

Bay area hotel workers determined to fight as union, Democrats try to derail strike

Our reporters
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Strikers on the picket lines at Marriott hotels in San Francisco, San Jose and Oakland have expressed their determination to fight poverty level wages and increased medical costs as they struggle to live in one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in America. The 2,700 workers in the Bay Area who walked out on October 4 and 5 are part of nearly 8,000 workers in Boston, Detroit and the Hawaiian islands of Oahu and Maui who are striking against the world's largest hotel chain.

"We're all overworked," Alfredo, a 38-year-old cook with Marriott Oakland, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "After I come out of the kitchen, I have been working so hard, I'm sweating like I just spent a couple hours in the gym."

Alfredo continued, "They're raising the cost of our medical benefits from \$25 to \$300 a month. You have workers here who have worked with Marriott for over 35 years. They are old, and they gave their life to this company. The main reason they don't retire is because they'll lose their medical benefits if they quit, and now Marriott does this. Nobody can afford these costs and still make ends meet on our pay.

"My girlfriend and I have three kids. I get paid \$19.25 an hour and we have to pay \$2,600 a month just for rent to get a two-bedroom apartment in Hayward. That does not include utilities. Our two older kids share one room, and the baby sleeps with us in the other. My girlfriend has a car, but I don't so I take BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) into work. With the price of housing in the Bay Area, you cannot make ends meet on the amount we're getting paid."

The police have parked multiple squad cars in front of the hotels directly opposite the picket lines and multiple officers stand watch over the strikers throughout the day. Diana, a Marriott housekeeper walking the picket

line, told the WSWs that the police have been there constantly since October 5, the day the strike began in Oakland.

Alfredo says, "The cops claim they're here because Marriott called them and said that our noise was 'an assault.' A lot of workers are saying that Marriott is paying the cops. Man, this is Oakland. There is something sketchy going on just up the street but the cops stay here and guard Marriott from a peaceful picket line."

Another worker, Diana, told the WSWs that Marriott keeps increasing the workload for housekeeping. "Many of the rooms get trashed, and it takes time to clean those rooms. When we go to management and tell them that a particular room is trashed, and we need to skip that room to meet our quota on time, management always tells us that the room isn't a mess and we should clean it up and still meet our quota."

Marriott is raising the amount that she is expected to contribute for her healthcare as a single person from \$10 to \$172 a month. "I can't afford that," she says. "The only reason I manage to afford rent is because I live in Section 8 housing."

Far from mobilizing the broad support hotel workers have to shut down the hotel industry, the UNITE HERE union has limited picketing to symbolic levels, allowing Marriott to continue operations with strikebreakers. At the same time, it has left workers on starvation-level strike benefits of \$60 a day, even though the union has assets worth more than \$150 million and pays its union president, Donald Taylor, a salary of \$362,034.

"The union should be giving us more for strike pay," Julio, a steward at the Oakland Marriott for 23 years, told the WSWs. "We have to picket 30 hours per week to get \$300, but that's not enough. We can't continue

to support our families without our job.”

Referring to the company, Julio said, “I gave them the best years of my life for nothing. It’s not right. The company doesn’t want to pay enough for us to survive. They won’t pay for health insurance or retirement. We’re not asking for so much, just a small raise and healthcare coverage.”

The raise the union is calling for is \$5 total—\$2 the first year, then \$1/year for the next three years. Julio’s current wage is \$16/hour, near the minimum wage in Oakland which is \$13.23.

Julio has two kids, ages 15 and 18, and has to work multiple jobs to support them. “Almost everyone that works here has to have two or three jobs in order to live in the Bay Area because the rent is too high. In addition to working here, I have to work part-time at a supermarket near where I live.”

When asked for his thoughts on the role of the big business parties, Julio replied, “The Democrats and Republicans don’t give a crap about us. We suffer. We have to have multiple jobs just to survive. The politicians work for their own, they’re big fishes that eat it all and leave nothing for the little people.”

While isolating the striking workers, the UNITE HERE union has given the Democratic Party a platform to posture as their saviors and hustle for workers’ votes in the run up to the November 6 election. Last week, the union staged a civil disobedience protest in conjunction with the Democrats in downtown San Francisco. Anand Singh, the head of UNITE HERE Local 2, and Wei-Ling Huber, president of East Bay’s Local 2850, were among dozens who were arrested.

The same day, San Francisco city supervisors Hillary Ronen, Ahsha Safai and Vallie Brown endorsed the strike and urged Mayor London Breed to do the same. The mayor responded by offering to meet with leaders of UNITE HERE Local 2 union this week, stating, “As a longtime supporter of organized labor, I support the rights of workers to organize, collectively bargain, and advocate for better wages and benefits.”

Kevin De Leon, the Democratic Party’s nominee to replace the hated US Senator Dianne Feinstein, made a token visit to the Marriott picket lines, as did local San Francisco Democrats Sandra Lee Fewer and Aaron Peskin.

Far from speaking for workers, the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, have overseen more than a

decade of declining worker living standards even as they handed over trillions of dollars to bailout the Wall Street banks. In Illinois, the unions are backing billionaire gubernatorial candidate JB Pritzker, one of the heirs to the Hyatt Hotel fortune. The Chicago-based Pritzkers—who played a prominent role in Obama’s rise to the White House—are notorious for their attacks on hotel workers.

In contrast to the union, workers are determined to fight. To take this battle forward, hotel workers need to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the union, to fight for the shutdown of the entire hotel industry. These committees should reach out to other sections of workers—at UPS, Amazon, teachers in Los Angeles and other cities—and fight to develop a common struggle against the corporate giants and the two big business parties that defend them.



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