After limited walkouts, UNITE HERE keeps 7,000 Chicago hotel workers on the job with expired contracts

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More than two months after contracts expired for roughly 7,000 hospitality workers at 46 Chicago hotels, the UNITE HERE Local 1 apparatus is keeping the overwhelming majority of its members on the job without an agreement. Despite an 85 percent strike authorization vote in September, union officials have confined the struggle to brief, isolated picket lines involving a tiny fraction of the workforce. At the time of this writing, there are no active pickets, and all hotels are operating normally.

Contracts covering room attendants, housemen, cooks, dishwashers, servers, bartenders, bellmen and front desk staff at Marriott, Hilton and Hyatt hotels expired on August 31. After waiting until September 21 to hold a strike vote, UNITE HERE delayed another two weeks before calling a walkout on October 9 at just six downtown properties. On October 18, it called out workers at the Hilton Chicago and the Hyatt Regency Chicago.

In total, workers at 38 of the 46 hotels have not been called out for a single day. The union has mobilized only dozens of its 7,000 members. Rather than launching an all-out strike to shut down the city's hospitality industry, it called temporary one- to two-day "Hollywood" strikes, meant only to posture as a fight and let workers blow off steam while ensuring the hotels never lost a dime. Workers who did strike were isolated from their brothers and sisters at other properties and quickly sent back to work under the same expired contracts. UNITE HERE has provided no progress updates.

UNITE HERE has the closest relationship with the city and state Democratic Party and has been determined to prevent a citywide strike by 7,000 hotel workers, which would have brought them into direct conflict with the Democrats. Three of Illinois' 18 billionaires belong to the Pritzker family, including Democratic Governor JB Pritzker, whose family controls 89 percent of the shareholder voting power in Hyatt Hotels Corporation. Determined to prevent a clash with the Democrats before the midterm elections, Cook County College Teachers Union, Local 1600, also called off a a walkout of 1,500 faculty and staff at the City Colleges of Chicago on October 19.

The same collaboration extends to City Hall where Mayor Brandon Johnson, a former Chicago Teachers Union staffer backed by the Democratic Socialists of America, is preparing massive cuts to close an $882 million gap in the city's 2027 budget. The Chicago Public Schools, which faces a $732 million deficit, is also pressing for deep cuts. In the face of growing opposition by workers and young people who delivered a historic blow to Trump and the Republicans in the midterm elections, the Democratic Party is desperately looking to the union apparatus to hold back the rising tide of militancy and political radicalization of the working class.

During the walkout at the Hilton Chicago, a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team spoke with workers fed up with skyrocketing living costs, exhausting workloads and social inequality. Nathan Bell, a bartender, said on the fifth day of the strike, "The conditions are basically all the things that have eroded since COVID. A lot of people either retired or got laid off and never came back. The hotel was like, once we get back up to business levels, we will rehire. That hasn't happened.

"You have all this inflation that has happened since COVID. We've got to get raises that match that level. We have to keep our healthcare, which is also rising. We have to protect our pensions and get more money put into those so we have a retirement with dignity."

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Bell emphasized how chronic understaffing has led to dangerous workloads and injuries. “And we’ve got to make sure we get a lot more people hired back to the levels we were at even in 2019,” he said. “We’re still below that, and that business is back. We’ve got people getting injured. We’ve got housekeepers that could be doing 18, 20 rooms with forced overtime when they’re supposed to do 16 rooms. We’re trying to put a stop to all of that.”

Describing the impact of rising living costs and declining tips, Bell continued: “You look at what you get paid, and then you look at what your grocery bill is. I buy the same stuff every week, mind you. I’ve watched it go from $180 to $200 to $220 to $275. If you’re working a tip position, you’re at the behest of your guests that come in and tip. And for some of our positions, particularly things like bellmen and doormen, they don’t really tip anymore because people don’t carry cash... Everyone is squeezed.

“We’re all kind of fighting over the same dollar and passing it around, right? Except the owners,” Bell added. “Their dividends keep coming, their stock price keeps rising... I think it’s criminal. The CEO of Hilton makes in one day what the average housekeeper makes in two years... That’s unconscionable in my book.”

According to a 2025 union survey, 32 percent of hotel workers struggled to pay rent or mortgage, 29 percent struggled with utility bills, and two-thirds had their hours cut during the winter off-season. The base wage for non-tipped workers under the 2023 contract is $25 an hour, which has failed to keep pace with housing, food and healthcare costs. Moreover, the largely immigrant workforce faces constant threats from the Trump administration’s immigration crackdown, which saw Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrest more than 3,600 people across Illinois during “Operation Midway Blitz.”

Meanwhile, Chicago hotels booked 11.9 million room nights in 2025, generating a record $2.9 billion in room revenue, while Marriott, Hilton and Hyatt returned $22.3 billion to shareholders over three years, and Hilton CEO Christopher Nassetta took in $27.7 million in fiscal 2025 compensation.

UNITE HERE’s refusal to mobilize its membership reflects the bureaucracy’s deep contempt for the rank and file. When a WSWS reporting team visited pickets at one hotel, a union staffer barred reporters from speaking to workers not coached on speaking to the press, saying workers might say “crazy things” and that their views might not align with the narrative the union is attempting to control.

Asked why the union had not called out all 46 hotels at once, the same staffer said she did not believe it was capable of organizing a strike on that scale. She turned the blame on the workers, remarking that “it was hard enough to get this many people out.”

This is despite 85 percent voting to strike, an undeniable statement of workers’ willingness to fight. The obstacle is not workers’ desire to fight the companies, but a union apparatus determined to stifle that militancy.

Workers can prevent another UNITE HERE betrayal, as happened in 2018. To break the stranglehold of the apparatus, Chicago hotel workers must form rank-and-file strike committees in every hotel and department, democratically elected by and accountable only to the workers. These committees should fight to call out all 46 hotels immediately, establish rank-and-file oversight over all negotiations, and unite hospitality workers with educators, healthcare workers, BP refinery, autoworkers and other sections of the working class through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

That fight is unfolding amid a global upsurge of the class struggle. On October 30, tens of thousands of dock and port workers took part in an international day of action across 113 ports in 22 countries against imperialist war, the Gaza genocide, rising living costs and austerity. This is part of a growing movement of workers and youth in France, Italy, Germany and across Europe against low wages, austerity and war rearmament.

The outcome of these struggles cannot be left to spontaneity or to a union bureaucracy that functions as a labor police force for management and the state. The success of workers’ fights is determined by leadership, organization and a clear political perspective. Above all, this movement must be guided by a socialist perspective that breaks with both parties of big business and strives for the expropriation of the billionaires and democratic control over production by the working class.

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