

# Union isolates Cambria hotel workers in Chicago as British Columbia and Los Angeles hotel employees protest

By Michael Walters  
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Workers at the Cambria hotel in Chicago remain on strike after more than three months without a contract, in a struggle against poverty wages, cuts to healthcare benefits and abysmal working conditions. What began as a strike at 27 Chicago hotels expanded to an additional 23 hotels across the country in major cities such as Detroit, Boston, San Diego, San Jose, Oakland, San Francisco, Maui, and Oahu.

In an effort to contain the strike from spreading, two weeks after the Chicago hotel strike began, UNITE HERE, which bargains on behalf of approximately 264,000 workers, rapidly pushed through a contract with Marriott International. Far from uniting workers in a collective struggle against the giant multinational hotel corporations, UNITE HERE signed separate contracts ending strikes hotel by hotel. As disputes flared up across the country they were promptly put down. Other large strikes included 1,500 workers in Boston and 2,500 workers in San Francisco.

UNITE HERE, the union covering thousands of hotel and hospitality workers, isolated workers by signing piecemeal deals with one hotel chain after another. Left on their own and subjected to harassment by police, the workers at Cambria are the only remaining Chicago hotel workers still on strike.

Meanwhile, other struggles seem poised to erupt.

Coast Bastion Hotels in Canada has issued a 72-hour lockout notice to workers following a one-day protest strike Saturday by workers in Nanaimo, British Columbia. Like their American brothers and sisters, the workers are seeking higher wages and smaller workloads for housekeeping staff. A lockout would affect 250 workers, members of UNITE HERE, in three cities in western Canada.

Workers at five upscale hotels in Los Angeles held demonstrations Wednesday only a week after about 7,500 hotel workers in Los Angeles and Orange counties voted 96 percent in favor of striking against 24 hotels in the region over contracts that expired in the last month.

Nearly 800 hotels workers demonstrated in front of five hotels in Los Angeles, Beverly Hills and Anaheim. UNITE HERE leaders say they are calling for wages of at least \$25 an hour, a very modest sum considering the soaring cost of living in Southern California.

On November 28, UNITE HERE held a token and totally ineffective one-day strike at the Chicago Marriot Hotel in the medical district. The workers voted to unionize in May and are still without a contract. The hotel is owned by Xenia Hotel Resorts, an investment trust fund and has refused to negotiate with the union.

With each signed contract came victory celebrations by the union and its pseudo-left backers with little to no concrete details given to the workers. Neither UNITE HERE or the various hotels have made public the specific details of the ratified contracts.

A few fairly vague details are mentioned in UNITE HERE Local 1's November Newsletter, highlighting below inflation raises of \$1.40 for non-tipped and \$0.70 for tipped employees, an additional sick day and guaranteed health insurance in the winter. Further year-round healthcare is reportedly guaranteed only to workers who work one hour a week every month. This 'victory' will only encourage hotels to extract longer hours from other workers to avoid having to cover insurance in the off-peak season.

Some of the lowest paid workers will already be getting a wage increase on July 1, 2019 when the

Chicago minimum wage for non-tipped employees goes up from \$12.00 to \$13.00 per hour. By contrast, UNITE HERE President Donald R. Taylor took home \$362,034 last year. Taylor makes 13 times as much as a minimum wage employee and places him in the top one percent of individual income earners in the US. In order to afford basic housing in a large city like Chicago or San Francisco, workers earning minimum wage often need to work more than one job to survive.

While the union claimed victory in each of the sellout deals it has signed, the meager gains are a pittance compared to the increased profits at the hotel chains. Chicago's business newspaper *Crain's* reported that revenue at the hotels was up seven percent over last year and that the hotels had the best quarter since the economic collapse of 2008. The Hyatt McCormick Place, part of the Hyatt hotel chain owned by the family of newly elected Democratic Governor JB Pritzker, posted a net operating income of \$3.1 million for the month of September.

Marriott said in a November 6 earnings call that the strike wave will not affect the company's financial performance. Marriott's third quarter gross fee revenue rose 13 percent to \$932 million. According to financial analyst David Beckel the strike "didn't have material impact on results" and a recent data breach will do more damage to the company's brand.

In September, Jairo Nunez, a UNITE HERE Local 1 union organizer, told a World Socialist Web Site reporter that "Marriott signing just puts a lot of pressure on the other companies." In fact, the opposite is true. By systematically shutting down and isolating workers, it has severely weakened the bargaining position of workers at the remaining hotels. According to UNITE HERE Cambria is using this leverage to demand that housekeepers clean more rooms per shift, a demand that supposedly was not a part of other bargaining agreements.

Housekeepers are highly exploited workers that are often paid on a per-room basis. This pay model is favorable to younger workers who can clean faster and move heavy hotel furniture more easily. Older workers end up working longer shifts for the same pay and face all kinds of daily strains and injuries.

Furthermore, by isolating the workers, UNITE HERE has left them vulnerable to police harassment. In order to receive their meager strike pay of \$60 per day,

workers must participate on the picket for 30 hours a week.

The isolation of Cambria is also taking place digitally. The union cynically took down the "ChicagoHotelStrike.org" webpage and redirected it to a sparsely maintained "CambriaHotelStrike.org" Further UNITE HERE Local 1's Facebook page makes no mention of the Coast Bastion Hotels strike in Canada which is organized by UNITE HERE Local 40.

In June, a mere two months before the strike, UNITE HERE donated \$25,000 to the re-election campaign of Democratic Mayor, Rahm Emanuel, who has chosen not to seek a third term. He has not returned the money and instead is using his war chest to funnel money to various political action committees (PACs) and Democratic Party politicians. This includes a \$17,500 contribution to Illinois Hotel & Motel PAC, which is managed and funded by Chicago hotel executives with the mission to "support legislatures that encourage pro-business legislation". Effectively, UNITE is helping funnel workers dues to an organization that actively lobbies against them.

Autoworkers, UPS workers, teachers, steelworkers and other sections of workers are seeking to fight back after decades of declining wages imposed by the corporations, trade unions and the Democratic and Republican parties. A genuine struggle against the massively exploitative hotel chains can only be waged if hotel workers form their own democratic rank-and-file committees, independent of the union, to fight for their own demands. Hotel workers need to unite across international lines as well, connecting Chicago hotel workers with workers in Nanaimo, British Columbia to unite workers along class lines against their common enemy.

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