

“Capitalism is not working, and it never has for us”

Striking Chicago hotel workers speak out on fight for wages, health care

Our reporters
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On Saturday, a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team spoke to striking hotel workers on the picket lines in the Loop in downtown Chicago. Thousands of cooks, housekeepers, servers, bellhops and other service staff at 25 hotels are striking for better wages, healthcare, staffing and job security (see: Chicago hotel workers’ strike enters fourth day).

On one picket line, a union representative initially sought to block WSWs reporters from speaking to workers. When asked why workers weren’t allowed to speak, she said that she had to call the union’s public relations team. She handed the phone to the WSWs reporter, and Sara Lyons, spokesperson for UNITE HERE Local 1, said by way of explanation: “We want them to keep the line. I’m sure you understand.”

Afterwards, WSWs reporters nonetheless spoke to workers, who were eager to speak about the strike and a range of social and political issues.

Sergio has been working for 11 months at the Chicago Hilton hotel on Michigan Avenue as a locker room attendant. Before that he worked for recycling department at a storage company for 13 years.

“We are striking for better benefits, for health insurance, for our family members. When we have a layoff, we do not want to lose our health plans. Also, we want more sick days.

“I work two days as a locker room attendant and then I have two days off. Then I help the person who takes the garbage out and I do that for two days when he is off. That’s four days a week. Sometimes five if it’s available, but usually four.”

Sergio is currently making \$17 per hour and takes home \$700-800 a week. The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that an hourly wage of \$19.50 is needed to afford the average rent on a one-bedroom apartment in the Chicago metropolitan area.

“This is the first time, I have participated in a strike,” Sergio said. “I’m a person with good values and I think this

is a good fight for the benefit of all the workers.

“We wouldn’t have to be going on strike if the companies were looking out for their employees. The employees have made the companies rich. Very wealthy! We deserve a fair shake. They should give us the benefits we are asking for. It’s nonsense when they say there isn’t enough money.

“The politicians, they know. They make promises that they will do this or that then they get the vote and forget about us. Sooner or later the US citizens will stop believing in the politicians.”

Alfonso, a banquet supervisor on the picket line outside Chicago’s historic Palmer House Hilton at Monroe and State Streets, told the WSWs: “I’m 45 and my partner is 50. We are concerned about having enough money for healthcare because we’re not getting any younger. He works in administration, and even in those jobs they have started to hire people in at lower pay, just like in my profession. Our experience is not valued like it used to be.

“We want better working conditions. If you don’t fulfill all the work they expect you to do, you get written up. When quality inspectors come through, the company instructs us to hide everything, because we are working with broken and dirty equipment.

“We got rid of part-timers at the Palmer House. All that work that they were doing has been shifted on to the full-timers. For me to get my hours, I also have to wash dishes. It’s very hard work.

“There are people here who cannot retire. I work with one gentleman who is a banquet steward, and he has been here over seventy years. He is in his 80s, and he is expected to push as many heavy carts of plates as I am.

“When you have a job like this, you need health insurance year-round. We only have the insurance during the months when we are working. When you take a break from this kind of work, that is when you really start to feel all that strain that’s been building up on your joints, and you need medicine.

“Corporations don’t realize these realities. They’d rather put the money they are making in their pockets than pay for what their workers need. You can’t win with corporations. Capitalism is not working, and it’s never been working for any of us.

“Corporations think we don’t read the news. If anything, we are more in touch with the news than they are, because we have no choice but to inform ourselves. I found out through reading an article in *Forbes* that Thor Equities bought the Hilton brand, and that they are sitting on the properties. Equity groups don’t like to sit on property, because they like to buy. So now what they are trying to do is squeeze as much profit from us as they possibly can, and it’s never enough.

“My partner asked me how long I’d be out here on strike. I said that honestly, I don’t know, but it will be as long as it takes. What I do know is that everyone out here has a family and needs to meet.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* asked Alfonso what kinds of demands workers would put forward if they could organize a rank-and-file committee to take their struggle into their own hands. “I think the first things would be for better pay and benefits. Also, in my department, we would ask for more staff, because the amount of work we are expected to do is too much for the amount of people that we currently have.

“The other thing we should ask for is for all of the other workers in the city to get behind us.

“It’s not the politicians in Washington who are the backbone of the economy. It’s the workers who are the backbone. It’s that nurse who takes care of you and your family, that firefighter who is going to save your life.

“I didn’t agree with the union having separate contracts [at different hotel chains] for us. When all the contracts expire at the same time, we should all be out on strike together, instead of being separated. A one-day strike is not going to be enough.

“What’s happening all around the globe is that the working class is so angry that it is standing up. We feel like our back is against the wall, and we fear that we will be put on the street at any moment.

“I live around the corner from a nursing home on the North Side where the workers were on strike for more staff, better pay and benefits, and I saw myself and my coworkers in them. Those are the same things we are fighting for.”

Denise is a cook and has worked at the W Hotel Chicago for three years. She graduated from Chicago’s Washburne Culinary Institute and is still paying back student loans. “I went to school for two years and have to pay \$15,000 back for a two-year associate’s degree. That’s crazy.”

She said that a major issue for her was the lack of work during the winter months. “It hits really hard around

November or January. The people who are lower seniority, we barely get enough hours in the slow season, maybe four days, three days or two days. So, unless we get more hours, how are we going to survive?”

While months may go by with little work, she said, the hotel routinely under-staffs the kitchen during busier seasons. “Especially around the time we’re super busy, they like to under-staff us. Sometimes the hotel is 100 percent booked, and we’re getting hit hard with the rush and with room service, and there’s only two cooks in the kitchen.”

She said that the hotel was bringing in temporary workers from other properties as strikebreakers. “The day before the strike, they had us prepping everything for them. Which defeats the purpose, right?”

Denise said she was striking not just for herself, but for other workers at the hotel. “It can be alright in the kitchens, but the housekeepers, they do a lot of hard work, and they have to deal with a lot of problems. I’m out here supporting them, in addition to the cooks, too.

Another picket at the W Hotel said: “I have been working as a kitchen steward for three years now. My duties mainly include cleaning the kitchen area, mopping and sweeping the kitchen floors, washing dishes and silverware. I’m a full-time employee but I have not worked a full-time shift—which is around 40 hours week—in over a year.

“This is the way management would like it to be,” he said, adding, “There is demand for more workers, because when you show up to work it is so hard to keep up with the workload.”

The striking worker continued: “Currently I am being paid close to minimum wage. I can’t afford to live on my own because rent is so high in the city. I am not receiving my full-time work hours and when I do show up to work I have to work with faulty equipment.”

The W worker also informed WSWS reporters that management is trying to make healthcare for family plans more expensive, proposing a \$15 increase for each family member’s premium and a higher deductible.

When asked if he saw a larger connection between his struggles and the struggles of the entire working class, the worker responded: “Yes! In a capitalist country the people in charge only care about making more money. They don’t care about how they make it or who gets hurt in the process.”



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