

Chicago Cambria Hotel workers continue strike

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One year after a walkout hit 26 hotels in Chicago and approximately 6,000 hotel workers struck mega corporations Marriott, Hyatt and others, workers at one property, Cambria Hotel, remain on strike isolated by UNITE HERE Local 1. The Ohio Public Employees Retirement System (OPERS) owns the Cambria Hotel and it is managed by Fillmore Hospitality. OPERS itself is overseen by a board that includes representatives from the Ohio AFSCME and Service Employee International unions.

What began last year as a strike at Chicago hotels expanded to include 23 hotels across the continent and into the Pacific as hospitality workers walked out in Detroit, Boston, San Diego, San Jose, Oakland, San Francisco, British Columbia, Maui and Oahu. The workers struck to oppose poverty wages, cuts to healthcare benefits and work speed-up.

The only statement on the Cambria strike posted on UNITE HERE's website dates from July 17, 2019. It reads, "Workers tell Ohio Pension System: Your Hotel Strike Hurts Ohio Pension Investment." They have estimated that ten months after commencing the strike, at least 17 organizations or events have canceled room blocks, relocated events, or removed the hotel from their promotional sites. They estimate this has cost the hotel \$300,000 in business.

The statement amounts to a plea to the hotel owners to end the strike by appealing to their sense of fiscal responsibility and profit seeking. The union has enlisted the aid of Ohio Democratic representative Brigid Kelly, herself a long-time union official, and Ohio AFL-CIO President Timothy Burga to pressure OPERS. It did not point out that OPERS is managed by an 11-member board that includes at least 6 union appointed representatives.

According to Cincinnati.com, "OPERS provides retirement, disability, and survivor benefits to about 1.1 million public employees. Its defined benefit fund totals

about \$77 billion. Rep. Brigid Kelly, D-Hyde Park, asked the OPERS Board of Trustees to help end the strike in a Feb. 1 letter. The hotel has lost business because of the strike, making it a less valuable investment."

In a letter dated March 27, Burga wrote to B. Thomas Goodwin, President of Fillmore Hospitality. He said, "Tens of thousands of Ohio families who are members or affiliates of the Ohio AFL-CIO are OPERS participants and beneficiaries. They depend on the retirement benefits they currently receive or will receive from OPERS. I am concerned that by prolonging the strike you are exposing the state's pension investment to unnecessary risks."

The Cambria hotel in Chicago is part of Choice Hotels International, Inc., one of the largest hotel chains in the world. It franchises 7,005 properties in 41 countries. Its revenues in 2017 totaled over \$1 billion. It is ludicrous to assume that losses at one hotel will make much of a dent in its budget.

On August 31, 2018, contracts covering approximately 6,000 Chicago hotel workers expired. Earlier in the month, workers had voted nearly unanimously to authorize a strike. Given the explosive mood among the hotel workers, many of them immigrants and heavily exploited, UNITE HERE initiated the action one week later to allow workers to let off steam.

In total, cooks, servers, bellhops, bartenders, doorman, housekeepers, and other service staff at 26 hotels took part. They demanded better health insurance, higher wages, improved staffing and job security. Workers were particularly angry over the hardship they face during the winter months when the tourist season has passed, and hundreds are laid off and lose their health insurance.

Almost two weeks into the strike, UNITE HERE suddenly announced that an agreement had been reached with about seven hotels in Chicago. The hastily announced sellout came on the heels of powerful strike votes by Marriott workers around the country. The union

had to work quickly to prevent workers in Chicago from linking their struggle with others in the hospitality industry. In rapid succession, the union came to agreements with the other hotels and brought the strike to an abrupt halt. The companies claimed they were taking steps to address workers' grievances and employees were sent back to work. However, only the Cambria hotel workers held out and remained on the picket line.

As part of the agreement UNITE negotiated with employers, Cambria Hotel sought to increase employees' workload. Fillmore Hospitality wanted to increase the number of rooms the housekeepers' cleaned from 13 rooms per day to 15, which it said was standard in Chicago. As management's attorneys explained, the hotel aimed to save \$220,000 per year in labor costs.

Workers at Cambria refused to accept the cost savings made at their expense.

In an interview provided to Social Justice News Nexus, Yolanda Garduno, a 12-year veteran housekeeper at Cambria, explained that she already struggled to finish the required 13 rooms in her eight-hour shift. Recent renovations at the hotel, including the addition of heavier mattresses, glass tables and larger televisions have made cleaning the rooms more difficult.

Seventy-five percent of Cambria workers, according to a study conducted by the union, have stated they do not have enough time to clean their required rooms. Fifty-six percent report having an injury or illness caused by their work, whose repetitive activity and heavy lifting lead to chronic back and knee problems.

According to a study titled Occupational Injury Disparities in the US Hotel Industry published in the *American Journal of Industry Medicine* in 2010, compared to all other service sector workers, "hotel workers are nearly 40 percent more likely to be injured on the job." The overall injury rate is 5.2 injuries per 100 worker-years. Of these, acute trauma accounts for 52 percent, and musculoskeletal injuries make up another 39 percent. Injury rates were highest for housekeepers at 7.9 injuries per 100 worker-years. For Hispanic housekeepers, this climbs to 10.6.

Due to the prolonged isolation of the strike by UNITE HERE only several score workers are continuing the fight. Workers picketing in front of the Cambria hotel, Maria and Veronica, told this *World Socialist Web Site* reporter that their decision to continue the strike was based on matters of principle. They said they were enduring economic hardship, but that their fight has the support of their families and friends. The union representative

present chose not to respond to inquiries and hastily moved the workers away.

This WSWS reporter has still to receive a reply to written questions sent to UNITE HERE representatives, Sarah Lyons and Elliot Mallen.

According to UNITE HERE, workers have now traveled twice to Columbus, Ohio, to plead their case to OPERS. To date, there has been no resolution achieved. While these tactics only demoralize workers, there is a genuine fear on the part of the unions that workers will take their struggle forward independent of the unions.

UNITE HERE poses no threat to the hotel conglomerates. As a case in point, only six years ago the union abruptly ended a 10-year strike at the Congress Plaza Hotel, also in the ultra-wealthy Chicago downtown, with Local 1 ordering an unconditional return to work. As a union representative told the *Chicago Tribune* at the time, "The decision to end the Congress strike was a hard one, but it is the right time for the union and the strikers to move on. The boycott has effectively and dramatically reduced the hotel's business. There is no more to do here."

Only a few dozen had remained when the strike was terminated. They received \$200 a week forcing most to take on second jobs to pay their bills. Those returning were told that they would be returning to their previous jobs at their previous hourly wages.

The continuing isolation of the Cambria Hotel workers demonstrates again the reactionary role of the unions. It underscores the need for independent rank-and-file committees to organize against the hotel corporations' strikebreaking operations and appeal for common action from broader sections of workers engaged in similar struggles, including autoworkers, teachers, steelworkers, retail and food services, and logistics and postal workers.

In every factory and workplace, similar committees, completely independent of the unions and both big business parties, should be elected to prepare and organize a general strike.



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