

GAO employees move toward vote on union representation

By Karen Rutzick
krutzick@govexec.com

A group of employees in the Government Accountability Office is attempting to form a union in the agency to combat, in part, discontent with a new compensation system.

As many as 1,500 GAO analysts will vote whether or not to join the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers in the coming months, according to IFPTE officials. Last week, some analysts and union representatives briefed members of Congress about the union effort and asked for their support.

GAO, an arm of Congress that acts as a watchdog over federal operations, has been frequently touted as having the model of an updated personnel system in government. Its system takes into account market salary rates and job performance in determining employees' pay.

About half of the federal workforce - specifically, employees at the Defense and Homeland Security departments -- is now moving off of the federal government's General Schedule to personnel systems similar to the one GAO has implemented.

The GAO attempt to unionize comes even as the Bush administration has tried to curb the power of unions in departments with new personnel systems, to give management more freedom to hire, fire and compensate employees.

Last winter, a small group of GAO analysts approached union officials in the Congressional Research Service, according to IFPTE President Gregory Junemann. IFPTE already represents CRS employees.

"If DoD and even Homeland Security throws up GAO as 'This is exactly how pay for performance is supposed to be run' and those employees are saying 'No, this isn't fair, it isn't working and it isn't right,' then how can anybody look at that and say that's a situation we want to model ourselves after?" Junemann said.

Since that initial meeting, the GAO union group has become a "broad-based effort" with "hundreds of supporters," according to IFPTE General Counsel Julie Clark.

But Comptroller General David M. Walker, who said he has been aware of the movement since August, characterizes the effort as coming from a handful of employees who are upset about not receiving pay raises this year under the new personnel plan.

"I'm not going to overreact just because a few employees are trying to do something," Walker said.

Some GAO employees received no raise for 2007 because a new market survey concluded they

were overpaid. Walker split the middle of three pay bands, or pay ranges, into two, with a higher compensation range available in the upper band for employees deemed to have supervisory roles. Employees who fell in the lower portion of the band did not receive a raise.

In late September, nine congressmen sent a letter to Walker expressing disappointment with his decision not to give everyone at least a small pay increase, after he testified that he would.

"Had we been aware of your unwillingness to follow through with your publicly stated commitment to provide the across-the-board increase, the Congress ... would have taken steps to do so through the legislative process," stated the letter, signed by Danny Davis, D-Ill., Steny Hoyer, D-Md., and others.

In his response, Walker said he "never promised, nor would I ever promise, to provide automatic across-the-board increases to any employee whose pay is in excess of competitive compensation levels."

Organizers in IFPTE stress that the lack of a pay raise is not the sole reason employees want a union.

"It's really not about the past, it's about the future," Clark said. "The union is about ... becoming a meaningful, active, engaged player in the process of personnel management."

In December, the employee advisory council for GAO sent a letter to a handful of lawmakers outlining some concerns. They included disparate performance appraisals for African American analysts, the use of one-time bonuses instead of permanent pay raises, and a lack of consistency among raters conducting performance reviews.

"Some staff, as well as many members of the [advisory council] believe that because the EAC lacks independence from GAO management, that it cannot effectively represent constituency concerns," the letter noted.

Walker said he supports the right to collective bargaining. But, he said, "there are pros and cons that we would have to present to our employees."

Already, IFPTE officials and Walker seem to disagree on the number of employees eligible for the union. Union officials put the number at 1,500, but Walker said that is too high.

"You can't organize supervisors," Walker said. "So I don't see how you get to 1,500. They may not understand what the rules are. But I do."

The unionization effort is still in its early stages. IFPTE has to officially petition for an election. There will be time to campaign after that, followed by a secret-ballot vote. More than half of eligible employees must vote to join the union for it to succeed.

Walker said there was a failed attempt to unionize GAO employees before his tenure.