

“We want to get treated like humans!”

Chicago hotel workers determined to fight for improvements, as Unite HERE shrinks their strike

Kristina Betinis
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Hundreds of workers at the Hilton Chicago and Hyatt Regency Chicago hotels walked out on Sunday in downtown Chicago. Earlier this month, on October 9, workers at six other downtown hotels walked out on a limited strike, having since returned to work. The central issues in the struggle are pay, staffing, overwork and forced overtime, and health insurance coverage.

While contracts covering roughly 7,000 workers at 46 hotels in Chicago expired on August 31, UNITE HERE Local 1 has kept the overwhelming majority on the job, despite a vote last month of 85 percent authorizing strike action.

Most of the hotels whose workers have been sent back to work—the Sheraton Grand Chicago Riverwalk, Palmer House Hilton, Waldorf Astoria Chicago, Westin Chicago River North, Westin Michigan Avenue and Millennium Knickerbocker—are luxury hotels, where room rates run in the high hundreds per night, even in the off season.

The WSWs spoke with housekeeping staff on the Hyatt Regency pickets on Monday. The strikers included many immigrants drawn from all over the world, and several languages could be heard at once.

On why they voted to strike, one young houseman said, “It’s the way we’re being treated. We are working six days a week. It’s hectic, they give us too many credits [responsibilities are distributed on a credit system]. It’s a lot to take.

“We want it better, and better insurance for ourselves. I was hospitalized not long ago, and I got a huge bill, thousands of dollars. The insurance covered something

like 10 percent, and I didn’t qualify for any help because I was making too much money. I feel like if something were to happen, I don’t want to see a doctor or go to the hospital. I don’t want to pay that much.”

Another worker spoke up to say, “I have been here 15 years. This is my third strike. ... Housekeepers are the biggest group in the hotel, maybe 300 workers, several departments. With the cost of living going up, a lot of people that work here have families, and it’s harder for them. We deserve a better wage. We’re working in the third biggest city, but we’re treated like we don’t matter!”

He continued: “We can be busy the whole week, and management can maybe get it right, but usually in order to save some money they’ll have enough attendants but less housemen. The remaining staff gets not the usual 3-5 floors to clean up but may have as many as 10 to vacuum, dust and pick up behind the room attendants. This causes so much unnecessary tension!”

The strike is unfolding amid mounting struggles by workers in the city. Faculty and staff at the City Colleges of Chicago, having taken a 96 percent authorization vote, were prepared to walk out early Monday morning. The strike was blocked at the last minute when the CCCTU union and the college administration appointed by Mayor Brandon Johnson came to an agreement around 3:00 a.m.

More than 500 nursing home workers at six area facilities threatened to strike last week, before SEIU officials announced a tentative agreement and called off the walkout. These and other struggles are developing

in a city and state long portrayed as secure strongholds of the Democratic Party, just weeks before the November elections.

Of the state of Illinois' 18 resident billionaires, three are members of the Pritzker family, who hold the controlling stake in Hyatt hotels. JB Pritzker, the governor of Illinois, is currently running for re-election, having spent nearly \$24 million himself in the race from July to September against a Trump-backed Republican Darren Bailey.

A WSWS reporter asked a young worker, "A controlling stake in Hyatt is owned by the Pritzker family. How does that affect your view of the strike?"

He said wryly, "You might think that because it's the Pritzker family that you could get maybe a little leniency, but it's not the case. It's really wild."

Working closely with the Democratic leadership in the city, the strategy of the Unite HERE bureaucracy is to contain and carefully manage opposition, bringing out workers on a limited and rolling basis to avoid a full citywide hotel shutdown that would draw the mayor, the governor and the Democratic Party apparatus into an open fight with the workers. Above all, the union apparatus aims to keep the political costs of the strike to the Democrats as low as possible ahead of the midterm elections.

The Democratic Party leadership is working to contain and co-opt mass opposition to Trump and anger at social conditions into electoral support. While making certain appeals to working-class anger over the cost of living and social inequality, the Democrats are also making clear that their central priority is a massive escalation of the war against Russia in Ukraine.

US control of Ukraine's economy is a central aim of the war, an effort that has been directly overseen by the Pritzker family. Agreeing with Trump's assault on social programs and the working class as a means to fund the escalation of war, the Democratic Party leaders' conflict with Trump is based on what they claim is his insufficiently aggressive pursuit of American imperialism's global interests.

One worker said, "This is such a wealthy area. The Pritzkers are involved. And when you compare to other cities like San Francisco, they get fewer rooms to clean and better pay. We have 16 rooms we have to clean,

it's our daily base, we are just told to get it done.

"We do the same thing here that they do out there, clean the same way. Why is it we are getting more work at less pay, you know? There's more tourism here, we're in the heart of the city. Even still now in the fall we're getting large groups of people coming in, but we're working six-day weeks? It blows my mind."

On the dangers the ongoing ICE kidnappings pose to workers, he said, "A lot of the workers are in fear of ICE. Management's way of handling this is to just bring temporary people in, kind of pretend it didn't happen. Just like this, this strike is a perfect example. We're out here now, there's at least 100 of us out here. Inside the hotel, they've got temporary workers coming in from other states and other Hyatts."

He concluded: "We want to get treated like humans. We want to make our voices heard."

If you are a hotel worker seeking an immediate expansion of the walkout to all 46 hotels and to broaden the struggle through appeals to educators, logistics workers, healthcare workers and workers at hotels across the country and internationally, contact us below.



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