

“This should be a mass movement if we want to get what we want”

Chicago hotel workers’ strike continues for eighth day

Our reporting team
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Over 5,000 Chicago hotel workers entered their eighth day on strike today against the giant hotel chains, Marriott, Hilton and Hyatt. The workers—cooks, servers, bellhops, bartenders, doormen, housekeepers, and other service staff at 26 hotels—are fighting for better health insurance, higher wages, adequate staffing and job security.

UNITE HERE Local 1 called the walkout, one week after the previous contract covering 6,000 workers in the city, expired on August 31. Previously these workers, who are some of the most exploited in the service industry, voted by 97 percent to authorize a walkout. During the slower tourist season in the winter, roughly from October through March, hundreds of workers are laid off and lose their health insurance.

On Tuesday, hotel workers at the Cambria Chicago Magnificent Mile hotel joined the strike. Officials from UNITE HERE Local 1 say the remaining four hotels covered by the labor agreement could be on strike “at any time.” Nearly 3,000 workers marched along the Magnificent Mile yesterday to mark the first week of the strike.

Earlier this week, hotel workers in Hawaii, also members of UNITE HERE voted by 95 percent to strike six Marriott hotels if no contract is reached. Hotel workers in San Francisco, San Jose, Seattle and other cities are also voting to authorize strike action.

UNITE HERE Local 1 has left workers completely in the dark about ongoing negotiations. Workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* complained they have not heard anything about what has been proposed since the strike began. The union is well aware that if workers learn the terms of the sellout deal being discussed they would oppose it.

“We’ve been out now for a week, but we don’t know what the union has proposed,” a dishwasher at the Palmer House hotel told a WSWs reporter. “I know we’re trying to get better healthcare insurance, more sick days and higher pay. They’re going to start negotiating again tomorrow morning. I don’t know what they’re going to talk about, but we need to know.”

Striking hotel workers confront multinational hotel businesses with intimate ties to the Democratic and Republican parties. This includes the Hyatt hotel chain, owned by the Chicago-based Pritzker family. JB Pritzker, an heir to his family’s Hyatt fortune with a net worth of \$3.3 billion, is the Democratic Party’s candidate for governor of Illinois in the upcoming November elections.

WSWS reporters stopped by strike pickets at the JW Marriott Chicago hotel and Palmer House hotel, distributed the article “Chicago hotel strike pits workers against Democrats’ billionaire candidate for governor” and spoke to striking workers.

“I’m a server and we don’t get paid what we deserve,” Dax, a server at the JW Marriott hotel, said. “This is an expensive city. I’ve been here for two and a half years and it’s hard work at a luxury hotel behind the scenes.”

The strike has caused long lines of guests waiting to check in, rooms not being properly cleaned, and some of the strikebreakers filling in multiple roles without proper training. Dax spoke about the disruption and blamed it on the ownership, who “don’t fully really know how to do the work as we do all the work. They have help there but they aren’t properly trained.”

“For us, it’s about healthcare and better conditions.

We strive to do our best and we are not treated well.”

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Robert told reporters he was fighting for year-round healthcare. “Any time business is down during the winter we don’t have healthcare,” he said. “We deserve better conditions when the hotel business in Chicago is making billions. I believe healthcare should be a basic right. It can’t be an option depending on the season when we have bills to pay and can’t go to the doctor. I’m here to support all my fellow workers and not just myself, so we all can be treated better.”

Alonso, a housekeeper aide with more than five years at the Marriott, was concerned about healthcare, wages and injuries on the job. He said, “Hotel workers like me have to work two jobs for the simple fact that we need to make ends meet. Some of us don’t even get steady hours. That’s what we are marching and on strike for. When it’s the winter time, they want us to pay for our own healthcare. We need higher wages and full healthcare all across the board. They should increase our wages by 100 percent.”

He continued, “I feel we deserve good wages, but it’s not like that right now. When you start here, you make \$12 an hour and that stays that way for many years. The Marriott CEO makes \$13 million a year. I make roughly \$27,000 a year. That’s just working full time with my first job. I also work a second job. You can’t really live with that in this city. The price of everything goes up and if everything goes up, you got to adjust for that and make more money.”

Alonso spoke of overwork and repetitive stress injuries on the job. “If you work in a hotel job, you will get injured after many hours,” he said. “You mess up your legs and arms just like that. If somebody gets injured, they won’t be looked after. When it comes to housekeeping, you’re lifting up beds and your shoulder hurts, your arms hurt.”

He also noted that the union works with management to keep workers from getting workers compensation. “If you get injured, they send you to the union doctor. But then the union doctor sends you back to work to do ‘light duty.’ That way you don’t get any workers comp. They don’t want to pay for workers comp.

“This should be a mass movement to get what we want,” Alonso said about the need to unite the working class. “No matter what work you do, you need

healthcare for your kids. That’s why we are here because we need vital healthcare for our families and our kids. You know how high doctors’ bills are. The companies just want to save money and make more profits.”



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