

US hotel workers continue strikes in eight cities

Our reporters
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Walkouts by US hotel workers continued into the weekend with about 7,700 workers at Marriott hotels in eight US cities on strike over largely economic issues as well as job security.

The determination of workers to fight is being fueled by poverty level wages and totally inadequate health care. Marriott, the most profitable US hotel chain, has 850 company managed hotels in the US and Canada. It has some 140,000 employees in the US.

The largest walkouts are currently taking place in Hawaii, Boston and San Francisco. There are some 2,700 workers on strike on the islands of Maui and Oahu with 2,500 in San Francisco and another 1,800 in Boston. Strikes are also taking place in Detroit, San Jose, Oakland and San Diego.

The walkout in Hawaii began Monday, with Marriott Workers at five properties including The Sheraton Waikiki, The Royal Hawaiian, Westin Moana Surfrider, Sheraton Princess Kaiulani, and Sheraton Maui taking strike action.

The hotel workers, members of UNITE HERE, have been called out by the union in a series of piecemeal, largely uncoordinated strikes without a clearly stated set of demands. While thousands of workers have been called out on strike, thousands more Marriott workers as well as workers at other hotel chains are continuing on the job, pumping out profits for the owners.

Walkouts by some 5,000 workers began in September at major hotels in Chicago including the Marriott, Hilton and Hyatt. Since that time UNITE HERE has wound down the strikes in Chicago, accepting a series of inadequate settlements in an attempt to prevent the fight of hotel workers from expanding into a larger movement of the working class.

On Thursday workers at the Kinzie Hotel in Chicago ratified a contract accepted by UNITE HERE, leaving

only the workers at the Cambria Chicago Magnificent Mile Hotel on strike in the city.

The strikes by hotel workers are part of a growing mood of militancy in the working class reflected in recent strike votes by workers at ArcelorMittal and US Steel and a 54 percent rejection vote by United Parcel Service workers of a sellout deal promoted by the Teamsters.

In each case the unions are doing everything in their power to prevent a fight, with the Teamsters declaring the UPS contract ratified despite a majority vote in opposition.

The urgent task facing hotel workers is to break through the isolation being imposed by the unions and turn out to the millions of hotel workers as well as workers at Amazon, UPS, the steel and auto industries and workers internationally. Workers should form rank-and-file committees independent of UNITE HERE to formulate demands corresponding to the needs of workers and fight for their implementation, including rank-and-file oversight over negotiations and contract ratification.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to hotel workers in Detroit and San Diego concerning the issues involved in their fight.

In Detroit 160 workers at the Marriott owned Westin Book Cadillac Hotel have been on strike since October 7. Workers said their main demand was for pay parity with workers at the Westin Detroit Renaissance and for improvements in health insurance, under conditions where some workers are paying \$100 a week out of pocket for family coverage. Workers expressed determination not to settle for the miserable deals accepted by UNITE HERE in Chicago and win their full demands.

Workers at the Detroit Metropolitan Airport Marriott

Hotel took a 96 percent strike vote on Wednesday. The workers had been without a contract for more than a year. Workers at the Marriot at the Renaissance Center are continuing to work under terms of a separate contract. Management is continuing operations at the Westin Book Cadillac using strikebreakers, with no real effort by UNITE HERE to mobilize opposition.

Responding to attempts by a UNITE HERE official to prevent WSWS reporters from speaking to pickets, one worker said, "I think we should be able to talk to whomever we want. I think you guys are accurate and word for word with what we're saying."

Regarding the current wave of strikes he said, "Now all of a sudden, it's happening everywhere. I think it's a different climate now, especially with who we have in office. I think the working class is getting screwed over especially with Trump's tax cuts."

Hani, a banquet server, said, "After 10 years I've only gotten a 70 cent increase. I spend more time at the hotel than I do at home with my family."

"I'm out here to support these people. This company made \$300 million in profits last year. The downtown hotel makes good money, but they give it to the investors, not the workers."

Regarding the impact of the strike he said, "They're down 35 percent after three days. The Economic Club cancelled an event and the hockey players cancelled an event. Sadly, the Brooklyn Nets crossed the picket line," he added.

A WSWS reporting team also spoke to hotel workers on the picket line at the Westin Gaslamp hotel in downtown San Diego.

Jose Carrera has been a cook at the Gaslamp for three years. He told our reporters that his hourly wage of \$15 barely covers his rent and living expenses in San Diego. He said workers need a "better contract, more money and better benefits." He said the workers' demands were very reasonable, but the management did not want to meet them. That's why "we need to fight...and other [workers] need to support us."

David, who has worked in the hotel's banquet hall for four years was primarily worried about the proposed changes to health care premiums, and also their applicability to clinics in nearby Tijuana, Mexico. Making minimum wages, he has been unable to afford to have his family live together in San Diego. His wife and children, who live in Tijuana, will probably not be

covered under the new proposed health care program that Marriott is trying to enforce.

Karen, a local strike leader, told WSWS reporters that workers had been forced to strike because of worsening conditions, particularly since the Starwood brand of hotels (which Westin Gaslamp was a part of) was bought by Marriott. Despite being the most profitable and biggest hotel chain in the world, Marriott was refusing to pay its workers a decent living wage, and in fact was even refusing to give them the retro-pay that was owed under a pre-existing contract.

"Marriott wants us to pay more on our health insurance, wants to take away our 401K, and deny us even the retro-pay that is owed to us. For most of our non-tip staff, that retro pay adds up to \$800-\$1,000, which is a lot of money for us."

Karen explained that even though she was officially with room service, she worked in whichever department she could in order to make sure that she worked the 22.4 hours every week in order to maintain her health insurance. To make ends meet, Karen has been working a second job as well.

She lives in a cramped studio in South Bay, which while far from work, is the only place she could afford in the San Diego area. She told us that she had considered living in Tijuana, like many of her co-workers, but decided to wait until she got a pass that made the drive feasible.

Many hotel workers, Karen said, "leave their homes in Tijuana at 3:00 a.m. so that they can make their 6:00 a.m. morning shift."

Karen described a new management measure, "Green Choice," which she said has really hit the housekeeping staff hard. Guests are given a \$5 voucher if they choose not to have their rooms cleaned daily. The voucher has resulted in fewer tips for workers in the restaurants and coffee shops, making the staff's income even more precarious.



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