

“The economy did not recover for me under Obama”

Striking Chicago Hyatt workers describe fight against hotel giants

George Marlowe, Marcus Day
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In Chicago, thousands of hotel workers have been on strike for two weeks, struggling against poverty wages, temporary employment and inadequate health care.

Seeking to put the brakes on a growing movement of hotel workers across the country and prevent workers from coming into direct conflict with the city’s Democratic Party establishment, the UNITE HERE Local 1 union announced Thursday afternoon that an agreement had been reached with seven hotels in Chicago, stating that a contract had already been ratified.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with picketing workers at the Hyatt Regency in the Loop Thursday evening about their struggle and distributed copies of the statement “Chicago hotel strike pits workers against Democrats’ billionaire candidate for governor.”

Ozier works in convention services and has been at the hotel for 10 years. He said starting pay for his position was between \$12 to \$13 an hour, far too little to be able to afford to live in Chicago. When he first began, he would be laid off during the slow season for five or six months at a time.

He described the exhausting and labor-intensive character of his work. “It’s real hard because we have to move a lot of equipment, push and pick up heavy chairs, roll tables, things like that,” he said. “Sometimes we do 10, 12, 16 hours a day.”

Ozier said he was striking for improvements in wages, benefits, sick days, and working conditions. Asked about the constant refrain by the corporations and politicians that there is “no money” to meet workers’ needs, he responded, “There’s plenty of money.”

While countless millions have been poured into the development of high-rises and luxury hotels and condominiums by Emanuel and earlier Democratic Party mayors, Ozier noted that life in working class

neighborhoods was radically different. “It’s pretty rough here, growing up and trying to get a good job, and trying to move on with your life.”

Darren is a young 26-year-old houseman that works on events, parties and banquets. He had worked at the Hyatt previously and was let go. He was rehired recently, but in total has been working at the Hyatt for five years. “The biggest issue we face is year-round health care and low pay,” he said. “When it’s snowing in the wintertime, they basically lay off half of the staff. And then they lose all their benefits. If we have year-round health care, we can at least still have health care in the winter months.

“During the winter when they lay you off, you have to fight to get unemployment. And sometimes you can’t even get unemployment. You can go three months with no work.

“When I first started working here, I was going to school. But I wasn’t able to pay for school and go to work. The rich are getting richer and we are just staying where we are. We are making them richer. I think health care and education should be affordable. It should be a right. Without the health care benefits, you can end up paying \$500 or more for doctor visits.”

Vincent, an overnight steward at the nearby Wyndham, spoke about the high cost of health care and its impact on hotel workers in the months when they are laid off. “If you don’t have insurance, you have to pay out of pocket,” he said. “If you get a hospital bill, it could be in the thousands and the bills can pile up. And they will take it out of your state taxes. A lot of people here have to do it all the time. None of us can afford that. Only the rich can afford it.”

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Pointing to an older worker, he noted, “There’s an

87-year-old here who has a disabled son and who is still working here at Hyatt. He should be home! Our society is terrible. They don't care about young or old people in corporate America."

Vincent spoke about the hard work he and other workers do in grueling shifts. "I'm an overnight steward. I clean the kitchen. They serve the food. I come to clean the kitchen. I clean the flattops, the floors, anything they cook, banquets, I clean it. I have an eight-hour shift and at least seven hours of non-stop work overnight.

"Sometimes they will schedule us the next afternoon. They will schedule me from 2 p.m. to 11 p.m. the very next day. I get two hours of sleep if that happens. I get home at 8:30 a.m., go to sleep at 9 a.m. I'm back up at 11:30 a.m., eat something and get back out the door with only an hour or two of sleep. This happens sometimes twice a week, on Saturday and Sundays, and Thursdays and Fridays."

"When I walk out of the hotel in the morning I look like a zombie. I don't have a life. I have kids and a wife. I have a grandson in college and I have to pay \$350 a month for his room and board. When I pay my bills, I may get a call from my daughter, my lenders, or my family asking for help.

"We need education and knowledge to fight back. We need our own movement of the working class. I look at my own neighborhood and they have locked up aldermen for corruption. The economy did not recover for me under Obama."

Vincent is a military veteran, enlisting when he was younger in the hopes of funding a college education. He spoke out against the money spent on wars. "I left the military in '94 and still haven't gotten my benefits. I did eight years in the military and I joined because of the GI bill for college. I didn't join to go fight in Afghanistan. Those people are struggling over there too just like us. When we cut, we bleed the same. We are all human beings. [Nationalism] is a smokescreen to keep everybody divided."



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