

New York: Oyster Bar workers in third month of strike

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10 February 2004

About 75 workers at the Oyster Bar restaurant at Grand Central Train station in Manhattan have been on strike since December 5, 2003.

According to Local 100 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union that is representing the striking workers, the restaurant is demanding a wage freeze for the first year of a three-year contract, the creation a two-tiered wage and benefits structure forcing new hires to earn less for the same work, the hiring of more part-timers, cutting overtime pay, eliminating holidays, increasing what the workers must contribute for their health insurance, and providing the company with the right to terminate the contract if the pension liability rises 5 percent in any three-month period.

Management is now saying they want to permanently keep the replacement workers, and will only place the strikers on a preferred hiring list if the restaurant should have any job openings in the future.

While the strikers walk the picket lines, more than 20 employees have decided to continue working. Restaurants management is attempting to maintain its operations with these and newly hired replacement workers, but strikers say that business is down dramatically.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority has been assisting the company by placing a limit on the number of workers who can picket inside the station near the Oyster Bar asking potential customers to not patronize the establishment. Many strikers are forced to stay outside the station, very distant from the restaurant, in the cold winter weather. They are currently struggling to survive on the \$200 a week they get from the union for picket duty.

The restaurant first opened up in 1913, the same time the terminal station was built. The customers who come

to the Oyster Bar have always included both native New Yorkers and tourists who visit the restaurant because of its worldwide reputation for excellent seafood.

Some of the workers—who are employed as cooks, waiters, oysterman, and dishwashers—have been working at the restaurant for as long as 30 years. The workforce is overwhelmingly immigrant, with the vast majority coming from Central and South America.

Ruiz, a waiter at the restaurant for five years, told the WSW: “They want to eliminate all our health insurance and pension benefits, cut our base salary and reduce our overtime. This is a problem everywhere in the country where companies want to reduce the wages and benefits of the workers. There are people who have been working here for about 30 years—now they want to destroy our livelihood and get rid of the union. This is a landmark establishment. People come from all over the world to eat here. They were making millions of dollars, but now their business is down 50 percent.”

Carlos Hernandez, a waiter for 11 years, said: “This is a very immigrant workforce. About 80 percent of us are Latino, and there are workers from other countries, such as Serbia and Haiti. Most of their customers are from all over the world because this place had a very excellent reputation. However, they are not getting the same kind of service with the people they have in there now. A waiter must know everything about oysters, the type of fish dishes that are being offered, what kind of sauces are available. We have to have knowledge about 2,000 types of red and white wines.

“When the tourists come out they complain to us about the poor service in there. Sometimes they give us the tip money. They say we deserve it, and they want to support the strike. We made this restaurant the famous establishment that it is, not the managers. All over the

world, it is the same story—it is the workers who makes the business successful, not the managers.”

Twenty-four restaurants signed contracts with the union last year, including La Caravelle and the 21 Club, which settled after a brief strike. The union has issued a study on the financial difficulties of the restaurant that perhaps explains why it is making such draconian demands on the Oyster Bar workers. In the last three years, the company, which includes Gallagher’s Steakhouse, has attempted to open up a number of franchises in Texas, Missouri and New Jersey, all of which have failed. Despite this, it is reportedly attempting to open up a new franchise in Japan. The company is attempting to reduce its operating costs by slashing the wages and benefits of its workforce at the Grand Central restaurant.



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