

High Tech Professionals Are Hard to Organize Too

It is unlikely that any technical and professional employees will be organized in non-union high tech firms until more blue-collar production workers become union members. There are, however, some high technology companies which already have heavily unionized blue-collar workforces. Two industrial unions have recently tried to recruit new members among the engineering and computer personnel at such firms. The experiences of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) at AT&T Technologies and the International Union of Electronic, Electrical, Technical, Salaried, & Machine Workers (IUE) at Raytheon indicate that the obstacles facing unions in this type of "high tech organizing" are formidable.

CWA's engineer recruitment drive began in 1982 when the 2,000 member Association of Engineers and Associates (AEA) voted to affiliate with it. The AEA functioned as a non-bargaining technical and professional organization at a number of AT&T's telecommunications equipment manufacturing plants. Frustrated by management's persistent refusal to meet with it, the AEA decided to seek CWA's help in winning collective bargaining rights at plants where CWA (or the IBEW) represented blue-collar workers and most of the lower-level white-collar workers.

Because AT&T had a history of opposition to technical/professional bargaining, the union proceeded very carefully. It assembled a team of five full-time organizers, including three with engineering backgrounds. Intensive leadership training and committee building was done. A six-month education and membership campaign was conducted at each target location. Before any authorization cards were distributed, at least 60% of the projected bargaining unit had to pay dues of at least \$20 per member to demonstrate commitment for the AEA's new organizational objective: NLRB certification.

When these targets were reached, AEA-CWA campaigned on a platform of democratically developed demands including: maintenance of merit raises, establishment of cash awards for inventors, greater involvement in management decision-making, and achievement of other "professional goals."

The drive was soon blunted, however, by extensive employer concessions in the form of promised (and quickly implemented) "participatory management" schemes, revamping of technical and

professional employee personnel practices, and other mollifying reforms.

The AEA-CWA was forced to withdraw one of its three election petitions after losing a long unit-determination battle at the NLRB. Other NLRB delays resulted in an election being held at the company's Pennsylvania plant in the middle of the nationwide CWA-IBEW strike against AT&T in August 1983! Angered or frightened by mass picketing incidents and swayed by six weeks of "captive audience" meetings with management, 70 AEA-CWA supporters defected to produce a 270 to 200 vote against unionization. AEA-CWA withdrew its remaining election petition and has since reverted to association-type activity.

The IUE's on-going campaign at several Raytheon Missile Division plants near Boston began in more traditional fashion. Disgruntled Raytheon salaried employees contacted the union when their insurance benefits were cut in the Spring of 1984. IUE officials responded by holding open meetings attended by more than 300 workers. Card signing began immediately—even before a broadly-based in-plant committee could be established. Two campaign offices were opened, a regular newsletter was started, and AFL-CIO field staff was sent in to assist the IUE. But the card-signing drive fizzled after company unfair labor practices and hastily-made improvements in pay and benefits cooled enthusiasm for collective bargaining.

By July 1985, the IUE had pulled back from its goal of an NLRB election. With greatly reduced financing and staff, the union is now trying to build support for unionization through a non-bargaining employees association.

Even when unions develop non-traditional bargaining proposals or experiment with new organizational forms, they have great difficulty overcoming the anti-union bias of better paid white-collar workers. Such workers—even when sympathetic to collective bargaining—often have a strong aversion to many of the practices of the blue-collar unions in plants where they work. This is why the few existing engineer unions rarely have any ties to their shop counterparts.

In the entire country, there is only one manufacturing plant in any industry where the same union represents all levels of the workforce—production workers, office clericals, technicians, and professional engineering employees.

The workplace unity and bargaining power that might be achieved in partially organized high tech firms through successful white-collar recruitment remains, for now at least, an elusive goal. ■

—Early & Wilson