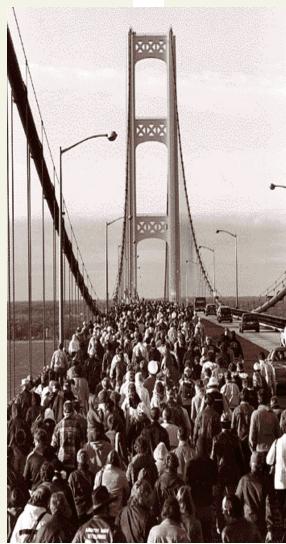# Unionizing Silicon Valley Part One: Problem, History and Opportunity

Mike Mosher

The headachey morning after the DotCom Bust is a time of great opportunity in America. That opportunity is one to advance democracy in the workplace -- this time the workplace that produces the hardware, software and networking gizmos from which so much commerce and creativity springs. Perhaps one must begin the labor-organizing process with the model of craft unions, based upon the skills of developers, programmers, software and interface designers, much like the American Federation of Labor in the early 1900s. Or perhaps the organization should be industry-wide, company-wide, with the model of the old Congress of Industrial Organizations in the 1930s. Eventually both could merge, as the AFL-CIO of the 1950s. Industry, of course, will fight any kind of worker organizing tooth and nail.

Why would I write of this for a tech art audience? Many of this field's most creative minds have grueling day jobs, or occasional contracting gigs with technology corporations, for that is where the action (and $$$) is. Many others of you are academics, a field which is well-organized, and have sympathy for unions. And as I will demonstrate in part two of this jeremiad, artists have an important role in the union struggle, however often shortsighted and culturally clubfooted union organizers in our time have forgotten that fact.

Beneath the distraction of war, the American economy remained in a two-plus-year slump as depressing as the fetid recession during the presidency of the first George Bush, whose name should have been so besmirched by it as to have guaranteed no family successor. Now there's another Bush in the White House, the requisite recession and -- try as he might to present himself the hero of 9/11 with overseas military campaigns -- when all is said and done, around the kitchen table it's the economy, stupid. The bursting of the bubble of the supposedly ever-expanding New Economy has resulted in many cynical veterans and once-eager young programmers, content writers and designers laid off after putting in long hours in the service of a company now dead, a firm now flaccid. There's nothing like a layoff to throw cold water on the lotus-land illusion of a company as one big happy family. This is the moment to consider how to best organize labor in the tech industry.

I use the name Silicon Valley (or "the industry") as a shorthand for technology workers in California, New York, Texas, Massachusetts and elsewhere. Northern California is a mix of various labor cultures, with San Francisco's well-organized service industries and public employees, nearby agricultural counties' United Farmworkers, coexisting with bitterly non-union traditions in other cities

and areas. Still, whatever works to organize California's programmers, pixelpushers and Photoshop jocks, its assemblers of code and chips, might then spread nationally. Or so we can hope.

This author recently inherited a musty basement full of engineering magazines from decades past. Besides much cool imagery, some articles in these may offer some antecedents and historical perspectives to today's organizing efforts, for the lines between hardware, software and other engineering disciplines (like computer-human interface) have blurred in Silicon Valley. A 1968 editorial in *Professional Engineer*, the journal of the staid National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE), fulminated against unionization efforts. Organization of teachers and public employees was then underway, and union organizers were looking optimistically at this profession, even addressing a conference of the NSPE. In the September 1968 issue, an article discussed SPACE, the Scienctific, Professional and Cultural Employees (!) Council affiliated with the AFL-CIO, which hoped to convince engineers that unionization would strengthen their professional status and security with collective bargaining. Yet "Trench Warfare Holds No Key to Victory Against Engineering Union Offensive" warned that issue's lead Editorial.

A less emotional 1971 article explored the issues of professional engineering and unionism, yet concluded in favor of maintaining the organization as a more gentlemanly professional society. In 1973, the PE staff concludes "in the Engineers' Interest--Collective Bargaining versus Collective Action" by affirming that it "abhors the concept of dividing engineers into 'labor' and 'management.'" In 1972, the journal wrote glowingly of the 36-hour four-day work week

in place at the Ellerbe firm in Minneapolis and the increased productivity that resulted from its four nine-hour days. Articles predicting the shrinking work week and increased leisure time for all were common in mainstream media at the start of the 1970s.

The more liberal and youth-oriented magazine New Engineer ran a feature in 1975 on the "Sveriges Civilingejorsforbun," the Swedish Association of Graduate Engineers, which grew out of white-collar organizing efforts in the 1940s. This professional association then, through mergers with other labor organizations, transformed itself into a union. In the Sweden of the 1970s, one-fourth of the population were unionized workers, and both white- and blue-collar workers (in which category is the Web programmer in the the t-shirt?) were represented on corporate boards. Today's reader wonders if we would have seen the Enron and Global Crossing frauds under such circumstances. Still, the survey New Engineer conducted in 1976 showed that 38 per cent of its American readership would not join an engineer's union under any circumstance, and only five percent belonged to one at the time.

In the Reagan era, the July 1983 issue of *Physics Today* wrote of a Science and Labor conference between distinguished scientists and officers of the AFL-CIO, the first to "explore matters of mutual interest and concern." Later, an angry article-length letter, "Unions Invade the Campus" from Edward R. Harrison of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, was published in the January 1984 *Physics Today*. Harrison claimed that organizing efforts popular in the humanities were creating a "two-culture climate" when leveling salaries in the sciences

and engineering colleges.

All very interesting ancient history. Past generations of engineers have been skeptical of unions but attentive when rarely approached. So what about now? There have been some successful organizing efforts in other sectors of the tech industry since 2000, which should be studied for lessons that might be applied elsewhere. There are risks which might derail organizing efforts, hazards and obfuscations that we can expect employers to employ. Beyond the volatile nature of hiring and firing, there is one big contemporary issue staring tech organizers in the face that can be pushed for maximum clarity and results. By pushing this Big Screw we might find ourselves with an invigorated working-class conciousness among all bleary-eyed denizens of the industry's workstations and monitor screens.

Next issue: Promising Victories and Cultural Strategies for Organizing the Valley