

Glasgow Village Hotel workers in month-long strike

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A group of hospitality workers at the Village Hotel in Glasgow, Scotland have begun a month-long strike over pay and conditions. The workers, most of whom are students, are also seeking backdated pay, paid breaks and the equalisation of pay and conditions across all age groups. Regular pickets have been held since August 2, drawing support from passers-by and a group of workers from the nearby Glasgow Science Centre.

The dispute followed the discovery that workers under 21 years of age in the Village Hotel in Edinburgh were paid the same as their older colleagues, £12.21 an hour, while those in Glasgow were only paid £10.42. The strikers are demanding pay rates in line with the “real living wage” of £12.60 an hour for all age groups in Glasgow, and paid breaks.

The minimum wage for adults over 21 (called the National Living Wage by the government) is £12.21 an hour; for 18-20 year-olds it is £10.00 an hour. For under 18 year-olds and apprentices the minimum wage is set at £7.55 an hour.

After a “grievance” process, 13 Unite union members in the hotel’s food and beverage department were balloted for strike action in July, recording a 100 percent vote in favour.

Their minimal claims have been rejected by management. Talks took place via the government’s arbitration body ACAS on Monday. According to Dan Friel, Unite convenor in the hotel, the chain operates an “inexplicably convoluted pay structure where different sites will be paid different amounts for no real reason.”

Friel explained that Village Hotels “rather than pay us equally, have decided to spend tens of thousands of pounds on scab labour from Newcastle, Blackpool and other Village Hotel sites.” Between 10 and 15 scabs are said to have been mobilised.

Unite is making the strike a poster child for the union. It organised a “mega picket” on August 3—attended, like those at Birmingham, most by representatives of various pseudo-left groups—and has another planned for next Friday, with former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn reportedly to attend. Echoed by the pseudo-left, it has hailed its action as “historic”, the “first strike at a major hotel since the chambermaids went out at Grosvenor House Hotel, London in 1979.”

Such a remarkable fact testifies to the four-decade abandonment by the trade union bureaucracy of one of the most highly exploited sections of the working class. It is no accident that trade union membership in hospitality as low as 3 or 4 percent.

More broadly among young people, who make up most of the workforce in the sector, the trade unions are barely a feature of their working lives; according to government figures published in May in 2024, only 4.4 percent of employees aged 16-24 were members of a union, compared to 7.4 percent in 1995. According to the Labour Force Survey in Scotland, 19 percent of employees aged 16–24 have their pay or conditions set via a collective bargaining agreement.

According to the employers’ organisation UK Hospitality, there as many as 3.5 million workers, working in some 140,000 coffee shops, hotels, pubs, clubs and entertainment venues in the UK. Hospitality and related industries is the third largest employer in the UK after wholesale and retail, and health and social care. The industry is worth some £93 billion in gross value added and £121 billion indirectly.

The sector is notorious for poor working conditions, including breaches of health and safety, working time and pay legislation. According to a 2021 Glasgow University study, *Anything goes? Exploring the limits of employment law in UK hospitality and catering*,

“minorbreaches—microviolationsormicrobreaches—are so frequent as to have become standard practice in the sector, akin to industry norms.”

Figures produced by the Fair Work Convention in Scotland noted that 45.8 percent of workers in the sector earned less than the real living wage, compared to 10.1 percent across all sectors. Workers reported having no say in the hours allocated to them, lack of breaks, pay inaccuracies, varying finishing times, lack of written contracts and reliance on employment apps such as Stint.

While small establishments abound, the Glasgow University authors write, “the sector is dominated by brands and franchises so that many small... enterprises are really part of big multinational chains with unified management structures from middle level and above.”

Village Group was bought in 2024 by trillion-dollar global equity giant Blackstone and has 34 hotels in the UK. It employs over 4,000 workers. Competitor Premier Inn employs around 34,000 workers in Britain and Germany. Radisson Hotel Group employs over 100,000 worldwide.

These massive corporations, their financial backers and rampant exploitation and abuses have produced widespread hostility among the workers, which the Unite bureaucracy is worried will find expression outside the traditional trade union structures.

An indication of this process was given by the one-day strike on August 9 organised by the United Voices of the World (UVW), a small union not affiliated with the Trades Union Congress established in 2014. It has sought to organise sectors, largely immigrant-staffed, left relatively untouched by the established trade unions: like cleaners, carers, couriers, bar staff and security guards.

Housekeepers represented by the UVW struck at the Radisson Blu in Canary Wharf, London against sharply deteriorating conditions since the hotel’s cleaning contract shifted to London based WGC—an outsourcing company operating in the UK and Germany. The workers, mainly from Nepal, report working hours being slashed and daily room quotas increased from 14 to 24. They are demanding a return to their 40-hour week and a pay rise to the level of the London Living Wage (£13.85 an hour).

UVW members at the Draughts Bar chain of games pubs also took strike action, against zero hours

contracts, late shift cancellations and poor scheduling. They demanded fixed-hour contracts, proper notice of rotas, training and evening security.

Unite is building up the Glasgow Village Hotel strike as a cause célèbre to buttress its reputation in the eyes of this radicalising section of workers. Off the back of it, according to Friel, its organisers are visiting other venues on a recruiting drive “to collectively mobilise other workers and other sites”.

These and many thousands of other workers in the sector recognise the urgent need for collective organisation to take on rich employers empowered by a battery of laws designed to neuter strike action. The decisive questions are what programme of struggle is required to do so, and who can be trusted to lead it.

Answering both means drawing the lessons of decades of abandonment and betrayal of the working class by the trade unions which have produced appalling conditions in which hospitality and service sector employees now work. This bureaucracy cannot be trusted. Whether covered by a union agreement or not, workers will have to rely on their own networks to communicate and coordinate effective action across workplaces, both nationally and internationally.

The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages hospitality workers to contact us with your experiences and for discussion and assistance in setting up workplace rank-and-file committees in every hotel, bar and café to prepare the necessary fight against the employers.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact