

Hilton hotel workers end three-day protest strike in Chicago

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Hotel workers organized in the UNITE HERE trade union federation ended a three-day strike on Monday, October 18, at the Hilton hotel in Chicago, Illinois. Scheduled strikes by UNITE HERE at flagship Hilton hotels in San Francisco, California and Honolulu, Hawaii have also come to an end.

The hotel workers—housekeepers, bellhops, cooks, servers, attendants, laundry workers and more—will resume work today. Yet the main dispute, the lack of a contract since August 2009, has not been resolved. Over 8,000 UNITE HERE hotel workers in the Chicago area as a whole have been without a contract since that time.

In the meantime, the Hilton chain has attempted to squeeze more work from a shrinking workforce. A striker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “When workers leave they don’t hire anybody. We have to make up the work that they had.” The union has publicized reports that the hotel chain is pushing drastic speedups on housekeepers, requiring them to handle 20 rooms daily, up from 14.

These policies are in line with conditions of austerity across the country, with business showing a rapid rebound in profits by squeezing greater productivity through layoffs, wage cuts and reduced benefits. While enacting massive budget cuts, both Democrats and Republicans insist there “is no money” for decent wages and social services.

The union protest material emphasizes that the owners of Hilton, The Blackstone Group, received \$320 million in bailout funds, but cut a deal with the Federal Reserve to only repay \$140 million. In response, the union has dubiously titled the actions as “taxpayer strikes,” with strike signage saying nothing about the open contract or working conditions.

The current strikes are the latest in a string of UNITE-

HERE events nationwide against the Hyatt and Hilton hotel chains that are best described as protest actions, including protests of a Hyatt Hotels shareholders meeting and boycotts of ten Hyatt hotels.

Rather than a coordinated strike action of the 8,000 organized hotel workers in the Chicago area, the Chicago Hilton strike was left to stand alone, even though the strike ballot—with 96 percent approval—allowed for action at four Chicago area properties. Instead, the union had O’Hare airport Hyatt go on strike in early September.

When asked about this decision, a frustrated union representative responded, “Do you know how hard it is to organize a strike? The other hotels have different conditions and different schedules.”

The political dimension of worsening working class living conditions—specifically, how the Obama administration and Democratic Party have spearheaded attacks on auto workers, teachers and social programs—was nowhere mentioned by the union.

Hotel workers did receive a flyer with pictures of politicians who had crossed picket lines to enter the hotel, but the flyer failed to mention their political affiliation. This was likely no accident—of the 12 state and local politicians listed, 10 are Democrats.

Undoubtedly, hotel workers at the Chicago Hilton and throughout the city want to fight to prevent worsening conditions, but the union policies of support for the Democratic Party and deliberate isolation of workers’ struggles proves to be a barrier.

Media reports said the hotel was “operating normally” during the action. When asked about how this was possible, a worker told the WSWWS that an entire staff of temporary workers had been trained for “two or three days” prior to the stoppage, and were working for minimum wage, raising the possibility that

UNITE HERE had gone as far as scheduling the strike in coordination with Hilton management. The worker also indicated strikers were not receiving strike pay.

Emphasizing that the strike was about overwork and low-pay, one worker commented, “I see these housekeepers on my floor struggling with the extra work, but then they [Hilton] don't want to give us anything. I probably can do the extra work, but I've got pains, my leg hurts and my back hurts. And if we take off, who is going support my family? They don't want do anything for us, but they want extra work, and really, they told us they want to downsize.”

A housekeeper noted, “Everything is expensive now. I'm not on public aid, I'm not on any of that, and I'm not going be able to take care of my kids.”

She added, “I live in the southwest suburbs, and they have me doing overtime on a Sunday past when transit can get me home. I'll have to leave, but they say you have to finish your room or else you're going get suspended or you're going to get written up.”

Seeing the flyer with politicians who crossed the picket line, the other worker said, “In my heart, I'm pissed off at all the politicians in here who crossed the line, but when it comes to voting time they want our vote. With one, I'm in his path, but he keeps on rushing into the hotel. They are entering through the garage, where the garbage comes out, rather than the front room. They'll nearly run you over in their cars to get through.”



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