

From the *Tallahassee Democrat*

Professors enter arbitration with FSU over layoffs

By Angeline J. Taylor • DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER • May 14, 2010

Oceanography professor David Thistle testified Thursday that he found himself in a quandary after being laid off from Florida State University last June.

Thistle was one of nine professors who testified during an arbitration hearing, in which faculty faced off against FSU administrators in an effort to keep their jobs. In a crowded boardroom, Thistle said he served on a committee that hired professor Ian MacDonald — someone "who has the same skill set I have."

MacDonald, also an oceanography professor, was offered a job in 2008 with full tenure, earning more than Thistle. Macdonald gets to keep his job. Thistle, a faculty member since 1977, has to fight for his.

Faculty members say Thistle's testimony accounts for only one of more than a dozen stories where tenured, long-time professors were laid off in June 2009 with a final work day set for May 7, 2010. Many have been scheduled to teach this fall, creating more questions than answers as to whether they have been laid off or not.

As each person testified, lawyers for the United Faculty of Florida union sat opposite from FSU attorneys in the University Training Center on Jackson Bluff Road. The arbitrator sat at the head of the table taking notes and listening intently. Today, FSU's attorneys will begin their case.

The arbitrator must determine whether the university was at fault for laying off tenured faculty — possibly violating as many as 12 articles of the collective bargaining agreement between FSU's board of trustees and the UFF, according to the grievance report.

Or, the arbitrator could determine FSU administrators and trustees upheld the collective bargaining agreement that was established in 2007.

"Our position remains, we followed the United Faculty of Florida contract," Betty Steffens, FSU's general counsel, said. "It was regrettable. We had to make layoffs due to budget constraints."

Thomas Brooks, attorney for the faculty with UFF-FSU's chapter, said. "The administration has not followed the layoff procedure set forth in the contract. Rather than

deciding what they would do to save money ... (they) glommed everyone together and said 'this person goes.' "

In the grievance, UFF-FSU's chapter seeks for the university to "rescind layoffs and make all grievants whole."

To that request, FSU Provost Larry Abele responded in a four-page document explaining the university's stance and saying "this grievance and remedy sought are denied."

