

Unable to suppress opposition, Los Angeles hotel union calls “second strike wave” of limited walkouts

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On Monday, Los Angeles and Southern California area hotel workers, members of the Unite Here Local 11 hotel workers’ union, began renewed strike action against area hotel chains. The move follows a three-day strike during the July 4 holiday weekend, which was abruptly shut down by the union without any demands being met or any agreement reached. The latest strike is intended to be an even more isolated, ineffective affair.

The July 4 action involved a strike against 19 Los Angeles and Orange County area hotels. This latest action has been reduced to 12 hotels, with none of the striking workers involved in the previous job action. Unite Here Local 11 spokeswoman Maria Hernandez claimed that the July 3 strike had to be called off “to make room for [workers at] other hotels who have also authorized a strike to walk out.”

On Monday, eight Los Angeles hotels were struck, including six at the Los Angeles International Airport. This was followed by an additional four hotels on Tuesday, three of which are located close to the Disneyland resort in Anaheim while the fourth was another hotel close to the Los Angeles International Airport.

The 32,000 hotel workers in Unite Here have been working without a contract since June 30 and the union is proposing a meagre \$5 per hour wage increase during the first year of the contract followed by a \$3 an hour increase in the second and third years. The hotel owners have responded with a \$2.50 per hour raise in the first 12 months and a tiny \$6.25 per hour increase over four years.

The average hotel worker salary in Los Angeles as of last June, was only \$49,301 per *Salary.com*. Knowing that their proposed salary increases will do nothing to

alleviate the severe financial hardships their members regularly face, the union bureaucracy is also proposing a 7 percent surcharge on hotel bills to subsidize housing for hotel workers. In other words, the union bureaucracy is urging the companies to pass the costs of subsidizing worker housing onto hotel guests, many of whom are lower-middle-class or working class too.

An additional demand raised by the union is for vacant hotel rooms to serve as temporary housing for the homeless. Both the hotel surcharge and the housing initiative indicate that Unite Here is utilizing “social justice unionism,” i.e. tactics created by pseudo-left and upper-middle-class functionaries in the late 1990s and early 2000s, to forsake workers’ demands in favor of mild reforms addressed to local governments and nonprofits. This is used to provide a “progressive” cover for the union bureaucracy while costing the employers nothing, even as they accelerate the attack on workers.

Even though workers at 60 Southern California hotels voted overwhelmingly to initiate strike action, the union is acting in opposition to the workers’ desire to carry out a powerful fight for decent wages and living conditions. Speaking on behalf of the Hotel Association of Los Angeles, Peter Hillan noted that hotel customers could expect virtually no disruptions at all as a result of the strike. Hillan told the *Los Angeles Times* that all “core functions” of the hotels being struck, including safety and housekeeping, would be conducted by middle managers and other nonunion workers brought in from other properties.

Such actions would be extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, had Unite Here mobilized all its members to strike at once. Not only would the hotels effectively

be unable to transfer staff between different locations to compensate for lost staff, but hotels throughout Southern California have retained lower staffing levels as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving them less able to effectively transfer staff during pickets.

The limited staffing levels, however, have also led to more work hours for hotel staff, an issue entirely neglected by Unite Here negotiators in the latest round of contract talks that started in April. Given the high cost of living in the downtown Los Angeles and Orange County areas, workers often commute multiple hours each day from locations with lower housing costs. Now, while working extra hours, many of these workers spend virtually every waking moment either working at or commuting to their job sites.

Moreover, the union had already signaled that it did not seriously intend to prosecute an effective strike after it reached an agreement with the Westin Bonaventure, downtown Los Angeles's flagship hotel, a full six days in advance of the first strike.

Such actions are not a result of innocent mistakes but are a deliberate policy directed by the Democratic Party establishment. Fresh off of shutting down a strike last year by US railroaders and after the Biden administration recently shut down a looming strike of West Coast dockworkers, the Democrats are working to quickly shut down what threatens to be the largest hotel worker strike in US history which, if successful, would have immense reverberations for highly exploited service industry workers throughout the country.

Unite Here Local 11 is co-led by three presidents, each of whom have intimate ties to the Democratic Party. Susan Minato, one of the three, has played a key role on the Los Angeles City Council Redistricting Commission which is a means by which elected officials are virtually appointed to positions behind the backs of voters. Minato was also involved in the 2020 Biden presidential campaign and utilized a Unite Here campaign to deliver the state of Arizona to the president during the last election.

Another of the three presidents, Ada Briceño, is also chair of the Orange County Democratic Party. The three also led the union's political action committee which spent \$364,000 to support the successful city council run of Democratic Socialists of America member Hugo Soto-Martinez last year. According to the latest 2022 figures, Ada Briceño's annual salary

was \$138,371 while Susan Minato's was \$144,988.

Despite the best efforts of the union bureaucracy and the Democrats, however, they have not been able to shut down the struggle of the hotel workers. This is now merging with a growing movement of the working class throughout the area against impossibly high living expenses, the use of technologies not to improve workers' lives but to destroy the jobs and increase their exploitation, and exhausting working conditions due to a labor shortage, largely caused by the criminal response of the ruling elites to the pandemic.

In addition to hotel workers, more than 160,000 actors, with large numbers in the Hollywood area, are set to walk out today, joining film and television writers who have been on strike for more than two months. UPS workers across the US, many located in the LA metropolitan area, face a potential strike on July 31, and dockworkers at the LA and Long Beach ports are among the 20,000 West Coast dockworkers who have been kept on the job more than a year after their contract expiration. There is also deep discontent among the 35,000 LA educators who were forced to accept another sellout contract pushed by their union.

To prevent another sellout, hotel workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands and link up their fight with workers throughout the region. To do this, workers need to form rank-and-file committees to transfer power and decision making from the UNITE HERE bureaucracy to the workers themselves.

These committees should outline demands they need and not what the multibillion-dollar hotel chains say they can afford. This should include inflation-busting wage increases, improved benefits and staffing levels. They should break through and reject the impotent, limited strikes organized by the union bureaucracy, and fight for united strike action by all of the 32,000 hotel workers.

To learn about how to join or start a rank-and-file committee, fill out the form below.



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