

Chicago hotel workers' strike enters fourth day

Marcus Day
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Thousands of workers at 25 hotels across Chicago are beginning the fourth day of their strike Monday. The hospitality worker union UNITE HERE Local 1 initiated the action a week after the previous contract, covering approximately 6,000 workers, expired on August 31. Earlier in August, workers voted by 97 percent to authorize a strike. Thus far, workers at 25 of 30 hotels where the union has contracts have been called out.

The workers, including housekeepers, cooks, bellhops, servers, bartenders, and other service employees, are among the most highly exploited sections of the working class and are fighting for improvements to wages, healthcare, sick days, job security and staffing. Speaking to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters on the picket lines Saturday, workers said that central to their demands were better wages, adequate staffing and the extension of health insurance year-round. Currently many workers are laid off during the slower tourist season in the winter—roughly October through March—during which time they lose their insurance.

Alfonso, a banquet supervisor at Chicago's historic Palmer House Hilton, told the WSW: "We are out here striking for better pay and benefits. It's hard to live in Chicago. Me and my partner are both working professionals and we are still struggling to pay bills, because this is a very expensive city to live in. I can't imagine what it's like to have a family on this pay. There are people who work here who are supporting families on this."

The strike is yet another expression of the growth of the class struggle in the US and around the world. It comes in the midst of a series of walkouts by teachers in Washington state, near-unanimous strike authorization votes by US Steel workers across the country and Fiat Chrysler autoworkers in Indiana, and the battle by over 230,000 United Parcel Service workers against a concessions contract being pushed by both the company

and the Teamsters union.

The giant hotel chains face a growing rebellion by workers looking to fight back against poverty wages and miserable working conditions. UNITE HERE has called strike authorization votes for nearly 8,000 Marriott workers starting yesterday, in Waikiki and Maui, Hawaii; San Francisco; and Boston. Workers in Seattle; Detroit; and Oakland, San Jose and San Diego in California may soon follow suit.

Marriott is the largest hotel chain in the world, with properties in 127 countries. The company raked in over \$1.3 billion in profit in 2017, an increase of 75 percent from the previous year.

The hotels demand back-breaking labor from their staff, many of whom are immigrants, facing harassment from managers or wealthy guests. Blanche, a housekeeper, described the relentless character of her work. "We have to get 16 credits [with one credit per room] a day. But all the rooms are different. Some rooms have two rooms, double baths, some are double beds or king beds. Some have washrooms. But they only give the same credit. We work by the number of rooms we clean, not by the hour.

"If you are lucky and have everything you need, you can finish in maybe eight hours. If you work here [the Palmer House] or anywhere workers are striking it can take 9 to 10 hours. And they expect you to do it till you are done.

"I do bathrooms. I go to the 24th floor down to the street level. Some of these bathrooms may have 30 stalls in them. I have to clean them all and all the way down. You can't do that, but they want you to do it all."

Her friend, Deedee, added: "A lot of the ladies have to take medicine and pain pills every day from all the work. Their feet hurt from all the running around. The carts they push that have all the linens, towels and shampoos are super heavy."

Asked how she survived on her salary in Chicago,

Blanche responded: “You can barely make it. You have to figure out what you need and keep on working.”

More than enough money exists to vastly improve the wages, healthcare and working conditions of hotel staff. According to UNITE HERE, with over 55 million tourists visiting Chicago last year, hotels in the city made over \$2 billion. Moreover, executives at the giant hotel conglomerates receive among the highest pay for CEOs. In 2017, Hilton Hotels and Resorts CEO Christopher Nassetta received nearly \$19 million in compensation; Marriott CEO Arne Sorenson, over \$13 million; and Hyatt CEO Mark Hoplamazian, close to \$10 million.

The strike in Chicago has the potential to impact hotel operations significantly going into this week, as the International Manufacturing Technology Show—with over 100,000 attendees expected at the city’s massive McCormick Place convention center—begins today.

Workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* also expressed a desire to broaden the struggle to other sections of workers. Pointing to the potential if workers were to band together and launch a general strike in Chicago and beyond, Alfonso told the WSW: “The other thing we should ask for is for all of the other workers in the city to get behind us. Teachers, firefighters, painters, drivers, electricians—it’s a scary thought to shut the city down, but we all need to get together to show the city officials and corporations that we’re not having it anymore. The point should be to shut the city and the country down, that’s something I’ve always been saying.”

While workers are seeking to conduct a serious struggle, however, the UNITE HERE union—which negotiates contracts with each hotel brand in each city separately—is doing everything possible to keep workers isolated and minimize the impact of the strike. The union has refused to call out all the workers whose contracts have expired, let alone the other 9,000 hospitality workers it represents in the area.

Chicago hotel workers should take as a warning the experience of Las Vegas casino workers earlier this year. The Culinary Workers Union (CWU), an affiliate of UNITE HERE, blocked a strike by nearly 57,000 casino workers in June. The union withheld any details of the agreement it had reached with management from workers until the day of the ratification votes. It also divided workers by reaching agreements with different casino companies one by one.

For their efforts in suppressing worker opposition, the union bureaucracy is handsomely rewarded. Donald

Taylor, president of UNITE HERE nationally and former president of CWU 226 in Las Vegas, took in over \$360,000 in compensation in 2017, over 10 times what many hotel workers in Chicago make.

Hotel workers should place no faith in UNITE HERE’s claims to be conducting a real fight. If the strike continues, the union will seek to let workers blow off steam on the picket lines, wearing them down with inadequate strike pay, while negotiating a deal with management behind closed door, which will inevitably fail to meet workers’ main demands.

Instead, workers should take matters into their own hands and form rank-and-file strike committees independent of the union. Such committees should demand an end to secret negotiations, insist that representatives democratically elected by workers be present at all contract talks, and livestream the discussions for all to see. Other demands to meet the needs of workers should include:

- Immediate 40 percent raise for all workers!
- Full-time employment for all workers, with adequate sick and vacation days!
- Full staffing at all workplaces!
- Year-round health insurance that is fully paid by the companies!
- Workers’ control over working conditions and hotel operations!

Hotel workers in Chicago cannot battle the multinational hotel corporations alone. An immediate appeal must be made to other hotel workers in the metropolitan area to join the strike, along with the hundreds of thousands of other workers in the region facing eroding wages and benefits, including teachers, UPS and Amazon workers, autoworkers, steelworkers, public transport workers, and others.



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