

Union isolates locked-out San Francisco hotel workers

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Hotel workers at 14 San Francisco luxury hotels are in the sixth week of a lockout that began on October 1. The action by the hotels was in response to a strike launched September 29 by 1,400 members of Local 2 of the Union of Needle Trades Industrial and Textile Employees-Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (UNITE HERE) against the Hilton, Argent, Mark Hopkins and Crowne Plaza hotels.

The San Francisco Multiple Employers Group (SFMEG), representing the major hotels in the city, locked out its employees at the four hotels that were struck plus an additional 2,900 workers at ten other hotels. Throughout the strike and lockout, the hotels have continued to operate with strikebreakers.

The actions of the union leadership are a stark demonstration of the bureaucracy's cowardice and inability to defend, much less advance, the interests of the membership. The union limited the initial strike to two weeks. When the hotels retaliated with a general lockout, the union not only refused to expand the strike, it meekly ordered striking workers back to work at the end of the two-week period.

The hotels, predictably, refused to take the striking workers back, and UNITE HERE responded by doing nothing. Since then, it has worked to isolate and demoralize the workers.

The union knew months in advance that a strike and lockout were likely, but the leadership failed to build up an adequate strike fund, limiting strike pay to the paltry sum of \$200 a week for 20 hours of picketing. No substantial sums have been forthcoming from the AFL-CIO, and no mass appeals have been made to workers in other industries to support the hotel workers.

At issue in the contract struggle is management's drive to increase workloads, dismantle existing health benefits, and secure a five-year, as opposed to a two-year, contract. The union has raised particular objections to the last demand, insisting on a shorter contract so that the San Francisco contract would expire at the same time as UNITE HERE agreements in 10 different cities across the country and the

state of Hawaii.

The hotels, represented by the SFMEG, are demanding that health care premiums for an employee with two or more dependents be raised from the current level of \$10 a month to a minimum of \$71 a month in the first year of the contract. The premiums would rise to a maximum of \$119 a month in the last two years of the contract. In addition, under the SFMEG proposal, workers would need to work 80 hours a month, in a three-week window, to qualify for health benefits at all. This is twice the number of hours currently required.

The hotel proposal is designed to limit health benefits to permanent employees, denying them to so-called "contingency workers"—temporary employees whose hours depend on rates of room occupancy. If the proposal were approved, more than 1,000 workers and their families would lose coverage immediately, and many others would be unable to pay for insurance.

UNITE HERE has refused to call out the rest of Local 2's 8,500 members. Despite the fact that UNITE HERE contracts have also expired in Los Angeles and Washington, DC, and that workers in these cities overwhelmingly voted in support of strike action, none of the San Francisco workers' fellow union members in other cities have been called out on strike, and no attempt has been made to link any of these contract fights in a common struggle. This demonstrates the falsity of the union bureaucracy's claim that it would use a three-year contract to wage a common struggle of San Francisco workers with those in other cities.

The union has made no serious attempt to win the support of San Francisco's residents, beyond announcing a boycott of the hotels on November 11.

While UNITE HERE has sought to channel the worker's anger into support for the Democratic Party, making the picket lines a regular photo stop for such figures as John Edwards and Jesse Jackson during the presidential election campaign, the contract dispute reveals the profound gulf between the needs of the hotel workers and the policies of the Democrats.

Gavin Newsom, San Francisco's Democratic mayor, has made various statements in support of the hotel workers and has been held up by the UNITE HERE leadership as a genuine friend of working people. In addition to making appearances on the picket line, where he threatened the hotels with a boycott, Newsom on November 4 withdrew police escorts for scab workers at the hotels. He did so when it became clear that this kind of overt support for strikebreaking was provoking outrage among workers. Newsom's actions, however, are half-hearted measures aimed more at deceiving the workers than seriously challenging the hotels.

"There are lots of things that the city can do" to punish the hotels for not ending the lockout, said the mayor at a press conference on November 10. However, when he was asked if he would consider yanking the \$7 million in hotel taxes that the city gives to the San Francisco Convention and Visitors Bureau to orient business toward the hotels, Newsom refused to answer. Later that day, a city official declared that the mayor would view such a step as absurd.

Given the generally left-leaning character of the San Francisco electorate—Newsom only narrowly won the mayor's race over a Green Party challenger—and the history of the city as a Democratic town, the political establishment, and Newsom, in particular, have a vested interest in casting themselves as defenders of working people. The union bureaucracy is an eager participant in this farce.

The appalling wages and working conditions faced by UNITE HERE employees provide the clearest refutation of the Democratic Party's attempt to posture as a defender of the living standards of San Francisco's working people. The locked-out workers—cooks, room cleaners, bartenders, bellmen, servers, and PBX operators—earn wages of \$9 to \$15 an hour.

A recent United Way study found that in the counties that surround San Francisco, an adult with a preschool-age child would need to earn about \$20 an hour for a 40-hour week merely to exist at the poverty line. The same family would need to earn \$23 an hour to live in San Francisco itself.

In an area where housing accounts for 60 percent of expenses for average families, many hotel workers are forced to commute long hours from outlying districts where rents are more affordable, while holding down two or three jobs. The UNITE HERE workers are part of an ever-growing population in the US—the working poor.

Working conditions for hotel workers have drastically deteriorated in recent years, as management has found new ways of increasing profitability at workers' expense. Available industry-wide statistics indicate that between 1986 and 1995, the number of workers per room decreased by 7.5 percent. During the same period, gross operating profits

increased from 22 to 35 percent. In the lead-up to the strike, several newspaper articles documented UNITE HERE employees' complaints about ever-increasing workloads, resulting in growing physical stress and strain.

The union bureaucracy has been a willing participant in the speed-up of San Francisco's hotel workers. Local 2 officials have joined the hotel industry in the so-called San Francisco Hotels Partnership, which develops ways of increasing worker productivity and reducing labor turnover by resolving labor management conflicts.

The union's isolation of the hotel workers, and its support for the Democratic establishment that continues to subsidize the hotels, are not accidental mistakes. They point to a deliberate policy of softening up hotel workers and demoralizing them in preparation for a contract with massive givebacks in health benefits, a token wage increase, and new attacks on working conditions.

San Francisco's hotel workers should draw the lessons of the recent supermarket strike in Southern California, in which grocery employees were left standing on the picket lines for months, their struggle isolated by the union bureaucracy, only to be sent back to work under a contract that gutted their health benefits.

Significant support for the UNITE HERE membership exists in San Francisco. Workers and students from across the Bay Area have joined picket lines and attended labor rallies in support of the hotel workers. However, a betrayal and defeat can be averted only by breaking with the union bureaucracy and waging a struggle for the industrial mobilization of the working class throughout the Bay Area to halt the union-busting, combined with the fight for a new political strategy—a break from the Democrats and the building of an independent party of the working class based on socialist policies.



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