

# COMPUTERWORLD

## Programmers are programmed against unions

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NOVEMBER 20, 2000 (COMPUTERWORLD) - Because of my recent experience in helping to form a professional association for computer programmers, I'm often asked about the prospects for expanding unions within the profession. Despite some recent well-publicized successes, such as Washtech's organization of "perma-temps" at Microsoft, the prospects for organized labor making significant inroads among programmers are bleak.

The major obstacle for unions to overcome? Programmers themselves.

They're too independent to organize, and most believe that keeping up their skills will always allow them to find jobs, so they can succeed on their own without a union's help. Organizing the now 1,000-member Programmer's Guild during the past two years made me feel like I was herding cats. Programmers have an instinctive aversion to any form of organizing, and the resistance to joining a union is much greater among programmers than joining a professional organization like ours.

Primarily, unions and programmers don't think alike. A striking example of this disconnect is in politics. Programmers tend to be libertarian in their views and treat the two major political parties with suspicion, if not contempt. And programmers view the major labor unions as - politically - an extension of the Democratic Party, which promotes liberal social agendas that most programmers aren't comfortable with.

Unions also face changes in the nature of the programming workforce. Historically, the vast majority of professional programmers haven't earned computer science degrees. The gap between the number of computer science graduates and the number of programming jobs was filled by employers that have given on-the-job training in programming to people from other fields. Also, employers have available a huge supply of imported foreign workers who have received basic computer training. In fact, a recent Department of Commerce report said 28% of programming jobs are being filled by foreign nationals.

A foreign guest worker's ability to remain in the U.S. is contingent upon staying employed, and that could be plenty enough to dissuade him from becoming involved in union activity. Add the fact that most of these workers depend on their employers to make green-card applications for them, and you have a solid bulwark against union activity.

To have a broad appeal to programmers, the unions themselves will have to change. Were I to form a programmers' union, it would look more like the Major League Baseball players'

union than the UAW. It would have to allow great flexibility for individuals, letting workers negotiate their own salaries within an overall framework, for example, rather than trying to lump everyone with the same job title into the same pay scale.

While unions have the potential to benefit a large segment of the programming workforce, I expect them to make very small gains during the next few years. Their most likely successes will be among organizations where unions already have a strong base. Unions also may be able to take advantage of intense company-specific issues, such as when IBM changed its retirement plan to the detriment of older employees or Microsoft's use of perma-temps to avoid paying benefits.

In order for unions to organize programmers, they must find a strategy for dealing with the increase in the use of temporary workers, and they must market themselves to programmers in such a way that the benefits of union membership clearly outweigh the perceived liabilities.