Employees considering union

By Farrell Petereal

An organization of MIT clerical workers, the Association to Work for Active Reforms in Employment (AWARE), has started a drive to unionize the approximately 200 biweekly and exempt employees at the Institute. It was revealed Wednesday at a nonunion meeting.

Kathy Kautzer, AWARE Steering Committee person and leader of the meeting, said the unionization attempt came after more than a year of efforts by AWARE to improve the conditions of white-collar workers at MIT in the face of noncooperation from the MIT administration.

The more than 100 clerical workers who showed up for the meeting listened to seven speakers, one of whom, Margery Elmler, is a representative of District 65 of the Distributive Workers of America, a group with which AWARE has shown interest in affiliating itself. By law, a new union can be recognized with a consensus of the employees represented in a National Labor Relations Board-sponsored election. Such an election can legally be held up by petition of 30 per cent of the employees involved, but Kautzer stated that AWARE will not request a referendum until more than 60 per cent of the Institute clerical workers have signed petitions.

Susan Sokalner, AWARE member and speaker at the meeting, noted the results of an AWARE questionnaire sent out last April and comments from the association's contacts, indicate that many MIT employees are disenchanted. The purpose of AWARE, she said, was to combat this discontent by trying to give employees a larger voice in deciding their working conditions and by pushing for an adjustment of the low and inequitable salaries.

The MIT administration not only has been uncooperative, Kautzer, said, but hostile to the group's efforts. She said a written request for a mailing list of biweekly and exempt employees was turned down by Vice President for Administration and Personnel John Wynne because of the "privacy" issue involved, though the list was given to groups inside or outside of MIT. "It is a matter of policy that we do not give out lists that classify people — either by job, by race, by nationality, or in any other way," he said.

(Wynne, when contacted last week by The Tech, said he was not aware of any cases where lists of employees had been given to groups inside or outside of MIT. "It is a matter of policy that we do not give out lists that classify people — either by job, by race, by nationality, or in any other way," he said. "We have had some cases where lists have been given out, but the administration was not aware of it." Kautzer also stated that individual employees have been "harassed" because of their involvement with AWARE, mostly by superiors who believe that the organization wants to "break up the office unity.""

Another act of bad faith on the part of MIT, according to Kautzer, is the Institute's membership in the Boston Survey Group, an association of about forty Boston businesses that meets four times a year to exchange information on office workers' wages, salaries, and benefits. She described the group as "a sinister organization that doesn't have our best interests in mind."

The Boston Globe reported in its last Wednesday's edition that a grade I office worker at MIT starts at $80 a week and could take home as little as $63.

At present AWARE is considering three unions, District 65, Distributive Workers of America; Service Employee International Union (AFL-CIO); and Research, Development and Technical Employees' Union, though the atmosphere of the meeting seemed to indicate a strong leaning toward District 65. DWA is organizing white collar workers at Harvard Medical, Harvard University, and Wheelock College.

Non-university clerical workers are also in the process of organizing. Many such employees have joined District 65 DWA in New York. In the Boston area women office workers have joined to form Nine to Five, an organization to fight low pay and demeaning work conditions. AWARE is not exclusively devoting its efforts to forming a union. At Wednesday's meeting, duplicates of an unanswered letter to John Wynne asking for a nineteen-page revision of the Institute's salary review were distributed, and six specific grievances to be brought before the administration were presented.

AWARE, which was organized over a year ago by about twenty people, now sends information on its activities to some seven hundred others. The goal now is to have an active AWARE organization in every MIT building so that Kautzer's hope of unionization within a year can be realized.