

Temps: A New Labor Movement

By Spencer E. Ante

4:00am 30.Jun.98.PDT

Sara Horowitz is a born labor organizer. But, after years of working within the traditional labor movement, the 35-year-old activist has become deeply frustrated with public and private institutions unable to keep up with the hyper speed world of business. So she has come up with a plan to rewrite the rules of labor.

"I realized that the whole legal framework of the 1930s wasn't working for this workforce," says Horowitz, the executive director of Working Today, a two-year-old nonprofit organization for self-employed workers. "It's a very disjointed world if you're a free agent."

The growing need for such "free agents" to have specially tailored representation is clear. In 1986, the number of temps employed each day was 800,000, but the number had more than tripled by last year, according to the National Association of Temporary and Staffing Services. A recent study by the Economic Policy Institute determined that self-employed and temporary workers now make up 30 percent of the American workforce.

Increasingly, these workers are hired as so-called long-term temps: employees who work at a company for at least one year, have flexible hours and high take-home pay, but no benefits or job security. High-tech firms, such as Microsoft, AT&T, Intel, Hewlett-Packard, and Boeing are particularly avid employers of long-term temps.

The use of long-term temps escalated in the early 1990s, after the Internal Revenue Service alerted companies that they had erroneously classified thousands of workers as independent contractors and ordered the companies to pay overdue taxes. Companies then asked many of the same workers to sign up with temp agencies, which sent the workers back to their old companies and old jobs.

Legally, there is still no prohibition on hiring long-term temps, but such workers are increasingly restive. Many have filed suits claiming that they deserve the same benefits as regular workers.

In spite of these rumblings, labor unions have so far had scant success in attracting high-tech temps. "New media professionals have very little time for organizing activity," says Cornell professor Susan Christopherson, who studies labor practices in the entertainment industry. "They've got to be convinced that these organizations are providing them with something that they need. Also, this part of the workforce is more difficult to organize and more resistant to organizing because they don't think of themselves as 'workers' but as 'professionals.'"

Nonetheless, increasing numbers of contractors and "professional" temps are seeking collective bargaining agreements. One high profile example is the Washington Alliance of Technical Workers or WashTech, which is seeking to organize thousands of temporary high-tech employees in the Puget Sound region. Others are springing up nationwide. Just last week a group of New York computer professionals announced its intention to start a guild.

Part of the same movement, Working Today is particularly keen on partnering with wired workers, who are a large part of the contingent labor force. A Coopers & Lybrand survey of New York's new

media industry, for instance, shows that 47,000, or nearly half, of new media jobs are filled by freelance or part-time workers, the majority of whom are employed for less than six months.

Running Working Today out of a small office in lower Manhattan, Horowitz hopes to unite the fragmented workforce and provide individuals with the bargaining muscle of a union and the political power of a lobbying juggernaut. So far, the organization claims 60,000 members from more than 18 professional groups, including Asian Women in Media, the Computer Game Developers Association, and the Society of Telecommunications Consultants.

Benefits for such workers are cheap and concrete. By ponying up Working Today's US\$10 membership fee, workers get discounted rates on health insurance, office supplies, computer software, and airline tickets. New Yorkers who join Working Today, for example, can buy a package including drug, dental, vision, and life insurance with a \$1,000 deductible for \$255 a month. Membership also includes a prepaid legal plan.

The next goal is uniting New York's large community of wired workers. To that end, Working Today launched a pilot project to explore the feasibility of creating a health and pension fund for new media workers. The fund will probably resemble the one devised by the Screen Actors Guild and will allow workers to keep their benefits as they hyperlink from employer to employer and project to project. It will also make it easy for employers to contribute to a health insurance or retirement plan, thereby increasing the security of free agents.

Even without the New Media project up and running, Working Today is beginning to attract members of the infotech workforce. In May, the World Wide Web Artists Consortium, New York's most prominent new media group, joined the Working Today network.

Horowitz knows that organizing contingent workers is a Sisyphean struggle, but she remains optimistic. "This group of people is learning that they'd be much better off by forming associations instead of going at it alone," says Horowitz. "WWWAC, in a sense, is the new labor movement, but people have been doing this for 200 years."

Related Wired Links:

MS Loses Round in Temp Case
26.Jan.98

Supremes Deny Microsoft Appeal in
Freelance Case
26.Jan.98

Wanna Pull an All-Nighter, Sans Overtime?
22.Dec.97

Redmond Report: The Lower-Caste Life of a
Microsoft Temp
18.Nov.96

Copyright © 1993-98 Wired Ventures Inc. and affiliated companies. All rights reserved.