

# Organizing Professional Workers

Submitted by Department for Professional Employees

**F**OR AMERICA'S UNIONS, membership growth depends upon our collective ability to reach out and attract into our ranks new members from all segments of the U.S. workforce especially those that are growing the fastest. For the last several decades, the most rapidly expanding workforce has been, is and will continue to be among America's professional and technical workers.

Post-industrial America has experienced seismic changes in the nation's workforce—a transformation marked by an explosion in the white-collar world of work. In 1975, over 13.5 million professional and highly skilled technicians were on the job in the American economy; by 2000, that number had more than doubled. Through 2012, their numbers will increase by another 6.5 million or 23.3 percent, still the fastest-growing occupational group in the nation. And while overall U.S. employment is projected to increase by less than 15 percent, these occupations will account for an astounding 30.3 percent of all employment growth.

The good news for the labor movement is that a number of its unions already represent millions of workers in white-collar occupations, providing a significant base from which organized labor can and should grow.

- Nearly 4.7 million (18.2 percent) of professionals are union members, while 12.5 percent of the overall workforce is organized;
- As union representation fell to less than 14 percent of the workforce, among professionals it was more than 21 percent—a third higher;

- From 1985 to 2005, as overall union membership declined by about 1.5 million, it increased by nearly the exact same number among professional and technical workers; and
- According to the Department of Labor, over 3 million professional and technical employees already participate in collective bargaining organizations—50 percent of those professional employees are eligible for union membership.

Today, more than 51 percent of all union members are white-collar workers, while professional and related occupations are the largest contingent of union members of any occupational classification. For example, unions within the federation's Department for Professional Employees (DPE) represent over 4 million professionals in nearly 400 separate and distinct occupations.

But the bad news is that this substantial white-collar base is one of organized labor's best kept secrets, a face of America's unions that is rarely seen. Unorganized professionals, academics, politicians, the press and even organizations allied with us more often than not do not connect the dots between the professions and unions. For most white-collar workers, unions are seen as irrelevant—organizations useful only to less-skilled, less-educated workers. This is a paradox that needs to change and an image problem that needs to be rectified.

If the labor movement, broadly defined, is to survive, expand and build density in the 21st century, the AFL-CIO must walk the walk and talk the talk to establish the relevance of the labor movement to

these workers. To begin that process, the AFL-CIO must address the following:

**Organizing:** Federation assets—including the Department of Organizing, the field staff, the Organizing Institute, the National Labor College, state and local labor councils along with organizing dollars—must be engaged in the business of assisting AFL-CIO unions in organizing professional and technical workers. Collaborative efforts must be undertaken to create or adapt new or existing organizational models for white-collar organizing, particularly in sectors where density is low, such as information technology, financial services, biotech, etc. Collaborative educational initiatives between the DPE and the National Labor College to train white-collar organizers must be restarted with the involvement of the Organizing Institute and with the recognition that organizing professionals is distinctly different from organizing other workers.

**Outreach:** Programs that connect to both today's and tomorrow's professionals through professional associations and on college campuses must be expanded:

■ **Professional associations:** Polling data, focus group findings and other information have long shown that professionals, more than any other occupational group, have a strong affinity for direct membership in organizations that are of, by and for them. Professionals and other highly skilled white-collar workers are joiners: They affiliate with professional societies and associations to network, continue their education, present papers and attend programs, receive mentoring and so on. The AFL-CIO must support expansion of existing networking initiatives with professional associations and work with the DPE and affiliates to establish a presence at their meetings and conferences. Stronger relationships between labor and professional associations offer the potential for organizing vast numbers of professional and technical workers and gain support from these organizations for legislative and other issues of common concern as happened during the fight over overtime pay.

■ **Community colleges and universities:**

Almost 17 million students are currently enrolled in these institutions. Most are preparing for a professional or technical career and are potential union members. Yet the vast majority has little understanding of the vital role unions play in our society and how they work to improve the status of the professions and help individuals achieve their career goals. Compounding the problem are the on-campus efforts of lavishly funded, anti-union right-wing groups that dissuade these professionals-in-waiting from becoming involved with unions as they pursue their careers. Significant resources must be devoted to expand existing programs that will reach out to students, change the culture and pave the way for future organizing.

**Collective Bargaining:** While white-collar workers care about the same basic economic issues as others—pay, benefits and working conditions—there are others who relate to their status as professionals—occupational standards and licensing; professional autonomy and integrity of their work product; lifelong learning, professional development and networking; the impact of technology; and contingent work arrangements. Collaboratively with the appropriate unions and the DPE, the AFL-CIO should inventory best practices now in use by professional unions that address these and other issues and explore new strategies that relate to their occupational identities and resonate with white-collar workers, particularly young professionals.

**Public Policy:** The AFL-CIO must be out front in addressing the overarching problems faced by white-collar workers as it was in the fight over overtime pay. These issues include the offshore outsourcing of their jobs; job displacement due to professional guest workers; the transformation of full-time work into contingent, part-time employment; loss of overtime pay through misclassification; the need for pension portability; and ineligibility for workers' compensation and unemployment benefits due to being categorized as "independent contractors."

Regarding the offshoring crisis, given widespread public concern about the continued export of American jobs, consideration should be given to targeted state and local ballot wedge-issue campaigns to ban offshore outsourcing of procurement contracts particularly where there are large high-tech workforces. Most importantly, federation-wide programs that provide the opportunity to involve these highly educated and articulate workers in back-home, face-to-face grassroots interaction with lawmakers on these and other issues like the fight to protect Social Security should be restored.

**Public Relations:** AFL-CIO press efforts featuring the unionized professionals needs to be ramped up substantially with particular emphasis on the federation's advocacy on key white-collar issues. The effort to tell the story of labor's professionals should link their work to the community, e.g., the teachers' fight for smaller classrooms is all about quality education, the nurses' fight for lower patient loads improves the quality of health care for patients and the firefighters' campaign to put more professionals in the fire stations better protects public safety.

In addition, opinion research conducted for the federation, where practicable, should include survey samples with appropriate occupational balance to assure representative demographics and timely issue questions relevant to professionals. Finally, colleges and universities are the training ground for the next generation of white-collar workers. The right wing already provides tens of millions of dollars in getting its message out through the college press or alternative venues. Consideration should be given to creating a labor link to the college and university presses

as a method for getting out the message about what today's labor movement is doing for the soon-to-be professional workforce.

At its last Convention, the AFL-CIO policy resolution that outlined the federation's organizing game-plan addressed the many root causes for the decades' long decline of organized labor. First among them was that "our economy has changed from industrial based to information based"—a transition that the labor movement has been slow to recognize and adapt to.

Collective action is at the core of what we, as a labor movement, are all about. Every union leader and activist knows the success of any collective action, whether it is organizing, bargaining, political action or mobilization, depends upon a precise understanding of who the target audience is we're trying to reach. The current debate about the future direction of the AFL-CIO offers us the chance to recognize the audience has fundamentally changed and survival depends upon our ability to adapt to that change.

In this regard, the AFL-CIO has to more emphatically and publicly identify itself with the concerns and aspirations of the growing professional and technical workforce. The federation and its affiliated unions have to think creatively, invest resources, reshape the image and the message and act strategically if we are to attract them to our side. Organizing the millions of current and future professional employees is essential to the survival of our labor movement and its ability to regain its standing as a dynamic and forceful advocate for all working Americans.