure was denied based on unevenness in her teaching, Ramlal-Nankoe said. Though she acknowledges that she received negative recommendations at every stage of the process, Ramlal-Nankoe said the decision was inconsistent with her previous review, when she was told her teaching and service met or exceeded standards.

Bernabei said because of the alleged inconsistencies, Ramlal-Nankoe thinks the decision was influenced by her teachings on the conflict in the Middle East.

"We think that it's because of her political views and her teaching on these issues that they denied her tenure," she said.

Ramlal-Nankoe said the attitude toward her teaching and especially her involvement with Students for a Just Peace, a student organization that advocates for the end of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, has made her interaction with members of the faculty and administration uncomfortable.

"I've often been referred to ... as anti-Israel," Ramlal-Nankoe said. "I'm definitely not."

Howard Erlich, former dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences, said the factors considered for tenure review are explained in detail in the faculty handbook, and political views do not play any role in the process. Erlich didn't comment on Ramlal-Nankoe's case directly but spoke generally about the tenure process.

Bernabei's letter cites Erlich, and "certain members" of the sociology department, as the cause of "numerous procedural and substantive violations of the tenure process."

The letter said Erlich and members of the department "distorted Dr. Ramlal-Nankoe's teaching record," and her positive student and peer evaluations were disregarded.

"Really, there is no basis for their current position, which is that she is not adequate in teaching," Bernabei said. "If there were some unevenness, you'd think before the 11th year they'd say something. They totally discounted student evaluations."

Bernabei said Ramlal-Nankoe's case has been rife with irregularities for many years, to the point that the American Association of University Professors contacted Rochon about the fact that Ramlal-Nankoe was not brought up for tenure after the standard six years. Bernabei said the explanation given to Ramlal-Nankoe by Erlich was that she was originally hired to a non-tenure eligible position and her first three years teaching did not count toward her tenure.

Erlich told The Ithacan that time spent in a non-tenure eligible position is not automatically applied to the six-year time frame if that professor transitions to a tenure track.

"That would be determined at the time of appointment in the tenure eligible position," he said. "The letter of appointment would specify the tenure review timetable."

Ramlal-Nankoe said the fact that those years would not count toward her tenure review period was never communicated to her.

Despite the troubles she has had, Ramlal-Nankoe said she is not ready to leave the college.

"I've been able to work with so many different programs," she said. "My work here has been rewarding and my teaching here has been rewarding."

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