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Watchdogs Snap at Their Own Agency

By GARY FIELDS

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WASHINGTON -- The government's official nags are turning on their own.

The Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, was created to ensure compliance with federal regulations when it comes to spending public funds on everything from contracts to hiring and compensation.

Now, irked by sweeping changes to the agency's own personnel rules, which demoted hundreds of employees and froze the salaries of others, GAO analysts are trying to unionize. Activists are collecting signatures from 1,500 workers they believe are eligible to be represented by the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers, which, if approved, would be the first union at the GAO since its inception in 1921.

"We're able to recognize unfair treatment at places like the Defense Department," says Jacqueline Harpp, a 32-year agency veteran whose salary was frozen. "We can surely recognize when it's happening to us."

The battle bears little resemblance to the head-busting days of labor organizing in the 20th century. Analysts talk about their predicament in terms of "fungible capital" and "transparency." Their arguments are framed in language that might have been pulled from one of their GAO reports, which sport titles such as "Combating Nuclear Smuggling: DNDO Has Not Yet Collected Most of the National Laboratories' Test Results on Radiation Portal Monitors in Support of DNDO's Testing and Development Program."

Nonetheless, GAO office windows are lined with red, white and blue "Band Together" stickers, a reference to the agency's salary "bands." On Wednesdays, volunteers staff a table on the first floor, handing out signature cards to employees. A small group of employees has filed a petition through the GAO Personnel Appeals Board challenging the restructuring.

The debate, despite its gentility, has so upset life at the agency that Congress has launched an investigation into its own investigator, asking its Congressional Research Service to look into the personnel moves.

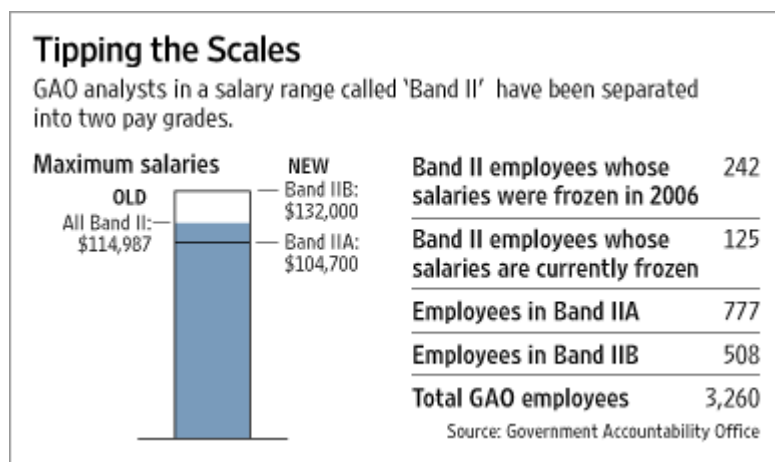
GAO organizers estimate they have signed up about half of eligible employees in Washington, and have expanded efforts to field offices around the country. Union representatives are hopeful a vote will be called this spring.

The target of the organizing activity is the head of the GAO, Comptroller General David Walker. Mr. Walker came to the agency in 1998 from accounting firm Arthur Andersen LLP, where he ran the practice that advised companies on personnel. Before then, he worked in the Labor Department during the Reagan administration.

Mr. Walker cuts a high profile, particularly in his campaign to spur action on the nation's long-term fiscal problems. In March, for instance, he spoke at conferences and hearings from Washington to London to Vienna, and appeared on CBS's "60 Minutes" insisting that "the most serious threat to the United States is...our own fiscal irresponsibility."

Mr. Walker says he has been trying to bring agency pay in line with salaries for comparable jobs in the private sector. He lobbied Congress for such leeway, which it granted in 2004.

Mr. Walker then hired consultant Watson Wyatt Worldwide, which concluded that hundreds of GAO employees were being paid more than their duties warranted. As



a result, Mr. Walker froze the salaries of more than 300 workers and capped the salaries of others, virtually all of them analysts conducting government investigations. For the agency's midtier pay scale, the new cap was \$101,600, down from \$114,987. Raises and promotions were

henceforth to be based on performance, rather than seniority.

As a small group of analysts ate lunch in a restaurant near the GAO's Washington headquarters recently, they seemed an unlikely group of activists. The discussion was analytical and precise and centered on information, statistics and process.

Ms. Harpp complained about not being able to see the data used by the consultant. "Transparency is one of the key phrases...we use in analyzing other agencies. You have to expect us to want the same transparency in our own agency."

Paul Wright, a 26-year veteran, was promoted as a result of the reshuffling. He said workers at the GAO were initially willing to give Mr. Walker the benefit of the doubt, "recognizing that in some cases people were stodgy...A lot of people thought GAO needed a breath of fresh air and some human-capital changes." But he, too, has soured on the boss.

While the organizing effort is under way, the agency settled with 12 employees who had filed a complaint because their salaries had been frozen and they had been demoted.

Mr. Walker disputes the notion that the changes weren't transparent, pointing to information posted on the GAO's Intranet and at town-hall meetings. He says no one took a pay cut and that the freezes aren't permanent. Salaries will rise when cost-of-living increases take them above the caps.

In an interview with Government Executive magazine, which riled analysts when it was published, Mr. Walker said many of the employees targeted by union organizers are supervisors who aren't eligible to sign union cards. "They may not understand what the rules are. But I do," he told the magazine.

Union organizers dispute his assessment of who is eligible.

Mr. Walker says the criticism is to be expected. He says the views of organizers aren't shared by most GAO employees, "based on the results of our latest employee-feedback survey." Indeed, a recent survey by the Partnership for Public Service and American University rated the GAO as the second-best place to work among large U.S. government agencies -- behind only the Nuclear Regulatory Commission -- up from fourth in 2005.

Now, Congress is getting involved. The restructuring prompted an exchange of letters between Mr. Walker and several House members, who accused him of backtracking on salary promises made in 2003. A representative of the CRS, the agency investigating the GAO, complained in testimony last month that his agency wasn't able to get basic information on data used by the GAO consultant.

Rep. Danny Davis, an Illinois Democrat who heads a House federal work-force subcommittee, says he doesn't know whether Mr. Walker or the employees are right -- yet. "It's like asking whether it's fair for birds to eat worms," he says. "You ask the bird you get one answer, and you ask the worm you get a different answer. Both of them are expressing their truths."

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