Service workers at five US convention centers plan strikes in coming weeks

Patrick Smith
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Are you a convention center worker? Tell us why you've voted to strike by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Service workers at five convention centers in the United States have either authorized or are scheduled to vote on strike action, which could start as soon as December 1. The cities where the workers are located are Detroit, Las Vegas, Sacramento, Orlando and New Orleans.

The contract for workers at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, Florida, expires on November 30. Workers there voted to authorize a strike by 235 to zero, with an 84 percent turnout. This would be the first strike in the tourism sector of Orlando, where massive resorts such as Walt Disney World and Universal Studios are located, in two decades.

The workers are members of the facilities management giant Sodexo, which was founded in Marseille, France in 1966 by Pierre Bellon. At the time, it specialized in providing food services to schools, hospitals and businesses. Since then, it has grown into a massive conglomerate operating in 52 countries, employing over 420,000 workers. It is the second-largest French-based employer in the world.

Jackeline Ponce, a retail and concessions worker at the convention center employed by Sodexo, told the local press, "I struggle with food, I struggle with gas, I struggle with my rent because I only make $13.60 an hour." She continued, "I support a strike because I need more money in my pocket to pay bills when the cost of living has gone up so much."

Meetings.net reports that across the five facilities, workers were paid an average of $11.77 an hour in February of 2020. This figure rose by only 5.7 percent, to $12.44 in August of this year, compared to 14 percent inflation. This starkly contrasts with Sodexo's revenue of 22.1 billion dollars in 2022. CEO Denis Machuel makes $3,643,980 a year.

The contract for workers at Huntington Place in downtown Detroit also expires on November 30, the Detroit *Metro Times* reports.

Kiara Smith, a steward at Huntington Place, told that newspaper, "We've had many parties in the past six months. We make sure our jobs get done, but I don't feel appreciation or respect," She continued, "If we had a raise, I'd be able to pay my bills on time."

The SAFE Credit Union Convention Center, a 240,000-square-foot facility in Sacramento, California, employs 85 food and beverage workers, according to the *Sacramento Business Journal.*

The food service workers' contract at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in New Orleans, Louisiana ends on December 31. In February 2020, there were 192 Sodexo workers employed at the convention center. Less than half that number are employed currently, only 92.

Wanoneica Arnold, a cook at the Convention Center, told the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, "Right now, I'm renting a room for $250 per week, I've developed hypertension, and I've lost a tooth since I started working for Sodexo … If I got a raise, I could afford an apartment, a place to lay my head. I want to see fair pay, retirement, medical, dental, and vision, medical time off, and raises across the board."

At the Las Vegas Convention Center (LVCC), Centerplate, a division of Sodexo, employs less than half the number of workers than there were in February 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. These workers will hold a strike authorization vote on December 7 and 8. Dylan Schoenhard, a banquet server at the LVCC, told *Exhibit City News*, "We have been

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busy at the convention center with big shows like SEMA [a major automotive trade show], but we need higher pay because everything is so much more expensive now, especially rent and housing."

In a statement, Sodexo spokesperson Paul Pettas downplayed the possibility of a strike: "It's an active negotiation; trust me, we regularly engage with UNITE HERE," the union of which the workers are members. He also pointed to upcoming bargaining sessions before the strike deadlines.

It is entirely possible that the union will try to call off the strike by announcing a deal at the last minute which falls short of workers' demands. UNITE HERE called off a strike of resort workers in Hollywood, Florida in this fashion earlier this year. However, even if a strike does take place, workers will face the need to assert rank-and-file control over the struggle and prevent its betrayal by the union bureaucracy. This was one of the chief lessons of the two-week hotel strike in Chicago in 2018, which UNITE HERE isolated.

However, there is enormous potential for broader support and unity between convention center workers and other sections of the working class. A major strike wave is taking place around the world, which includes 50,000 graduate students in the United States. Railroaders are also pressing for a national strike which could begin as soon as December 9, and are facing down the threat of a congressional injunction.

Opposition is also building among service industry workers, among the most exploited layers of the working class. Sodexo airport lounge workers are also picketing at the Newark Liberty Airport's Lufthansa lounge for better working conditions and higher pay. Workers at airport lounges in Boston, Austin, Washington D.C. and the JFK airport in New York are taking similar measures.

Lamar Roper works at the Lufthansa lounge and told Prism, "It gets overwhelming … Sodexo needs to hire more people, but they don't tell anybody what they're walking into." He works there from 1:00 to 9:30 PM, but says he "can't just clock out and leave" because he has "to do the dishes whenever the last flight leaves, and that last flight could be delayed. It could be 30 minutes late, or it could be an hour or two hours. They didn't tell me that when I got the job."

Sodexo's international workforce faces appalling conditions. In Colombia, Sodexo requires some female job applicants in Bogotá to take pregnancy tests as a condition of employment, according to a report by the TransAfrica Forum. Workers describe health and safety conditions in the Dominican Republic, Guinea, Morocco and the United States. Workers in five countries told the group that Sodexo has been "unresponsive and, in some cases, workers felt their employment could be at risk when they raised safety concerns with management." There are also concerns that workers are not always paid for all their work hours.

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