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## NEWS

### Lawmakers seek assurances that GAO may unionize

By [Kelly McCormack](#)

Government Accountability Office (GAO) Comptroller General David Walker last week met with Rep. Albert Wynn (D-Md.) and assured the congressman that he was not opposed to the organization of a union within his agency.

Despite Walker's assurances, Wynn drafted a letter supporting GAO workers' efforts to form a union. The letter gained the endorsement of 21 other members of the House and Senate, who demanded that Walker honor his employees' desire to organize.

"Some concerns had been expressed that Mr. Walker might oppose the union," Wynn said. "I met with Mr. Walker and we had a good, cordial conversation. He assured me that he wasn't opposed to the union."

Wynn told Walker that the letter, which "did not make any specific accusations," was sent out Friday, Feb. 23.

The letter cites the GAO Personnel Act, which states GAO employees have "the right to engage in self-organizational activities freely and without fear of penalty or reprisals, and for a labor-management relations program consistent with Chapter 71 of Title V — the labor-relations law that governs other federal employees."

Along with Wynn, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), House Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller (D-Calif.) and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) were among the lawmakers to sign on to the letter. Three pro-labor Republicans also signed the letter: Reps. Frank LoBiondo (N.J.), Charlie Dent (Pa.) and Chris Smith (N.J.).

In late January, the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE) announced that GAO employees launched a union-organizing campaign intended to represent 1,500 agency analysts and analysts in field offices across the country.

However, according to a source familiar with union activities who spoke on the condition of anonymity, Walker has not remained neutral during the campaign.



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“He has not been that neutral up to this point,” the source said. “He was probably in violation of law in union-organization campaigns — and if not the law, then the spirit of the law.”

The 22 lawmakers urged Walker to respect the rights of GAO employees and pleaded with him not to meddle in the campaign.

“Now that the GAO analysts have chosen to exercise this right, we want to ensure that they are permitted to proceed with their protected self-organizational activities free from interference,” the lawmakers continued. “Further, once the analysts file their election petition, we urge you [to] work cooperatively with them to ensure that the election is completed expeditiously and in good faith.”

Walker responded in a letter yesterday, saying that he has “stated both internally and externally on numerous occasions” that he recognizes the rights of certain GAO employees to organize. However, he noted that the management at the GAO has “certain legal rights” related to union activities, including the “right to challenge any attempt by the union to organize certain types of employees.”

“Let me assure you that we are prepared to fully support a timely election process if the union meets the related requirements for a vote,” Walker wrote.

However, the source said that the IFPTE lawyers recently warned Walker against speaking out against the union. The source noted that Walker has said that the GAO employees seeking to unionize are “disgruntled” and that the union does not have enough support to have an election.

Said the source: “The IFPTE found it necessary to send him a letter to cease and desist his anti-union statements.”

The source said that the union’s up-or-down election would most likely be held this spring.

Many GAO employees have complained that the federal agency has no internal oversight function and that its leader has consistently ignored employee concerns.

Over the last year, GAO employees and lawmakers have questioned Walker on a rating system that kept nearly 17 percent of employees from receiving a cost-of-living salary adjustment. In addition, some employees have said there has been racial discrimination within the agency. The House Oversight and Government Reform Committee as well as several lawmakers and employees have questioned Walker on several of these issues.

“We want to put Walker on notice and have Democrats and Republicans say to him, ‘We’re watching and we think these people have the right to form a union if they so choose,’” the source said.

The GAO is commonly called the “watchdog” agency. It oversees how the federal government spends taxpayers’ money and recommends to Congress how to make the government “more effective and responsive,” according to its website.



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