

Workers strike at Marriott hotels in Boston and San Francisco

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More than 100 striking workers picketed outside the Sheraton Boston on Thursday morning. The picket is part of the walkout by 1,500 workers against the Marriott International hotel chain in Boston, which began on Wednesday.

Another 2,500 workers also walked off their jobs Thursday morning at seven Marriott hotels in downtown San Francisco, calling for higher wages, workplace safety and job security.

The Sheraton Boston Hotel has more than 1,200 rooms with prices for a single room starting at over \$500. A housekeeper making \$21.45 per hour under the contract signed by the UNITE HERE union would have to work more than 23 hours to make this amount in gross pay.

The Sheraton offers Marriott's "Green Choice" program, a corporate cost-cutting measure, which under the guise of saving energy makes workers' jobs and schedules more difficult. The hotel's web site boasts of "4-star sophistication" and an "unbeatable location in the heart of the action." It is within walking distance from Boston's South End, where in 2016 the income of those in the top five percent of income earners made 15 times more than those in the bottom 20 percent, according to a Brookings Institution study.

The union called the strikes in Boston and San Francisco after more than 8,500 workers at Marriott facilities in both cities along with Oakland, San Diego, San Jose, California; Seattle, Honolulu and Detroit overwhelmingly voted for strike action. While hotel workers around the country want an expansion of the strike, UNITE HERE called the Boston and San Francisco workers out even as it works to shut down the month-long walkout by thousands of hotel workers in Chicago, which started on September 7.

In Chicago, UNITE HERE signed separate deals with

several hotels, including those owned by Marriott, and only five out of 26 hotels originally struck are still being picketed. Rank-and-file workers in Chicago say they did not win the wage demands they were seeking. They have also challenged claims by the union to have achieved year-round health coverage, pointing to a provision that workers must work at least one hour a week every month to qualify for medical coverage. Many hotel workers are laid off for months at a time during the offseason, however, and would not qualify for medical insurance if this is the requirement.

Marriott International had revenues of \$22.9 billion in 2017, which had more than doubled since 2010 as it bought up other chains. Its president and CEO, Arne Sorenson, made more than \$13.3 million in 2017, or more than \$36,000 for each day of the year.

The "Green Choice" program allows high-paying visitors to opt out of having their rooms cleaned every day during a stay, with the corporation claiming that electricity, natural gas, and clean water are conserved. In reality, it cut Marriott's Boston payroll costs by more than \$150,000 in 2016 according to a *Boston Globe* article. It also results in workers having to stay on call, sleeping with their phones nearby at home in case they are offered a shift. Cleaning up after a "Green Choice" visit is more difficult, according to a worker who told the *Globe* that "it can take an hour or more to clean the dust, mildew, soap scum, and trash" that build up over several days.

The World Socialist Web Site spoke with Rhonda, a worker whose shifts are split between Westin Waterfront, the Westin Copley, and the Sheraton.

About the high cost of living in Boston, she said, "it's very expensive to live here. If you don't work, you don't eat. I'm a single parent, so it affects me big time. There's no more middle class: it's either rich or

poor. I have two kids. I work other jobs. You do what you got to do.” When asked how many Marriott employees are having to work two or three jobs, Rhonda said, “a lot of us.”

Carlos Da Veiga said that workers will stay out on strike as long as needed. Their demands include health insurance, job security, and post-retirement health insurance. The latter is not in the current contract. Rhonda said that one of the strikers’ demands is health insurance for those who work only 20 hours per week.

Employees often lose their health insurance for two or three months out of the year because of temporary layoffs. When asked how workers cope under such circumstances, Carlos replied, “we survive.”

He’s lived in the working-class city of Dorchester for 25 years, “but now the housing is too expensive.”

“We’re fighting about Green Choice,” Carlos said, “because Green Choice is taking jobs from a lot of people. We fight for job security because sometimes they put employees on call. If you have a lot of Green Choice, housekeepers have to stay home.”

Brian Lang, the President of Unite Here Local 26, sits on the unelected Fiscal and Management Control Board of the MBTA, the Boston area’s public transit agency. The FMCB’s mission for the past three years has been to cut MBTA workers’ wages and benefits while privatizing services and jobs.

If the hotel workers’ struggle is to be taken forward workers should elect rank-and-file committees to fight for a nationwide strike of all hotel workers. At the same time, workers should elect representatives from among the most trusted co-workers to monitor all negotiations and report to membership. There should be no return to work without a ratification vote, and no vote until workers have a full week to study and discuss the details of any agreement.



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