

UNITE HERE isolates striking Chicago hotel workers, rams through deal with Marriott

Marcus Day
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On Thursday afternoon, hotel and hospitality union UNITE HERE Local 1 abruptly announced that an agreement had been reached with seven hotels in Chicago, including six owned by Marriott. Thousands of workers at 26 hotels have been on strike for two weeks, fighting back against poverty wages, abysmal working conditions, and the regular loss of employment and health insurance during the slower tourist season.

The hastily announced deal—coming in the midst of a series of massive strike votes by Marriott workers around the country, unanimous strike votes by steelworkers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal, and struggles by teachers, UPS, Amazon and autoworkers—is an attempt by the union to sabotage a growing rebellion of hotel workers and prevent it from coalescing into a broader movement of the working class.

More than 9,000 Marriott hotel workers, many of them immigrants and highly exploited by hotel management, are pressing for strike action in major US cities. Strike authorization votes have passed overwhelmingly at hotels in Detroit, Oakland and San Diego in recent days, following earlier votes in San Francisco, San Jose, Seattle, Boston, Waikiki and Maui. UNITE HERE bargains on behalf of approximately 20,000 workers at Marriott properties around the country, with some 12,000 currently working without contracts.

Jairo Nunez, a UNITE HERE Local 1 union organizer, claimed on the picket line in Chicago Thursday, “Marriott signing just puts a lot of pressure on the other companies.” On the contrary, the agreement between UNITE HERE and Marriott severely weakens the position of workers, isolating those remaining on strike.

As of this writing, no details of the agreement have

been released by either the union or Marriott. Sarah Lyons, spokesperson for UNITE HERE Local 1, did not respond to a request for a copy of the contract. On Thursday afternoon, pickets were already taken down at a number of hotels, both Marriott and non-Marriott, around Chicago’s Magnificent Mile retail corridor.

Marriott workers contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site* said that the union announced Wednesday night that ratification votes would take place Thursday morning. They told them that the agreement, a five-year contract, included a provision for year-round health insurance, workers’ main demand, along with pay increases.

However, any deal reached behind closed doors with Marriott, the world’s largest hotel chain, will inevitably fail to meet workers’ needs, and will maintain the hated status quo of poverty wages and inadequate job security and health care. If it is in fact the case that Marriott has agreed to year-round insurance, it would only be in order to reduce turnover and maintain an exploitable workforce.

Moreover, paltry raises will be more than offset through other concessions; workers on the picket lines previously reported that the companies were demanding significant increases to health insurance costs for family members.

If the agreement were as great a victory as the union is claiming, there is no reason why workers should not have had at least two weeks to study and discuss it, particularly since it will dictate their working conditions for the next five years. Instead, every indication is that UNITE HERE is rushing through the vote in order to conceal the full details.

One thing is certain, under terms of the deal workers will continue to work for inadequate pay in the city with the highest cost of living in the central United

States. Like many, Vincent, a kitchen steward on the picket lines Thursday night, works two jobs just to make ends meet.

“People think \$20 is a lot of money. That’s no money—it’s nothing,” Vincent told the WSWS. “Minimum wage should have been \$20 an hour a long time ago. That’s chump change. A job like this, we should get paid \$40 an hour. You look at the rent we have to pay and the cost of living. We easily deserve more. They pay \$500 or more for a night at the Hyatt on Wacker Drive in Chicago on a Monday night.”

In contrast with UNITE HERE’s attempts to limit the spread of the strike, Vincent pointed to the necessity for broadening the struggle, saying, “I’ve been wondering why we aren’t all on strike. The way I see it is all the cities should be on strike together.”

In an indication of the pro-corporate character of the deal, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel immediately praised it Thursday, writing in a statement, “This agreement is a significant step forward for the union, the hotels and the city and I am confident it can light a path forward to ending the labor action at other hotels in the city.” Emanuel lauded the union and Marriott “for staying at the table, working in good faith and reaching an agreement that reflects their shared interests.”

UNITE HERE has close ties to Emanuel, who is despised by workers in Chicago for his closure of 50 public schools in 2013 and his administration’s cover-up of the police murder of teenager Laquan McDonald. The union prominently supported his re-election campaign in 2015, paying for a series of commercials with the tagline “Rahm Love.” While most videos have since been taken down from the union’s web site, in one that remains, UNITE HERE Local 1 President Karen Kent exclaims, “We have the best city in the world, the best hospitality, and the best mayor!”

Through Emanuel’s pro-business policies and promotion of tourism, channeling tax money to the central business district (the Loop) and various city boondoggles, the union has benefited from the expansion of low-wage jobs. The average UNITE HERE member in Chicago pays nearly \$686 in dues.

The pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America, which functions as a faction of the Democratic Party and has promoted illusions in UNITE HERE throughout the strike, followed Emanuel’s lead

Thursday, writing on Facebook, “Workers at the Hotel Blake have won a contract!,” apparently indifferent to its actual terms.

The strike pitted workers in a struggle not just with the giant hotel companies, but against the Democratic Party, which represents the interests of the corporations and their billionaire owners no less than the Republicans.

The Hyatt hotel chain, notorious for its ruthless tactics, including turning heat lamps on workers during a strike in the summer of 2011, is owned by the vastly wealthy and politically connected Pritzker family. Billionaire venture capitalist J.B. Pritzker is currently running for governor of Illinois and has obtained the support of over a dozen trade unions.

While UNITE HERE previously made a show of opposition to the appointment of J.B. Pritzker’s sister, Penny Pritzker, as commerce secretary in the Obama administration in 2013, the union has since “made its peace” with the Pritzkers, according to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and has made no comment on J.B.’s candidacy.

Workers have not struck for two weeks in order to return to another half decade of poverty wages, 12- or 16-hour days, dangerous working conditions and yearly layoffs. They should reject the union’s attempts to shut down the strike and ram through an agreement without adequate time to review and discuss it.

Workers must elect their own organizations, rank-and-file strike committees independent of the union, and formulate demands which correspond to their interests, such as a 40 percent wage increase; fully funded, year-round health care for themselves and their families; an end to layoffs and part-time employment; and more.

An immediate appeal should be made to the millions of hotel, steel, UPS, Amazon and autoworkers and others around the country and the world to expand the strike and mobilize the full force of the working class in a political struggle against capitalism, and for workers’ power and the socialist reorganization of economic life.



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