

POLITICO

Unions eye Brookings, Urban Institute as push to organize think tanks grows

REBECCA RAINEY

April 13, 2021

The labor movement's efforts to organize think tanks — major players in influencing and informing the policy debate on Capitol Hill — is the latest white-collar sector to see a burst in collective bargaining.

Workers at two of the largest, most influential think tanks in Washington, D.C. are forming a union, adding to a growing trend in white-collar collective bargaining.

Staff at the Brookings Institution and the Urban Institute on Tuesday asked their employers to grant them voluntary recognition — which doesn't require a secret ballot election — of their unions, which are affiliated with the Nonprofit Professional Employees Union, IFPTE Local 70.

The labor movement's efforts to organize think tanks — major players in influencing and informing the policy debate on Capitol Hill — is the latest white-collar sector to see a burst in collective bargaining. Labor efforts have poured into Silicon Valley and have expanded to groups of workers not typically protected under federal labor law, like independent contractors.

“We believe Urban needs a nurturing workplace for all employees in order to bring rigorous research to advance equitable policy solutions,” the Organizing Committee of Urban Institute Employees Union said in a statement. “We believe that nobody can represent workers' interests better than workers themselves and that our perspectives are vital to Urban's longevity and its institutional ethics.”

The Brookings United Organizing Committee said in a statement that "Brookings is an intellectual home for policy ideas that empower working people. And Brookings United is excited for this new partnership so that together, we can create a more inclusive and sustainable environment in the post-COVID-19 world.”

Spokespeople for Brookings and the Urban Institute were not immediately available for comment.

The NPEU has successfully organized several other prominent think tanks in the D.C. area, including The Center for American Progress, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the Economic Policy Institute, National Immigration Law Center, and the National Women's Law Center, among others.

While many of those institutions are considered left-leaning or progressive, Brookings tends to fall more politically in the center, and the union says it's prepared to file for a ballot election with the National Labor Relations Board if not granted voluntary recognition.

"It can sometimes really surprise us which organizations crack down most aggressively on their staff," said Daniel Essrow, an organizer with the NPEU. "Ideology definitely comes into play, but organizational culture is often a bigger factor."

"In the case of Brookings and Urban, they are certainly slightly more centrist than some of the nonprofits where we have received voluntary recognition," he added. "But the breadth of research they have produced on the benefits of collective bargaining is unmatched — we are hopeful they will follow their own research and recognize their staffs' unions."

The nearly 200 employees forming a union at Brookings say they want to improve diversity, retention, and paid family and parental leave, among other issues, NPEU says.

Similarly, The Urban Institute Employees' Union, which would represent nearly 250 workers, says it's looking to ensure that the think tank supports its diverse staff through "equitable pay, treatment, promotion processes, access to leadership positions, and mental health resources."

Rachel Greszler, a research fellow at The Heritage Foundation, a conservative thinktank, said that the growth in nonprofit unions "will be an interesting story to follow," given the nature of the work and nonprofit employees' relationship to their organization's message.

"Traditional unions are not well-suited for industries like non-profits and think tanks where job duties often vary significantly within the same job title, and where organizations' missions rely on both flexibility and accountability," she wrote via email. "Most people who work at non-profits and think tanks do it because they are passionate about their organization's mission and they want to help build their organization up."

Greszler argues that unions "typically rely on strong-armed tactics and adversarial relationships." She says that often leaves "workers feeling like their employer is their adversary instead of their ally."

The growth in organizing inside some of the most influential institutions in Washington follows efforts by the labor movement to organize in new sectors beyond the traditional trades.

The Communications Workers of America launched an initiative early last year to support union organizing efforts in the tech and video game industries.

In January, more than 400 Google employees formed the Alphabet Workers Union, a non-traditional union in the sense that the group didn't seek certification with the federal labor board, meaning that the company won't be required by law to bargain "in good faith" with the group.

However, efforts made by the union, which is affiliated with the CWA, to advance working conditions at the company will still be protected under the National Labor Relations Act.

Drivers for app-based taxi services like Uber and Lyft have also formed worker organizations, despite being classified by their companies as "independent contractors." Such workers are not protected under the National Labor Relations Act, and thus don't have collective bargaining rights that can be policed by the federal labor board.

Despite the labor movement's efforts to expand into new sectors like nonprofits, at least one labor expert is skeptical those unions will have staying power.

“I will be curious to see how many high-powered professional workers, who are researchers at think tanks are going to want a union to represent them,” said Douglas McCabe, a professor at Georgetown University’s McDonough School of Business.

McCabe, who said he is pro-union, added, “Whether they're at Brookings Institution on Mass Ave., or the Cato Institute, I'd be very hesitant to see whether they're going to be willing to join a union.”

But workers who are part of the union drive say that they hope their efforts will galvanize more think tanks to organize.

“When we're working towards this union effort I think a lot of us are thinking about solidarity,” said Kate Hannick, a member of the Brookings Union Organizing Committee, “and knowing that a place as influential and prestigious as Brookings forming a union, it could really become industry standard in the think tank world and beyond.”