

“Gas, rent and milk goes up and we’re still making the same money”

Striking Chicago hotel workers speak out

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Last Friday, thousands of bartenders, doormen, cooks, servers, bellhops, housekeepers and other service staff at 25 hotels in Chicago went on strike for better healthcare insurance, wages, staffing and job security. Yesterday, workers at the Cambria Chicago Magnificent Mile hotel joined the thousands of other hotel workers on strike in Chicago, making it the 26th hotel on strike.

Other hotels may join the strike. The website, chicagohotelstrike.com, operated by UNITE HERE Local 1, reports the Park Hyatt Chicago hotel is one of the four hotels where “there could be a strike at any time.” The union called the strike one week after the previous contract, covering nearly 6,000 workers, expired August 31. In August, hotel workers voted by 97 percent to authorize a strike.

World Socialist Web Site reporters visited the Hyatt Regency McCormick Place hotel, one of three Hyatt operations owned by the Chicago-based Pritzker family. One of the billionaire heirs of the hotel chain, JB Pritzker is running as the Democratic Party candidate for Illinois governor with the backing of most of the unions.

Workers expressed their frustration and anger over the cost cutting measures enacted by Hyatt, which has led to cutting of hours and increased workloads for workers. WSWs reporters spoke to striking workers Renee, Miguel and Maximal on the picket line outside of the hotel.

Renee, a lobby porter, said, “Me and my wife work here. We have seven kids. We have a mortgage. We have car notes. I’m taking on this cause for me and my kids’ futures. They’re trying to take our pension. They’re trying to take our insurance benefits. They

want to make us pay for it.

“I’m sacrificing a lot right now, but it’s worth it. My kids were out here yesterday. I not making any money right now except for the \$300 a week from the strike fund. If I was working, I’d probably make \$1,000. But this is important to us.

“Gas goes up, rent goes up, milk goes up and we’re still making the same type of money, we’re actually losing money in the end from these increased expenses. When I bought my home four years ago, I was paying \$1,200 a month. It just jumped to \$1,600 because of increased property taxes.”

Maximilian, a Hyatt bartender for three years who moved to Chicago from France five years ago, added, “We want respect! We’re striking for better healthcare, all year round, and for a livable wage. Living in Chicago is expensive as hell! We’re still making the same thing as prices for everything are going up and up. We don’t get treated equally with the higher ups of Hyatt. But then they expect us to work 16-hour days!”

Renee added, “The people at the bottom with the lowest seniority always get laid off every year during the slow periods. So, when they get laid off, they get no health insurance. When they come back, they make you pay for the cost of the health insurance for the months you weren’t working!”

“You apply for Medicaid, but you can’t even get it because you’re going to be hired back on in a few months. The government says you’re stealing!”

Maximilian spoke about Hyatt’s ongoing cost-cutting measures. “They’re shutting departments down so we’re doing two jobs at once. They got rid of the room service department and merged it with another department. They only gave people thirty days’ notice

that they were going to get laid off. About seventeen people were laid off or transferred to other departments.

“Miguel, our co-worker was affected by this. He worked here for twenty years and was number two seniority and now he’s at the bottom of seniority, which means he gets laid off during the slow season in the winter.”

“I worked in room service for twenty years at Hyatt,” Miguel said. “They gave us thirty days to decide what to do. They tried to find other positions in the hotel. But now I only work two days a week if I’m lucky. I went from working full-time to only getting a few days a week. It’s completely unpredictable.”

Maximilian added, “They lay people off and force other workers to pick up slack. I’ve been at Hyatt for three years and now I have more seniority than Miguel because he’s been transferred.”

A WSWs reporter raised the fact that JB Pritzker, a billionaire running for Illinois governor as a Democrat, inherited his wealth from his family, which owns Hyatt. “The Democrats are just as bad as the Republicans,” Maximilian replied. “I will not be voting for him. We make the wealth for people like him!”

WSWS reporters also spoke with Elynn, a server for four years at Hyatt, who expressed her anger at the working conditions. “All summer long we’ve been working six days a week consistently. The lower seniority you are the more that you have to work six days a week. They only have to pay us time-and-a-half if we work the seventh day.”

Speaking about the experience Miguel and other workers who have been laid off or transferred confront, she said, “His department was gotten rid of to save money because the service wasn’t making enough money to justify it. Now in-room dining [i.e. room service] has been taken over by our coffee shop. They still make the same amount of money, but they do more work. They take ‘market-to-go’ orders, which they deliver to the room, but they do not walk in with the tray. They get a \$2 delivery fee, which is not a tip, which is then split with everyone in the department. This way, they got rid of room service people who were getting raises every six months.”

WSWS reporters explained that UNITE HERE and other city unions were isolating the strikers and looking to force workers to end the strike and accept a contract that did not meet their demands. Elynn responded,

“When the whispers of strike started three months ago, I was told the union would be trying to raise everyone’s pay to twenty dollars an hour, because that’s what some of the highest paid workers here make. Then they were like ‘well, maybe we’re going to ask for sixteen.’ Because they were acting ‘realistically,’ which means that we wouldn’t get what we wanted if we’re asking for extra sick days, better overtime, etc.

“So, then my union rep comes to me a week before the strike and I tell her, ‘I want to hear you say it: how much are you fighting for me to make?’ She said, ‘well, it’s probably going to be about thirteen dollars. Plus, after six months you’ll get a raise and then those raises will continue.

“So every time I talk to them it goes down. And I think it’s because there’s some corruption between unions and big corporations, a relationship of ‘if I help you out, you help me out.’”



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