

“We are just new slaves”

1,500 Boston hotel workers walk out as UNITE HERE seeks to end Chicago strike

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4 October 2018

More than 1,500 hotel workers in Boston began a strike against multinational hotel chain Marriott International on Wednesday at seven hotels. The Boston workers join thousands of Chicago hotel workers who have been on strike for four weeks to demand substantial wage increases, year-round medical insurance and improved working conditions.

From the start of the strike in Chicago on September 7 the UNITE HERE union has sought to isolate workers by signing piecemeal deals with one hotel chain after another. Last weekend, the union settled with another four hotels, leaving pickets up at only 8 of the original 26 strikebound hotels. If the union called out the workers in Boston it is only because there is immense sentiment among hotel workers for a nationwide strike.

Contracts for Marriott hotel workers across the country expired on August 31 and the union has kept them on the job. In the meantime, workers voted overwhelmingly for strike action at hotels in Boston, San Francisco, Detroit, San Jose, San Diego, Honolulu, Seattle and other cities. Everywhere hotel workers confront low wages, part-time work and ruthless efforts by hotel chains to slash their healthcare and retirement benefits. Many workers are forced to work two or more jobs just to survive in cities with high costs of living, including soaring housing costs.

Despite widespread sentiment for strikes across the US by hotel workers and other sections of workers—including steelworkers, teachers, UPS workers, Fiat Chrysler autoworkers in Indiana, who have all approved strike action—UNITE HERE and the other unions have worked systematically to block a concerted struggle by the working class. Instead the

unions have sought to channel worker opposition down the dead-end road of electing Democrats on November 6.

The anti-working class alliance of the unions and the Democratic Party is revealed in Chicago where one of the most ruthless employers they face is Hyatt, which is owned by the Chicago-based billionaire Pritzker family. One of the heirs of the Hyatt fortune, JB Pritzker, is currently running as the Democratic candidate for governor of Illinois with the backing of the unions.

Since the beginning of the strike, the union has sought to wear down the hotel workers by having workers march daily in noisy pickets while keeping them in the dark about the details of the contract negotiations. In addition to demanding a higher wage, many of these workers face layoffs in the winter months with the slowing down of the tourist season, and lose access to health care coverage. Without access to year-round healthcare, hotel workers with serious health issues pay hundreds, if not thousands, for medications and treatment.

The union and Democratic Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel have claimed victory at chains such as Marriott and Hilton where UNITE HERE has signed deals, claiming that it has won year-round healthcare and pay raises. The union has not released any of the details of any of the five-year contracts, most of which have been negotiated separately with the different hotels. The unions pitch such minor wage and benefits improvements to management as means of stabilizing their workforce and reducing costs associated with a high turnover rate. Meanwhile, the union is guaranteed a secure flow of dues income, no matter how miserable

the conditions workers face.

In addition to the accolades from the deeply hated mayor, these sellout deals have also been hailed by the Democratic Socialists of America, the International Socialist Organization and other supposedly “left” organizations with close ties to the Democratic Party.

One worker who labors on 15-hour shifts at the Palmer House Hilton hotel, where the union rammed through a contract, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about what she had been told. She said the workers had not won the wage demands they had sought, and their year-round healthcare was only guaranteed if they worked one hour a week every month. Given that many hotel workers are frequently laid off for months at a time this would mean the union’s claim to have won year-round coverage could prove false.

Gurdip, a hotel worker at Hyatt Regency for more than seven years, spoke about the exploitation and threats workers face. “We are fighting for healthcare, more sick days, but also for higher raises. We only get 4 sick days. We work very hard and some days we work 10–12 hours. One person often works four to five jobs in my department. Management demands that we work overtime without any notice and tell us we will lose our jobs if we don’t.

“The average hotel worker in this city, if you look at rent in Chicago, you need at least \$50,000 to survive. Even that is not enough if you have a family. Most workers here make less than \$25,000 a year. Nobody can survive on that. All the bottom guys were only working six months. Some are only given one or two days a month. How can they survive? They have to work other part-time jobs. This system is not working for us. For us to win against these powerful corporations, we really do need to stay on strike together and unite across the world. We need one fight.”

Elena, a banquet waitress at the Hyatt, compared hotel working conditions to slavery. “I work here and another job and just barely make enough to survive. I pay almost \$1,200 a month in rent. We need \$30 an hour or more to survive in Chicago. I was watching this movie about slavery and I told my friend, ‘Nothing’s changed!’ They tell us we are free, but it’s not real. You’re still paying mortgage, rent and everything. We can’t afford anything. We are just new slaves.”

While the hotel workers in Chicago have been strung

along during the strike on \$300–\$400 in strike pay, the union bureaucrats have been rewarded handsomely for their services to the hotel corporations. The top executives of UNITE make more than six figures in salary and compensation. Donald Taylor, the president of UNITE, took home over \$370,000 in 2017, more than ten times the average wage of many of the hospitality workers. Most workers also pay almost \$700 in annual dues.

A genuine struggle by workers can only be waged if hotel workers form their own democratic rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the union, to fight for their own demands and prevent another sellout. Workers should demand 40 percent or more in wage hikes; fully-funded annual health care without any stipulations; an end to part-time work and more.

At the same time, rank-and-file workers should elect representatives, made up of the most trusted workers, to monitor all negotiations and report back to the whole membership. Workers must uphold the principle of “No contract, no work” and not return until there is a ratification vote. Workers must have a full week to study and discuss all the details of any agreement before a vote.

With the expansion of strike by the thousands of hotel workers in Boston, rank-and-file workers must do everything to break the isolation of hotel workers from the broader working class. Hotel and hospitality workers have allies among thousands of other workers who are also ready to strike, including UPS workers, teachers, autoworkers and more. All workers must unite in an industrial and political counter-offensive against the giant corporations and the two big business parties that defend them.



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