



Stephen Gentry - AP/Photo-Elaine Thompson

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Unions take on white-collar offshoring

By T.A. Badger
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During his 15 years with The Boeing Co., Stephen Gentry never pictured himself wearing the union label.

Then the computer programmer from Auburn, Wash., was laid off last summer after training his replacement, a high-tech worker in India.

Now Gentry, who hasn't worked since, is among those convinced that America's white-collar workers have to band together to keep their futures from being exported to places where skilled labor comes cheap.

"I don't see any other options," said Gentry, 52, who's joined a Seattle-based union trying to organize tech workers around the country. "There's no loyalty anymore. I feel my job was taken by corporate greed."

For some unions, the growing concerns about offshoring are an opportunity to recruit more workers like Gentry.

"I get a call last week from Intel, I get a call from Microsoft, I get calls from places we never used to get calls from," said Andy Banks, organizing director for the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers in Silver Spring, Md. "People are realizing that labor unions are the best-kept secret in America. You have no employment rights at work unless you have a collective bargaining agreement."

The issue's potency was proven last month when the Communications Workers of America negotiated a new contract with SBC Communications Inc. after a four-day strike. As part of the deal, the San Antonio-based phone company agreed to work with the union to

bring an estimated 3,000 company jobs in India and the Philippines to the United States.

During the strike by CWA's 102,000 SBC workers, thousands of picketers around the country hoisted anti-offshoring signs saying "SBC Unpatriotic" and "Keep Jobs in America."

"There is something to be said for shaming a company if you say "This company will outsource good jobs from our community," said Christian Weller, a researcher at the Center for American Progress, a Washington think tank. "In the current environment, it's a land mine for the company. There's a real receptive audience for this."

That connection was important for CWA, given that for decades labor unions have been losing bargaining clout and public prestige.

Fewer than 10 percent of the nation's private-sector workers now are unionized, down from a peak of 37 percent in 1960, according to federal statistics.

"This is a kind of lever to convince the public that labor is under pressure more than people realize it is, that it could be you tomorrow," said Alex Colvin, a labor professor at Penn State University.

But another labor organizer said the foreign outsourcing issue can cut both ways.

"They're afraid that their job is not secure and therefore they want a union to protect them," Kevin Kistler, of New York-based Office and Professional Employees International, said of workers. "But they're also afraid to stick their head up and try to help form the union because their job is so tenuous."

The number of U.S. high-tech and service jobs that have been moved overseas so far is relatively small, but a report last month said the pace is quickening.

Cambridge, Mass.-based Forrester Research estimates about 830,000 such positions will be relocated to India, Russia and other low-wage nations by the end of 2005, and that 3.4 million jobs representing \$136 billion in U.S. wages will be lost by 2015.

Labor organizer Banks said the CWA's success with SBC is an important lesson for other unions.

"If we have enough examples where people are winning the outsourcing issue, why wouldn't people turn to unions?" he said. "It can be the one issue that can revitalize the labor movement."

Banks said offshoring work was a key issue that helped his union recently organize 250 engineers and architects employed by the city of San Jose. He said a drive to organize engineers will start soon in Seattle.

Marcus Courtney, who in 1997 co-founded the Washington Alliance of Technical Workers in Seattle, says the unionizing effort started slowly but has gained momentum. WashTech's dues-paying membership has more than doubled to 450 in the past year, he says, while its newsletter subscriber list grew eightfold to 17,000.

"And we are talking to almost a thousand workers a month about organizing," said Courtney, whose union has offshoots in most of the nation's high-tech centers. "Not only is (offshoring) resonating with the public, but they're seeing unions are addressing it and they're out front on it."

Uday Karmarkar, a UCLA management professor, said corporate efforts to cut costs by automating more tasks and encouraging self-service via the Internet threaten at least as many white-collar jobs as offshoring.

"There's a much better us-versus-them story when it's offshoring," said Karmarkar, who wrote an article on the subject for the current edition of the Harvard Business Review. "It's 'Somebody's taking our jobs,' rather than 'We're automating the jobs.' "

Gentry, the laid-off programmer, said he overcame a deep aversion to unions to become an active part of Courtney's group.

"I thought these guys are trying to do what's right," he said. "I don't know if it'll do much good, but I feel like I'm doing something."

