

Hundreds of Chicago hotel workers enter second week on strike, as union confines walkout to six out of 46 hotels

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On Friday, hundreds of Chicago hotel workers completed their first week on strike at six downtown hotels. But while contracts covering roughly 7,000 workers at 46 properties expired on August 31, UNITE HERE Local 1 has kept the overwhelming majority on the job, despite an 85 percent vote in September authorizing strike action.

The strike is unfolding amid mounting struggles by workers across Chicago, the third-largest US city. Some 1,500 faculty and professional staff at City Colleges of Chicago have set a Monday, October 19, strike deadline after a 96 percent authorization vote. More than 500 nursing home workers at six Chicago-area facilities also threatened to strike this week before SEIU officials announced a tentative agreement and called off their walkout. These struggles are developing in a city and state long portrayed as secure strongholds of the Democratic Party, only weeks before the November elections.

Hotel workers walked out October 9 at the Sheraton Grand Chicago Riverwalk, Palmer House Hilton, Waldorf Astoria Chicago, Westin Chicago River North, Westin Michigan Avenue and Millennium Knickerbocker. The walkout coincided with the Chicago Marathon, which drew tens of thousands of runners and huge crowds of visitors.

The hotels are concentrated in the Loop, River North, Streeterville and the Gold Coast, at the heart of Chicago's luxury shopping, convention and tourism districts. The wealth on display along the Magnificent Mile and the riverfront is produced and maintained by housekeepers, cooks, dishwashers, servers and other workers who are struggling to afford rent, food, utilities and healthcare.

According to Choose Chicago, the city's official tourism marketing organization, Chicago hotels booked 11.9 million room nights in 2025, generating a record \$2.9 billion in room revenue. Downtown hotels alone brought in a record \$949 million during the summer of 2025. City officials boasted that visitors spent \$21.5 billion in Chicago last year.

The prosperity advertised to investors and wealthy visitors

contrasts sharply with the conditions of hotel workers. A 2025 UNITE HERE survey found that 32 percent of respondents could not cover rent or mortgage costs, 29 percent struggled to pay utilities, and two-thirds experienced cuts to their hours in the off-season. Seasonal layoffs and unpredictable hours leave workers exposed to sudden losses of income even when their hourly wages appear relatively high.

Joel Pacheco, a dishwasher who has worked at the Sheraton for 25 years, earns \$26.50 an hour. She told the *Chicago Sun-Times* that keeping her current health insurance, which covers her and her children, and winning a wage that can support her family are why she walked out.

At the Sheraton Grand, housekeeper Juana Sanchez told the *Chicago Tribune* that the number of women on her schedule had fallen from 118 to 92. "The work that is for two ladies, there's only one lady doing it," she said. Understaffing leaves individual workers carrying workloads previously shared among two or more employees.

In a union press release, room attendant Cassandra Pope described being scheduled for six consecutive days without being asked and repeatedly rushed to clean rooms. "They demand and demand, always rushing us in the rooms, without acknowledging that we are human beings. We only have two hands and two feet. I'm coming out of here extremely exhausted. And I have to come and work, because I need money to feed my four children."

Danetta McPhan, a steward at the Hyatt Regency McCormick Place, which has not been called out, said in September that after 24 years at the hotel she was struggling to keep food in the house for her family. She described having to explain to her children why she could no longer afford food they once took for granted.

The industry's drive to squeeze more work out of fewer employees has deepened since the pandemic. Under the 2023 Chicago hotel agreement, daily guest-room cleaning had to be explicitly restored after management cut back on

housekeeping services. That agreement established a \$25 minimum hourly wage for non-tipped workers at participating hotels. Three years later, even long-serving employees earning somewhat more describe exhausting workloads and the inability to meet basic expenses.

For immigrant hotel workers, the struggle also takes place under conditions of intimidation and fear generated by the Trump administration's immigration crackdown. During "Operation Midway Blitz" last fall, more than 3,600 people were arrested by ICE across Illinois between September and November 2025. A report published Friday by *Borderless Magazine* states that local organizations have confirmed a minimum of 80 arrests in Chicago every month since June.

Hotel workers have been targeted nationwide. In January, ICE agents staying at a hotel in suburban Minneapolis arrested a Nicaraguan refugee working there even though he had a valid work permit. UNITE HERE reported that about 200 members in the Minneapolis area were avoiding public places out of fear of immigration enforcement.

The strike pits workers against the Democratic Party. The Democratic city and state governments have meanwhile devoted immense attention and resources to promoting the hotel industry. In February, Governor J.B. Pritzker and Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson appeared together at Choose Chicago's annual meeting, held at the Hyatt Regency Chicago, to celebrate the industry's revenues.

In March, the City Council approved a Tourism Improvement District financed through a 1.5 percent assessment on qualifying hotel stays and expected to raise nearly \$40 million annually to attract still more visitors and conventions. In September, the council approved a \$50 million tax-increment financing loan to help turn a Loop office property into another hotel.

The Pritzker family, from which the Illinois governor comes, controls Hyatt Hotels Corporation. Hyatt's own annual filing states that Pritzker family business interests possessed approximately 89 percent of the company's shareholder voting power as of January 2026.

Yet not one of the three Hyatt-branded hotels involved in the present contract fight—Park Hyatt Chicago, Hyatt Regency Chicago (where February's appearances by Pritzker and Johnson took place) and Hyatt Regency McCormick Place—has been called out. Hyatt owns the Park Hyatt Chicago and manages the other two properties.

The union officials' containment of the strike also serves to prevent the growing conflict between hotel workers and the corporate owners from developing into a direct political confrontation with the Democrats.

In 2018, more than 5,000 Chicago hotel workers then struck 26 hotels, including Hyatt properties. UNITE HERE broke up that struggle through separate agreements, first

announcing a deal at seven hotels, including six Marriott properties, and sending workers back while others remained on picket lines. Workers were given less than a day's notice of ratification votes. The Democratic mayor at the time, Rahm Emanuel (also the former chief of staff for the Obama administration), immediately praised the Marriott settlement as reflecting the "shared interests" of the union and the hotel owners. Three years earlier, UNITE HERE Local 1 had supported Emanuel's reelection campaign with advertisements featuring union president Karen Kent.

In 2023, the union negotiated new agreements with Marriott, Hilton and Hyatt before the old contracts expired. The Chicago Federation of Labor hailed the result for "ensuring labor peace at major downtown hotels." "Ensuring labor peace" expresses the function of the union apparatus in holding back workers a broader struggle.

Chicago Teachers Union President Stacy Davis Gates declared support for the hotel workers on October 13, writing, "To Local 1: we have your back." But Gates and the CTU bureaucracy imposed a sellout last year on teachers which has been used to carry out major cuts. Mayor Johnson himself was also a former CTU official.

The strike raises the necessity for workers to develop a political movement independent of both big-business parties.

Hotel workers should demand an immediate expansion of the walkout to all 46 hotels and appeal to City Colleges employees, healthcare workers, teachers and workers at hotels across the country and internationally. Rank-and-file strike committees, elected and controlled by workers independently of the UNITE HERE apparatus, are needed to coordinate the struggle, insist on full public disclosure of every proposal and negotiation and prevent any deal being imposed without adequate time for workers to study and discuss it.

Workers must advance demands based on what they need to live: a 40 percent across-the-board wage increase, fully funded year-round healthcare for workers and their families, guarantees against layoffs and arbitrary cuts to hours, protection for immigrant workers and an end to the exhausting speedup and abusive workloads. These demands require uniting workers across industries rather than accepting the limits imposed by the union leaderships and Democratic politicians.



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