Labor unions face hard road in Silicon Valley

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Employees of tech firms and startups often move frequently and get a number of workplace perks, but activists say there is nonetheless growing interest in labor unions in the sector

Well paid and in high demand, it would appear that engineers in Silicon Valley have scant reason to join forces in labor unions.

And yet there are signs that interest is on the rise.

Engineer Bjorn Westergard and a dozen colleagues were fired early this year by Lanetix. The startup specializing in professional software cited economic reasons for the staffing cut.

But axed employees suspect their effort to create a worker union was a factor in the move.

The dismissals came a few days after an application join with the Communications Workers of America was sent, Westergard told AFP.

"I think it is the first time that software engineers in a software company have filed (to unionize)," Westergard said

"It's not hard to find a job, and it pays relatively good so there is the idea that if you have any problem at all you just leave and get another job."

Some 10.7 percent of US workers are unionized, according to a January report by the Labor Department, about half the percentage from 1983. The highest levels are in public-sector jobs, including teachers and firefighters.

The report found just 1.7 percent of "professional and technical services" workers in the private sector are union members.

Silicon Valley talent is notorious for flitting from one well-paying job to another, with high turnover in workplaces weakening the potential for worker solidarity.

Westergard contended that colleagues in the industry are giving increasing weight to the option of staying put and fixing what they see as problems in workplaces instead of quitting.

It's not that engineers are anti-union, Westergard maintained, "they just don't know anything about organized labor."

Libertarian outlook

Tech companies, on the other hand, have long been cool to the idea of unions.

Internet titans like Facebook and Google are known for pampering engineers: high salaries, stock grants, comprehensive health insurance, unlimited meals, bicycles, dance classes, special commuter buses, limitless espresso and more in offices with the feel of playful college campuses.

Technology workers are less likely than others to be unionized, but there are signs of interest in Silicon Valley

It would seem daunting for engineers on picket lines to win public support.

Silicon Valley employers are said to have a "libertarian" mindset that deems unions a brake on freewheeling progress, with the viewpoint conveniently playing into their business interests, according to David Judd of the Tech Workers Coalition.

The organization describes itself as " a coalition of tech industry workers, labor organizers, community organizers, and friends cultivating solidarity among all workers in tech."

According to Time magazine article in 2014, retail colossus Amazon has taken pains to prevent even warehouse workers from unionizing, advocating a "direct relationship" between management and employees.

For the Tech Workers Coalition, the interest of Lanetix employees in a union was a sign of growing awareness in the technology sector that they are very much a part of the rest of society and their creations are touching the lives of most people.

Lanetix did not respond to a request for comment.

"There is a lot of activity among workers who are working for websites and digital media and trying to organize," author and union specialist David Bacon told AFP.

"It is partly a product of the insecurity in this industry," he added, noting that if a startup fails, employees rewarded with shares for countless hours of labor can wind up with nothing.

The response from employers, however, has been a consistent 'unions not allowed,' according to Bacon.

There has been a wave of unionization in recent years among employees of subcontractors tech giants hire for jobs such as cleaning offices or preparing meals, noted Judd.

Computer scientists have yet to follow suit with a passion, but interest is healthy, according to Judd.

Work hours for engineers can be grueling, with long days routine under the pretext of changing the world for the better, Judd said. And, there can be workplace concerns about sexism or racism.

The election of Donald Trump as US president may be ramping up interest in unions, with tech workers worried they may be serving as drones for an evil empire.

"We don't want our employers to get away with building surveillance tools for Trump to go after our neighbors and colleagues, or with screwing over their users by selling data, ignoring security holes, or manipulating content," Judd said.

"Fundamentally, it's about democracy: we want a say in our lives and our impact on the world. We want technology to be a tool for people, not a power over them."

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