

Thousands of Los Angeles hotel workers strike

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4 July 2023

On Saturday, July 1, up to 15,000 hotel workers, members of the UNITE HERE! Local 11 union went on strike against 65 hotels in the Los Angeles Metro Area, following the expiration of their contract at midnight on June 30. By Monday afternoon, employees at 18 of those hotels—including the Biltmore and JW Marriott in downtown Los Angeles, the Fairmont Miramar in Santa Monica and the Laguna Cliffs in Dana Point, Orange County—had walked out. Hotel housekeepers, bellhops, servers, dishwashers and front desk staff have joined the picket lines. Also picketing in solidarity with the hotel workers are striking members of the Writers Guild of America, on strike since May 2.

Workers “remained on the job at a number of other Local 11-represented hotels,” according to a report in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Many of the measures that these hotels took during the pandemic-induced lockdowns, such as the elimination of daily room-cleaning for guests, the reduction in work force and speed-ups and long hours for those who remained on the job, have been retained and normalized, restoring and increasing profitability globally.

Two days before the contract expired, the Westin Bonaventure Hotel & Suites in downtown LA announced it had reached a tentative deal for higher pay and benefits with Local 11 representing its employees. The Westin Bonaventure, the largest and most luxurious of downtown LA hotels with its iconic cylindrical glass towers, employs 600 workers. This is the overture to a sellout—instead of uniting workers and exerting strike leverage, the union has already begun the fragmentation of the struggle.

The agreement is said to include a wage increase and improvements in employee health and pension plans. “The agreement also addresses the reduction in daily room cleanings [quotas per worker], guaranteeing a restoration of staffing to pre-pandemic levels,” said the *LA Times*.

“It is the first domino to fall, but it is a big domino,” declared Local 11 president Kurt Peterson. “We applaud the Bonaventure for putting the workers and the city first,” he added. “This is the best contract ever for hotel workers in Los Angeles and sets a standard for workers in this city. There is still work to do, but it takes steps as we head towards the World Cup and Olympics.”

These declarations should be viewed with extreme skepticism. So far, the union has revealed no details. While Peterson and the Local 11 bureaucracy suggest that the Bonaventure agreement will set the pattern for the other hotels, Wednesday’s surprise

announcement fits a pattern by UNITE HERE of making separate, piecemeal agreements amid strikes, effectively dividing and weakening the struggle of hotel workers.

Local 11 is currently negotiating with a group of 44 hotels, while another 21 hotels are expected to go along with whatever is agreed to by the first group.

The union is asking for a \$5 an hour immediate wage increase, followed by a \$3 raise per year in a three-year contract, more money for pensions, and expanded hiring to reach pre-pandemic levels. For example, the Intercontinental Hotel reduced its workforce from 800 workers before the COVID pandemic to 500, right before the strike. Even in the best case scenario, these figures will move workers only from utter misery to poverty.

The hotels’ existing offer is for a \$2.50 hourly raise plus \$6.25 over four years.

A major sticking point in the negotiations is a union demand for a 7 percent surcharge on hotel bills to establish a “hospitality workers housing fund” to make it possible for hotel workers to afford extremely high housing costs in Los Angeles and Orange counties.

The call for a surcharge is a divisive measure, directly pitting workers against the public by imposing in essence a regressive tax to fund worker benefits, instead of insisting the corporations pay.

Currently, hotel workers in Los Angeles and Orange counties earn between 20 and 25 dollars per hour, that is, \$40k to \$50k yearly. Given the high cost of renting apartments in Los Angeles County, a two-income household (both earning the same) would consume between 50 and 60 percent of their after-tax income. As in other urban areas in California, including San Francisco, Sacramento, San Diego and Orange County, millions of workers find it impossibly expensive to live in the cities where they work and must commute very long distances.

Conditions are dire for most of these workers. The *Guardian* newspaper quoted Brenda Mendoza, a JW Marriot LA Live employee who commutes two hours each way from her home in Apple Valley, California, 95 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. “I am forced to spend half my wages on transportation and risk my life on dangerous roads,” she told the paper. “I am voting yes to strike because my co-workers and I deserve a wage that allows us to live near where we work.”

The issue of housing costs dominated the strike vote that took place on June 9, 21 days before the expiration of the contract. A strike was authorized by 96 percent of Local 11 members.

