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White-collar workers are turning to labor unions

"There is a great deal of unrest among professional workers, who don't have a history of union joining behavior," one expert says. "They represent the frontiers of unionization in America."

By Alana Semuels, Los Angeles Times

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NEW YORK — The next wave of union protesters isn't blue collar.

It's lawyers, paralegals, secretaries, helicopter pilots, judges, insurance agents and podiatrists.

These white-collar workers are not exactly the picture of the labor movement, but they are becoming a more essential part of it as they turn to unions for help in a tough economy as bosses try to squeeze out more profits.

"Employers have been downsizing, asking employees to take on larger roles, making them work more hours," said Nicole Korkolis, spokeswoman for the Office and Professional Employees International Union. "People are feeling like they need an advocate."

Members of UAW Local 2320 in New York, nearly half of whom are lawyers, voted to strike Wednesday, after their employer, Legal Services NYC, pushed for cuts to benefits in a recent contract negotiation.

Many of them had never been involved with labor unions before, but they said decisions by management led them to take the drastic action of voting to strike.

"They're pushing a lot of changes that are making it a less pleasant place to work," said Logan Schiff, 30, who recently left his job in the corporate world to become a lawyer helping clients facing foreclosures on Staten Island.

Like many in his union, he puts the blame on his employer's board members, who he says are unwilling to compromise. "These are corporate lawyers, making millions of dollars a year, dictating the policies of management," he said.

Some experts see professional workers such as Schiff as the future of the labor movement in a job market where white-collar employment is increasing and the manufacturing industry is steadily diminishing. Professionals account for 62% of the U.S. workforce, up from 15% in 1977.

But labor hasn't usually done a good job in recruiting professional workers, said Gary Chaison, a professor of labor at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. The labor movement tends to focus on professions that have a large number of employees, such as fast food or hotel workers.

And professionals are hard to organize. They see themselves as individuals promoted on their talents, and often leave their workplaces rather than protest at them, Chaison said. Changing labor laws also have made it harder to organize workplaces than ever before.

"There is a great deal of unrest among professional workers, who don't have a history of union-joining behavior," Chaison said. "They represent the frontiers of unionization in America."

The economy, though, may be driving more employees to look at unions.

One of the most clicked-on links on the professional employees section of the AFL-CIO's website is "I'm a professional. What can a union do for me?" said Paul Almeida, president of the national union's Department for Professional Employees.

"When you come out of a recession, people feel more secure, and say, 'I've taken all the hits and done what I'm supposed to. I deserve my share of what's going on,'" he said.

The legal profession seems especially ripe for organizing because of the abysmal job market.

In Washington, D.C., for example, a group of administrative law judges is trying to form a union under the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers. In Canada, legal aid lawyers in Ontario also are trying to organize, in part, because their employer asks employees to share computers to do their work.

At one time, professional workers were encouraged to give input to management to improve the way companies are run. Now they are treated like cogs on the wheel, regardless of the amount of experience or the number of degrees they have under their belt, said Paul Shearon, secretary-treasurer of the federation. "Their level of influence has really diminished, and it's had a dramatic impact on their workplace environments," he said.

Many professionals have pricey educations and are more sensitive to unequal distributions of wealth. That's made them more willing to speak out about inequality at the workplace, said Harley Shaiken, a professor at Berkeley who specializes in labor issues.

That can mean threatening to unionize to get better contracts, if not actually organizing.

"Professional workers have, in many cases, the reach to see how others are doing so much better," he said. "Their supervisors have gotten raises, and the [employees] are marginalized. That difference in status can be particularly grating."

Professional healthcare workers in California picketed across five UC medical centers Wednesday, for example, protesting raises for executives in the face of cuts to wages and benefits for employees.

Still, for many professionals, there can be some culture shock in getting involved in unions. Recently organized workers at New York's Urban Justice Center who went to a public union meeting were treated to singalongs of "Solidarity Forever" and Woody Guthrie's "Union Maid," according to a newsletter.

Some professional organizations want to avoid such old rituals and look for a different relationship with unions — one more focused on advocacy and less on solidarity.

For example, members of the National Assn. of Professional Allstate Agents elected to join the AFL-CIO in 2011 when they faced a pay cut. But the agents are part of a guild, rather than a union, meaning that members don't collectively bargain. Not all agents are members; only about 10% of them pay the \$350 annual dues to be a guild member.

Knowing that many independent business owners such as Allstate agents don't like unions, the guild keeps its activities relatively quiet because "a lot of independent businesspeople,

like Allstate agents, are really anti-union," director Jim Fish said. "We'd love to have them all as members, but they can't see it's in their interests to pay."

Union leaders hope that attitude will evolve over time.

Gordon Deane, president of the National Organization of Legal Services Workers, said interest is growing. As the Legal Services workers show, he said, professionals will stand up for their rights, if pushed.

"People are aware of how management decisions are affecting their work life," he said. "They are taking a stand and saying enough is enough."

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