

Roll Call

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# GAO Analysts Plan to Vote on Unionization

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Government Accountability Office employees are aiming to hold a vote this spring to decide whether to form a union, with organizers claiming momentum is building at an agency they described as filled with discontent, fear and rapidly sinking morale.

But Comptroller General David Walker said the movement is being led by a few discontented workers unhappy after the agency changed its employee pay structure to a market-based, performance-driven system.

"When you're making dramatic and fundamental changes, it's going to be controversial," Walker said. "Not everybody is going to like it."

Organizers said they officially entered the second phase of their efforts last week, going public with a movement kept relatively quiet outside of the GAO for several months. If their plans succeeds, more than 1,500 analysts will become members of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers, an AFL-CIO-affiliated union that also represents Congressional Research Service staff, according to union officials.

In addition to staff in Washington, D.C., the union also would represent analysts at field offices in Atlanta, Boston and other cities.

In an interview, three analysts who each have worked more than 20 years at the agency said they are seeking a voice for employees in administrative matters and on Capitol Hill.

"We want a union so our expertise can be a part of shaping the answers," one analyst said. All three requested anonymity.

Commonly referred to as Congress' official watchdog, the GAO is charged with auditing, evaluating and investigating the activities and policies of other government agencies.

Its employee structure often is presented as a model, and GAO employees have never formed a union before, despite past attempts.

But the analysts said that in recent years employee discontent there has grown, with the pay restructuring given the main blame.

Those who came out positively after the restructuring were urged to keep quiet about it, the analysts said. That created a secretive, competitive work environment, undermining teamwork at a place where people are required to work together, they added.

"People who work at the agency are in the dark about how personnel management decisions are made," said IFPTE President Greg Junemann.

The new policies also hurt minority employees and have pushed out many agency veterans, the analysts said.

They added that GAO officials excluded employees when the new policy was being designed because they feared employee response.

Walker "knows we are going to look at it in a very analytical way, and we are going to point out the problems," one analyst said, adding that any attempts at employee feedback, including through the agency's Employee Advisory Council, have been ignored.

"It's just going through the motions," another analyst said.

Walker denied those claims. The pay restructuring came after a comprehensive study on the agency's salary methods, and the new system is far more transparent, he said.

But that study also found that 10 percent to 15 percent of GAO employees were overpaid, which Walker said is a direct cause of this protest.

"There's no easy way to tell someone you are paid overmarket," he said.

Officials also worked hard to include employees in the restructuring process, hosting forums and meetings with employees, Walker said.

Walker added that the Employee Advisory Council has significant power when it comes to the decisions made by GAO leaders.

"There were many more winners than losers, and unfortunately, you never hear from the winners," Walker said.

He admitted the transition has not been easy, but he added that once it is over, things will be better for both the agency and taxpayers.

"When you are on the leading edge of change and transformation, some people don't like it," he said. "I think that's what's going on here."

Walker said that while he isn't convinced that organizers will ever meet the requirements to form a union, he will work with employees if it is their decision to do so.

"I obviously support the right to unionize if they want, and I support the collective bargaining process," Walker said.

For the analysts, their goal is to improve the way employees are treated, they said.

"I didn't come to the federal government for wages," one analyst said. "I came to GAO because I wanted to make a difference."

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