

Union calls more limited strikes by Southern California hotel workers

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23 July 2023

Unite Here Local 11, the Southern California-based union covering 62,000 hotel workers, has called a third “strike wave” against the hotel companies that began last Thursday. The move follows an initial partial strike on the July 4th holiday weekend, followed by a second limited action on July 11. In neither strike was an agreement reached nor were the slightest concessions extracted from the hotel chains. The restraints put on the walkouts by the Unite Here leadership allowed the hotel chains to largely keep their operations going.

The union apparatus and the Democratic politicians they are allied with are desperate to prevent a unified struggle with the more than 72,000 Hollywood writers and actors currently on strike. Another 340,000 UPS workers across the country may strike the logistics giant August 1, and 150,000 autoworkers are also poised for walkouts in mid-September.

Even before the first strike began in early July, Unite Here Local 11 reached an agreement with the Westin Bonaventure hotel in Los Angeles—the premiere hotel in the city’s downtown area—preemptively removing 600 workers from the picket line. To add insult to injury, union and the hotel executives have conducted their “talks” at the Bonaventure since the agreement.

Peter Hillan, speaking on behalf of the Hotel Association of Los Angeles, has claimed that no “core functions” of any the hotels have been adversely affected by the limited strikes. Instead, middle managers and non-union workers have been shuffled between hotel sites to cover the duties of striking workers, Hillan said.

Rather than calling out all its members in Southern California, let alone across the state and more broadly, the Unite Here bureaucracy is largely using the strikers as “extras” as it pursues its own self-interests in negotiations with management.

It is seeking to conceal its betrayal behind various public relations stunts with local Democrats and NGOs under the banner of “Social Justice Unionism.” This includes calling for a regressive surcharge on hotel customers to pay for company housing for hotel workers, ceremonial calls for politicians to mandate hotels to allot vacant rooms to temporarily house the homeless and calls for the passage of minimum wage increases by local municipalities.

Last week, Unite Here called on politicians in the coastal city of Santa Monica to raise the minimum wage from \$16.95 to \$30 per hour. While hotel workers who cannot afford to live in the city certainly need a massive increase, the union knows that the city’s politicians will never pass such a measure.

These empty gestures will not cost Hyatt, Hilton, Marriott and the other massive hotel chains a dime. The union’s only contract demands relate to a wholly inadequate \$5-an-hour wage increase for hotel workers in the first year and \$3-per-hour in the next two years of the contract. Below the overall inflation rate, this would do little or nothing to improve the conditions of workers in one of the most expensive areas of the country.

The anti-working class character of Unite Here’s Social Justice Unionism has come into sharp relief as contract negotiations collapsed last Tuesday. According to Kurt Petersen, one of the three co-presidents of Unite Here Local 11, bargainers for the hotel chains’ representatives walked out when the union proposed that strikebreakers brought in by the hotels to replace striking workers be offered permanent positions. The union bureaucrats framed their proposal to hire strikebreakers in racial terms, claiming most of the replacement workers were African American and therefore to refuse to hire them permanently was

“racist.”

This shows that the union bureaucracy functions as little more than a cheap labor contractor for the hotel chains. Its only concern is that the people it supplies, even scab laborers, pay dues to Unite Here. At the same time, the bureaucracy is sowing racial and ethnic divisions to weaken the unity of striking workers.

Petersen stated the union was proposing to move negotiations out of Los Angeles because it “couldn’t guarantee labor peace.” Indeed, a unified movement of the working class threatens the cozy relationships between the union bureaucracy, the hotel chains and the Democratic Party establishment.

On July 19, Unite Here Local 11 sent an open letter to the American Political Science Association asking it to cancel its upcoming 119th annual meeting on August 31 in Los Angeles. This follows the Democratic Governors Association’s announcement that they would likely cancel their summer policy conference in Beverly Hills on July 24 at the behest of the union.

Unite Here Local 11 was instrumental in electing several Democratic candidates to the Los Angeles City Council, including former Unite Here Local 11 organizer Hugo Soto-Martinez. Soto-Martinez was recently involved in a fake protest stunt with fellow city councilmember Nithya Raman in which the two were arrested while protesting with hotel workers only to be immediately released with no charges filed. Both Raman and Soto-Martinez are members of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America, whose members in Congress supported the strikebreaking legislation against railroad workers last year.

Two of the current presidents of Unite Here Local 11, Ada Briceno and Susan Minato, make \$138,371 and \$144,988 a year respectively, nearly three times as much as hotel workers who struggle to survive on less than \$50,000 a year. Briceno is also chair of the Orange County Democratic Party where she makes an additional \$150,000 per year according to *glassdoor.com*

Hotel workers are at a crossroads. If their struggle is left in the hands of the union bureaucracy, their powerful struggle will be strangled and another pro-company contract will be imposed on them. The hotel chains will continue pumping billions of dollars in profits from their labor while workers sink further into poverty.

But rank-and-file workers can prevent this. This requires the formation of rank-and-file strike committees, controlled democratically by workers themselves, to take the conduct of the strike into their own hands. The impotent partial strike must be ended and the full power of all 62,000 hotel workers in Southern California mobilized to win inflation-busting raises, cost-of-living protection, humane and safe working conditions and schedules, and fully paid health care and pension benefits.

At the same time, all closed door negotiations must end with all talks live-streamed and overseen by militant and trusted workers elected from the rank and file. Above all, hotel workers must coordinate and unite their fight with striking actors and writers, and other sections of workers engaged in struggles against the corporations, the Biden administration and the union bureaucracies; including the dockworkers, UPS and other logistic workers, and autoworkers.

We urge hotel workers to find out more about joining and creating rank and file committees here.



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