

10,000 hotel workers launch nationwide strike during Labor Day holiday weekend

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More than 10,000 hotel and hospitality workers went on strike on Sunday and Monday in cities across the US to demand wage increases, improved working conditions and more staffing.

The workers, members of UNITE HERE, walked out against 25 hotels at some of the largest hotel chains, including the Hilton, Hyatt and Marriott, after the previous contract expired at midnight on Saturday.

UNITE HERE has said the strikes—which are being carried out at select locations in Baltimore; Boston; Greenwich, Connecticut; Providence, Rhode Island; Honolulu; San Francisco; San Diego, San Jose and Seattle—will last for two or three days. The hotel chains have said they prepared for the walkout with “contingency plans” and are continuing to operate.

Thousands of cooks, bartenders, housekeepers, dishwashers, banquet servers and banquet housemen joined picket lines on one of the biggest travel weekends of the year. The workers are outraged over the fact that the hotel chains laid off staff during the first months of the pandemic and collected billions of dollars in government aid and then adopted policies that have attacked working conditions. Meanwhile, the hospitality workers’ wages have not kept up with inflation.

Jerome Roberts, a dishwasher at the Hilton Baltimore Inner Harbor, told CNN, “I walked out today because we just cannot keep working paycheck to paycheck, not able to pay our bills. Going on strike is hard but not nearly as hard as trying to get by on what we are getting paid. We told the bosses in our negotiations how much we are struggling right now, but they didn’t care. We are on strike to make them pay.”

Elena Duran, a server at Marriott’s Palace Hotel in San Francisco for 33 years, said, “Since COVID, they’re expecting us to give five-star service with three-

star staff. A couple weeks ago, we were at 98 percent occupancy, but they only put three servers when we used to be a team of four or five. It’s too much pressure on us to go faster and faster instead of calling in more people to work.”

As part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the hotel and restaurant industries were given \$350 billion in forgivable loans. Since then, the hotel chains have been making record profits. Industry data shows that room rates are at record highs, and the US hotel industry made over \$100 billion in gross operating profit in 2022.

Meanwhile, hotel staffing per occupied room is down 13 percent from 2019 to 2022. Hilton Hotels, for example, has quadrupled its stock market value since April 2020. It is the fourth largest chain that operates 6,200 properties worldwide, including the DoubleTree and Embassy Suites brands.

According to financial reports, Hilton Worldwide Holdings earned a gross profit for the 12 months ending June 30 of \$9.67 billion, an increase of 11.64 percent over the previous year. Some of the workers, such as housekeeping staff, are earning wages of \$16.20 per hour and are not guaranteed a 40-hour workweek.

UNITE HERE covers 300,000 workers in hotel, gaming, food service, manufacturing, textile, distribution, laundry, transportation and airport industries. The union includes a total of 40,000 workers impacted by the contract under negotiations with the hotel chains. According to media reports, 15,000 of these workers voted overwhelmingly for strike action.

However, union officials have restricted the strike to just one-quarter of these workers while the remainder are still on the job. The bureaucracy of UNITE HERE is continuing its strategy of limited strikes and keeping hotel workers isolated from each other among different

employers and different parts of the country.

Last year, the union called out 15,000 members on strike during the Fourth of July holiday weekend at 65 hotels in Los Angeles and Orange counties in Southern California. The workers returned to work a few days later while the union staged a series of “rolling strikes” in the months that followed.

In March, UNITE HERE signed a four-year sellout deal with 34 hotels that was presented to workers as a “life-changing contract” but did not bring wages in line with years of inflation. The agreement also contained toothless and unenforceable “fair workload guarantees.”

In September 2023, while the struggle in California was still underway, UNITE HERE-affiliated Culinary Workers Union representing 60,000 hospitality workers in Las Vegas betrayed the demands of workers and called off strike action with a last-minute agreement. The workers had voted by 95 percent for strike action which would have shut down 22 resorts.

A significant factor in limiting the action of hotel workers is the endorsement by UNITE HERE of Kamala Harris for US President and the effort to ensure the workers’ struggle does not disrupt the union’s campaign on behalf of the Democratic Party.

UNITE HERE posted on its website an endorsement of Harris on August 5, claiming she has “consistently demonstrated her unwavering commitment to working people and the labor movement.”

Harris was invited to the union’s constitutional convention in June where she was permitted to posture as a “fighter” for the interests of workers. In the endorsement of the Democratic Party nominee, who joined with President Biden in blocking a nationwide strike by railroad workers in December 2022, union officials made the most of Harris’s “personal story.”

UNITE HERE Secretary-Treasurer Nia Winston said, “As a woman of color and daughter of immigrants, her journey reflects the diverse fabric of our union, which proudly represents women, people of color and immigrants.” This is a false narrative since the Biden administration and Harris herself has stated that “securing the border” and attacking immigrant rights is a priority of the current White House and going forward the Democratic Party.

To take forward their struggle against the hotel chains, which operate on a global scale, hospitality

workers need to draw the lessons of the past betrayals by the union. To win increased wages, benefits and better working conditions, workers need to take matters into their own hands and join the growing rebellion against the union apparatus and build independent rank-and-file committees as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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