

Reproduced with permission from Daily Labor Report, 152 DLR 9, 8/9/17. Copyright © 2017 by The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc. (800-372-1033) <http://www.bna.com>

Machinists

SAIC Air Traffic Controller Instructors Join Machinists Union

SAIC employees who train the next generation of air traffic controllers joined the International Association of Machinists, the union told Bloomberg BNA Aug. 9.

More than 280 instructors overwhelmingly approved union representation, the IAM said. The workers voted through mail-in ballots that were counted Aug. 7. The results are set to be certified Aug. 14.

The instructors work for Science Applications International Corp. and teach current and future Federal Aviation Administration controllers at the Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center in Oklahoma City.

“We are focused on what is best for our employees and our customer, the FAA,” an SAIC spokeswoman told Bloomberg BNA Aug. 9. “Our goal is to work effectively with IAM to ensure that there is no impact to the FAA and the training of our nation’s current and future Air Traffic Controllers. The public’s safety in the air is our greatest concern, and we remain fully committed to supporting FAA’s mission.”

These workers are seeking higher pay similar to the average rate earned by pilot instructors as well as benefits and job security, Bob Anderson, a representative in the IAM organizing department, told Bloomberg BNA Aug. 9.

Instructors Highly Skilled All of the workers are retired and in their late 50s, 60s, or 70s, Anderson said. Only people who have served as certified FAA controllers are eligible to provide the “rigorous” training, he said.

“They’re the only ones with the skill set, knowledge, and experience to train,” Anderson said. “It has to be someone who’s done the job to instruct it.”

SAIC was awarded a \$425 million controller training contract with the FAA in May 2015.

Since 2015, the FAA has been executing a five-year plan to hire as many as 6,000 new air traffic controllers to replace a retiring workforce.

The FAA’s controller workforce reached 14,143 in fiscal 2015, the agency says on its website. The FAA hired 1,345 new controllers in fiscal 2015 and has hired approximately 4,700 controllers over the last five years.

All instructors must be certified with the FAA and must undergo regular training to maintain proficiency with the latest skills, procedures, and technologies used

by the agency. Most of the instructors are former FAA controllers who retired after more than 30 years of federal service, according to the agency’s Air Traffic Controller Workforce Plan 2016–2025.

The main concern for workers is compensation to meet their skill set, Anderson said. Workers are seeking higher pay to match the market rate of pilot instructors. The SAIC instructors are currently receiving an hourly wage of \$30. Other instructors in the aviation industry, like private sector flying instructors, receive closer to \$50 an hour, Anderson said.

New Members ‘Unusual’ The Machinists’ new members are “unusual” for a number of reasons, Anderson said. The age of the workers is higher than the usual age of employees the union organizes; all of them are retired; and many of these workers had been unionized before.

The union represents many pilot instructors and other aviation industry instructors, but this is the first unit where instructors train FAA employees, he said.

As FAA air traffic controllers, these workers were part of NATCA, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association. NATCA was born after the pivotal Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization strike in 1981. President Ronald Reagan fired more than 11,300 striking controllers, and the PATCO union was decertified.

Most of the workers in this unit weren’t working at the time that happened, but plenty remember it, Anderson said.

Union: SAIC Pushed Anti-Union Message The instructors dealt with an anti-union campaign by SAIC throughout the campaign, Anderson said. They were threatened with loss of benefits and wages, he said.

The SAIC spokeswoman says the company provided employees with information on unionization and collective bargaining.

“SAIC representatives also discussed whether unionizing is in the best interest of the employees or our government customer,” she said. “We respect the fact that union representation is an employee decision and sought to ensure employees were able to make an informed decision.”

By JACLYN DIAZ

To contact the reporter on this story: Jaclyn Diaz in Washington at jDiaz@bna.com

To contact the editors responsible for this story: Peggy Aulino at maulino@bna.com; Terence Hyland at thyland@bna.com; Chris Opfer at copfer@bna.com