

FEDSMILL

"Respect for Employee Rights, Ideas, Insights, Participation and Unions Generates the Power to Improve Government"

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WHAT IS THE IFPTE?

To begin, it is the latest union to organize a new group of federal employees, and for that we pass on our Congrats. But beyond that it is a union that has quietly served notice on the much bigger and better known federal sector unions such as AFGE, NTEU, AFSCME and SEIU that it intends to be a player in the federal government, especially among the more professional occupations. For example, its newest unit brings to over 2,000 the number of federal Administrative Law Judges (ALJs) it represents—and that raises the question of why white collar, professionals employees in very high profile agencies are choosing IFPTE over those other unions. After all, what union would not want to represent employees at the—

- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- Government Accountability Office (GAO)
- Library of Congress/ Congressional Research Service (CRS)
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)
- Social Security Administrative (SSA)
- Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)

The International Federation of Professional & Technical Engineers (IFPTE) was created in 1918, and, as its name suggests, has its roots in the engineering profession. Prior to branching out to federal accountants, judges, analysts, researchers, and librarians, it organized much of the Army Corps of Engineers, as well as the engineers at Naval shipyards, Department of Energy nuclear plants, and Department of Interior reclamation sites. (That alone gave it enough political clout with the Obama Administration to have its former General Counsel nominated and confirmed as the FLRA's General Counsel. Ironically, FLRA records show that IFPTE only litigated 59 case before FLRA dating back to the late 70s while NTEU has processed 634 and AFGE got 3,057 decisions.)

While these units give it a solid claim to federal sector employees, feds are a minority within IFPTE, although a growing minority. The union has over 60,000 dues paying members in state governments, the private sector, and even Canada.

One of the most significant facts about IFPTE is that according to Dept. of Labor records one local, the engineers at Boeing, has 22,000 of those 60,000 members. In fact, that local has twice the annual dues income of the national office (about \$12 million to \$5 million), employs more union staff than the national union does, and has staff paid more than anyone on the national staff.

And this may be a clue as to why employees at those high profile federal agencies are choosing IFPTE over the larger and better known federal sector alternatives. IFPTE is a “federation” of unions, not a first line union. The IFPTE national office does not control which cases locals take to arbitration, lends units bargaining assistance only when asked, and does not control the lobbying by its locals. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more decentralized labor organization. Consequently, a fair guess as to why these recently organized high profile federal employee units have chosen IFPTE is that they value that decentralization and independence over what more nationally driven unions could provide. IFPTE has found a niche (or market if you prefer) for what it has to offer. While some will argue over whether decentralized or centralized power is better, we are not taking a position on that here because the more fundamental fact is that thanks to IFPTE these employees are now covered by a union.

Another possible reason for IFPTE’s attraction is its membership in the AFL-CIO, which gives its members access to the highly regarded Union Plus Benefits program that federation runs for all member unions. It offers discounted credit cards, home heating oil discounts, pet supplies, etc. IFPTE’s federal employees also benefit from its membership in the Federal Workers Alliance, a group of over a dozen unions representing federal employees that pool their strength in legislative and media efforts.

Finally, IFPTE does what it does for a national office dues charge of only \$7.55 per month per member, making it far, far less expensive than other alternatives.

We will close with this comment. If Goldman- Sachs and other investment bankers paid attention to federal sector unions like they do businesses around the globe, they would very likely try to buy IFPTE and then sell off its individual parts, e.g., find a buyer among other federal sector unions for its federal government units. But that is another, more sophisticated, story which we will begin addressing in the near future.

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