On June 22, about 500 hotel workers affiliated to the UNITE HERE! Local 11 marched and rallied in the vicinity of the Los Angeles International Airport. The march was tightly managed by the union bureaucracy. Most of the marchers carried union-provided signs and t-shirts in English and Spanish demanding the right to live where they work. Unlike other rallies and marches, there were no hand-painted placards or banners.

In what appears to have been a prearranged move, when the police demanded that the protesters clear the intersection, about half refused to do so and accepted being detained. The 190 protesters who were charged with failure to disperse were summarily released, including two LA City councilmembers, Democrats Hugo Soto-Martinez and Nithya Raman. Also present, but not arrested, was Maria Elena Durazo, a Democratic Party state senator.

This is a typical publicity stunt employed by the union bureaucracies, Democratic Party and the pseudo-left, in particular the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in the US, as well as all around the world. The aim is to create a false impression of militancy while the union leadership prepares a sellout.

In a statement, DSA-aligned Soto-Martinez indicated: “A single mother who works as a housekeeper has to work 17 hours a day to afford housing in this city.” As true as the statement is, it doesn’t change the fact that Soto-Martinez has been part of the UNITE HERE! bureaucracy for the last 16 years and today’s conditions are a direct result of the union’s inability and unwillingness to improve conditions for hospitality workers, a large majority of whom are immigrants.

Soto-Martinez and Raman were recently co-sponsors of a motion that would make Los Angeles a “sanctuary city” for immigrants. On June 9, the Los Angeles City Council approved it. This is a cynical measure aimed at legalizing the hyper-exploitation of a large section of the working class which is essential in the production of commodities and services, while it does nothing to change the legal status of hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants. Essentially, it guarantees employers a consistent supply of cheap and tightly policed labor.

Nonetheless, participating in the June 22 demonstrations were Hollywood screenwriters and others involved in struggles including dock workers and UPS workers. In each and every case, the unions leading these various struggles continues to isolate and betray the elementary demands of the workers.

The disconnect between the UNITE HERE! leadership and the rank-and-file workers was reflected in the low turnout, just 500 hotel workers, less than 4 percent of total union membership in the area. This fact does not reflect “apathy” on the part of workers, but the lack of serious effort by the union leadership to organize and mobilize workers for a fight.

The strike itself has taken on a farcical character. Only a minority of hotels are being picketed, mainly in Santa Monica, downtown Los Angeles and parts of Orange County. Since the walkout began, all the affected hotels continue operating (albeit with reduced staffing and fewer amenities) using non-union temps and assigning managers to perform hotel tasks. Local 11 has not even demanded that deliveries to the hotels cease by UPS drivers, members of the Teamsters, who are themselves heading toward a

possible strike involving many of the very same issues as the hotel workers.

In addition to the 15,000 LA-area hospitality workers, Local 11 represents 22,000 workers in hotels, restaurants, airports, sports arenas & convention centers in Southern California and Arizona. The union has done nothing to mobilize these workers in support of the striking LA hotel workers.

Despite this, many guests have moved out of the struck hotels in solidarity with the workers.

Rather than mobilizing the support of the working class, the focus of UNITE HERE! has been pressuring Democratic Party politicians. South of Los Angeles, hospitality workers in Anaheim, California—home to Disneyland, the mythical “happiest place on earth,” also members of UNITE HERE! Local 11—rallied on June 13 demanding that the city council approve a hospitality workers bill of rights law which would include a \$25-dollar minimum hourly wage, safer working conditions, and an end to long hours and intensive work loads. This is part of a broader strategy by UNITE HERE! to pressure politicians into approving local hotel workers rights laws in cities throughout California, including Los Angeles.

The strategy of isolated strikes followed time and again by UNITE HERE!, which organizes workers across the US and Canada, is designed to have a minimum impact on the massive, international hotel chains. However the conditions for establishing global unity have never been better.

Since 2021, with the end of COVID-mitigating measures, the struggles of hotel workers have intensified, from Chicago and San Francisco, to Buenos Aires, Viña del Mar, Acapulco, Paris and Las Vegas to name a few cities. The issues are common across the globe: hunger wages, exploitation, unsafe conditions and temporary, precarious employment.

To win their fight, hotel workers must begin from a strategy based on uniting different sections of the working class that are in struggle through the building of worker-led and organized rank-and-file committees independent of the bureaucratic unions. The hotel struggle must be expanded to dockworkers, writers, nurses, UPS and other logistics workers in a common fight against the entire political corporate setup. This includes the Democratic Party, its pseudo-left backers and the trade union bureaucrats that work in collusion with the political establishment for the defense of the corporations.



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