FEATURE: The Future of the Hi-tech Union (Part 2)

By Paul Zakrzewski

Whether you're talking about thousands of potential union employees at Amazon, or only a few dozen at eTown, one aspect that united the recent high-profile union drives was their location -- the west coast, or more specifically, California and the Pacific Northwest. But what about closer to home? Are there any signs that similar union battles are heating up here in the Alley?

The short answer is no.

Several company representatives contacted for this story say the unionization efforts out west did not affect them. "We're not a retailer, so it's not really a concern," said a spokesperson for 24/7 Media, echoing similar responses from several major Alley companies. Other companies, with customer service departments similar to Amazon.com's, did not return calls for comment.

These days, of course, Alley dot-coms would rather talk about a potential NASDAQ delisting than admit to labor unrest within their ranks.

Officials at the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) Region 2 office, which covers New York City, say they haven't seen any recent evidence of unionization efforts either.

The NLRB, the federal agency which fields petitions for union representation and investigates labor grievances (such as the one filed in early January by the Northern California Media Workers Guild against eTown), would be on the frontline of any unionizing effort here in the Alley. Its Region 2 office has yet to receive any petitions from a union seeking to represent dot-com workers.

Furthermore, local union activists say despite some scattered attempts to organize hi-tech workers, New York just isn't living up to its history as a hotbed of labor unrest.

"I haven't heard of any organizing efforts lately," said John Miano, chairman of The Programmers Guild. The guild is a 300-member, Summit, N.J.-based programmers group aimed at addressing grievances among IT workers. "Most of the time when I hear about these sorts of efforts, it happens to be in response to specific events such as at Amazon or Microsoft," he said.

Partly this has to do with the mentality of IT workers themselves. "It's very difficult to organize people in the hi tech world," said Miano. "Programmers, especially, have a very independent streak. We still have a difficult task just trying to get them to join professional organizations, never mind unions."

"We've learned that you can't parachute people into this sort of thing. You have to have people who are eager to be in a union," Cheliotis said. "It's going to take some time to develop on this coast."

But lack of interest may be only a part of the reason why the Alley hasn't seen the same level of organizing effort. Immanuel Ness, a professor of Political Science at Brooklyn College and editor of a labor journal called "Working USA," thinks that the Alley's hi-tech industry simply hasn't developed to the same degree as it has on the west coast; hence its unionizing efforts also lag behind.

"Here in New York you don't have any company, such as Microsoft, which approaches 8,000 or 10,000 workers," said Ness. And while there's been a "tremendous change" in how unions are viewed in the Pacific Northwest -- even among highly skilled professionals, such as Boeing engineers -- this isn't true back home.

Alley experts say that Local unions may have to take some of the blame, too. "No worker is going to join a union if they think they'll lose," said Ness. "There isn't any union in place currently that has the power -- that has committed the resources to organize on a large scale -- in New York. It's a completely nascent effort, with only small firms involved at the moment."

But some activists say the hi-tech union of the future is already here, if you know where to look.

Unions can simply be membership organizations which create standards industry, such as pay levels. Boeing engineers who created professional associations that eventually morphed into unions are only one example.

And both hi-tech workers and unions themselves need to rethink what a union could be, says Ness. For example, activists could work towards a union that didn't specialized in bargaining agreements, but rather in ensuring certain wage levels for different sorts of workers -- argued collectively, of course.

"What we need in the union movement is to reconceptualize what it means to belong to a union," said Ness.

WashTech's Mike Blain thinks that a hi-tech union must take into account the different needs and demands of IT workers.

"There's totally a disconnect between traditional unions and the hi-tech industry, which is why [WashTech] isn't building a traditional union," he said. "The fact is that a traditional union that revolves around collective bargaining and negotiation is a long ways away in this industry. And we want to do something in the meantime."

Blain recalls the recent victory of so-called "permatemps" over Microsoft as an example. In December, thousands of temporary Microsoft workers won a $97 million class-action lawsuit against the company. The permatemps, many of whom had worked for the software giant for longer than two years, had accused Microsoft of improperly denying them benefits similar to those of other long-term employees.

"I think our organizing among contractors at Microsoft helped bring the whole permatemp issue to national prominence, and brought added pressure to bear on Microsoft to settle that case," Blain said, noting that WashTech did not directly participate in the lawsuit itself.

WashTech has developed what Blain calls an "at-large members union" that pushes for legislation on issues which affect freelancers. The union is opening a training lab in conjunction with Cisco Systems, Verizon and others, and will soon be significant discounts on Cisco Systems training. Web development classes will be another core component of its training mission."

The hi-tech union may eventually look more like the building trades of the present than the bargaining juggernauts of America's past. "I think a high tech union of the future will revolve less around the bread and butter issues of security and wages and will revolve more around rights on the job, portability of job benefits, access to training and things like that," Blain said.

Closer to home, the chairman of the NJ-based Programmer's Guild says that the hi-tech union of the future must take into account the independent, entrepreneurial nature of specialized IT workers, such as programmers.

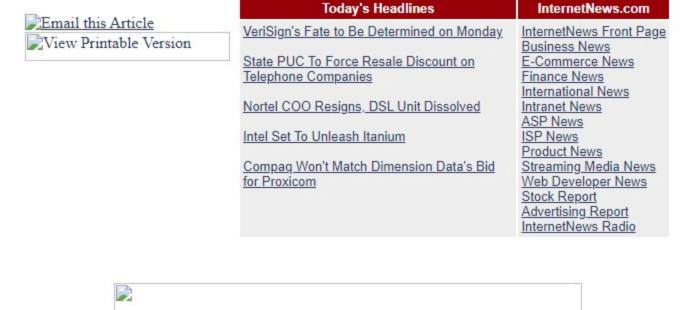"I expect to see more flexibility in negotiating among individuals [than what traditional unions have permitted in the past]," said John Miano. "That's because programmers don't like someone telling them how much money they can make and what they can and can't do."

Miano sums up his thoughts on the matter. "I like to tell people that I expect a hi-tech union to look more like baseball union that the UAW."

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