

Detroit Westin Book Cadillac workers join hotel walkouts

A WSWS reporting team
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Workers at the Detroit Westin Book Cadillac hotel struck Sunday morning, joining thousands of other hotel workers on strike across the US. It is the first hotel strike in Detroit in 30 years.

One hundred sixty workers in Detroit who had been working since June without a contract walked out over economic issues, including pay and benefits. Meanwhile, 5,000 workers at Marriott hotels in five other cities, including San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, Chicago and Boston, members of UNITE HERE, are continuing strikes.

Strikers in Detroit include housekeepers, cashiers, servers, barmen and desk personnel. They are seeking a substantial wage increase to achieve at least parity with other Westin hotel workers in Detroit. While the Book Cadillac is the most profitable Westin property in the city, workers took a wage freeze in 2008 and have not had a substantial pay increase since then. Housekeepers start at about \$14 an hour, a poverty wage that makes it impossible for many workers to live in the city, which has seen soaring rents due to property speculation downtown.

Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they wanted an immediate raise to at least \$20 per hour. However, union officials contacted by the WSWS were not willing to spell out any specific demands.

A UNITE HERE official reported that workers at the Book Cadillac have had a cumulative 70-cent per hour pay raise over the last 10 years. As a consequence, workers at the Book Cadillac now make \$6,000 a year less than workers at the nearby Detroit Westin, Renaissance Center. On top of that health insurance premium costs amount to \$50 per week, making it impossible for many workers to afford coverage.

Detroit hotel workers are facing a management strikebreaking operation using supervisors and temporary workers. However, UNITE HERE has isolated the strike. There has been no call issued to other sections of workers,

such as tens of thousands of Detroit area autoworkers, teachers, Amazon workers or others for support. Meanwhile, UNITE HERE members at the Westin Detroit Metropolitan Airport hotel are continuing to work, even though they have been without a contract for more than a year.

Workers will not receive strike pay, despite UNITE HERE having nearly 270,000 members in North America, with workers paying some \$11 in weekly dues.

“We are their most profitable [Detroit] hotel. They are 100 percent sold out every other week,” said Rikisha, a Book Cadillac housekeeper. She noted that a king room runs \$300 a night and a top floor suite is \$1,000. “Yet I am barely managing. I work from paycheck to paycheck.

“I am the only night housekeeper. The normal is 16 rooms a night, but I may have as many as 21. It is hard to handle just by myself. I am supposed to get off at 11 p.m., but sometimes I work until 1:30 a.m.”

She continued, “We want \$20 an hour. We work too hard to get any less.”

Another Book Cadillac worker, Ruchelle, a steward, said, “We want better wages and insurance.” She continued, “We put on a lot of banquets. They want us to meet their demands, they should meet ours.”

Shellena, another worker, said, “Marriott says this is enough to live on?” She pointed out that management has imposed an onerous workload in exchange for meager pay. “One Sunday I had five suites and two double rooms, and they had all been trashed!”

Said Trina, “You can’t make it with a family. You work crazy hours, so you can’t even get a second job.”

WSWS reporters also spoke to striking Marriott workers in San Francisco. Some 2,500 Marriott employees in downtown San Francisco walked off the job Thursday morning at seven hotels. The workers are fighting for higher wages, workplace safety and job security. The walkout followed an overwhelming strike authorization

vote.

One worker said, “It’s really tough for people who have a family and kids. The rent increases every month in San Francisco, and I only make \$14 an hour here so I have to work two jobs. I started at \$13 five years ago and have barely had a raise, while they’re cutting our work by about three hours a week. We just want to survive in this country and city.”

Another San Francisco Marriott worker said, “When the contract expired we lost our benefits. We weren’t asking for much, just a slight raise, but Marriott doesn’t want to renew. Daily expenses in San Francisco are too high, and we only make \$14.25 an hour. I’ve heard hotel workers in Hawaii are going out next. We need to connect with workers at all the Marriotts.”

There is a broad sentiment among hotel workers for a determined fight after years in which wages have been suppressed while profits for the hotel chains have boomed. UNITE HERE has done everything it can to undermine solidarity, limiting strike action and cutting separate deals that leave workers isolated and divided. The union has done nothing to mobilize broader support in the working class under conditions where management is resorting to strikebreaking to maintain operations.

The series of hotel strikes take place under conditions of a broad mood of militancy in the working class, reflected in massive strike votes by steelworkers at ArcelorMittal and US Steel as well as the 54 percent contract rejection vote by UPS workers of a sellout deal negotiated by the Teamsters.

Nothing can be won on the basis of isolated, individual strikes. Hotel workers should form independent workplace committees to expand the strikes, linking up the struggles of workers in different cities as part of a broader mobilization of the working class. These committees must formulate demands that meet the real needs of workers for livable wages, full health care coverage and job protections.



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