

Hotel Workers Rising

Nicole Cohen

A few days before International Women's Day in early March, Zeleda Davis, a room attendant at Toronto's Doubletree International Plaza Hotel, stood up at a meeting of her co-workers and women from various feminist groups and explained the details of her job. Her typical eight-hour shift includes loading a large, burdensome cart and pushing it to the other side of the hotel (which takes about 30 minutes), then thoroughly cleaning and making up beds in 16 rooms.

Lately, her job has become increasingly difficult. Beds have changed over the years as hotel ownership has consolidated under a few multinationals, which now compete to out-luxuriate each other at workers' expense. Chains such as Starwood, Hilton and Marriott have introduced what they call "heavenly beds," with bigger, heavier mattresses and fluffier pillows, making rooms more difficult and time-consuming to clean.

Davis now makes up heavier mattresses with duvets and extra sheets and places five pillows where there used to be two. She still has only eight hours in which to do the work, and her rate of pay has not increased. She suffers from back and shoulder pain and, like many room attendants, carries painkillers with her at all times. Many of her co-workers are on modified duties due to bed-related injuries and have had a difficult time being compensated. "We are walking injuries," Davis says. "Everyday our jobs get harder."

The feminist meeting was part of Hotel Workers Rising, a North America-wide campaign organized by hotel workers and their union, UNITE HERE, to raise standards of work and living for those employed in some of the most strenuous, underpaid jobs in the service sector. Hotel workers, especially room attendants, are overwhelmingly immigrants and women of colour. The median wage for Toronto hotel workers is \$26,000 per year, and many work two or three jobs. According to UNITE HERE, room attendants' injuries are escalating: 91 percent of 600 room attendants surveyed in Canada and the United States say they suffer from work-related pain, and room attendants report more injuries than heavy construction workers.

As 23 hotels across Toronto geared up to negotiate new employee contracts in the spring, hotel workers and UNITE HERE Local 75 began mobilizing community support, support they need to demand better pay and lighter workloads, benefits, training and promotions and subsidized transit. The Fairmont Royal York, which reached an agreement in November, has now set the standards for equal opportunity training and subsidized transit passes, both critical to improving standards of living and work. The campaign's broad goals include raising wages throughout the industry, easing housekeepers' workloads and winning employer neutrality during organizing drives. (Only three-quarters of Toronto hotels are unionized. Key non-unionized sites include

about half of the airport-area hotels and several hotels in the Marriott chain, which has the fewest unionized workers).

"The power of companies has grown so power of workers needs to grow," says Andrea Calver, a UNITE HERE Ontario Council organizing coordinator. Hotel multinationals are earning record profits. According to a UNITE HERE fact sheet, "the overall lodging industry earned an estimated \$20.8 billion in profit before taxes in 2005, and those earnings are expected to increase by 21 percent in 2006." Hotels have grown into global corporations that frequently change ownership and are resistant to organizing. As Steven Tufts notes in *Paths to Union Renewal*, hotel multinationals have developed sophisticated resistance to organizing: they employ union-busting consultants and offer some workers wages above those of unionized workers to tame the "union threat." For these reasons, Hotel Workers Rising is concerned with organizing non-unionized workers to consolidate worker power.

The campaign launched in December 2005. At a press conference, actor and activist Danny Glover spoke about the importance of supporting low-waged workers' campaigns, while hotel workers discussed the racialization of hotel work: while white employees work the front-of-the-house and management jobs, black workers and immigrants are concentrated at the back-of-the-house. Often, back-of-the-house workers can't even walk through the hotel's front door. "I want to be at the front of the house too," Felix Odong, a dishwasher at the Royal York for the past seven years, told the *Toronto Star*. "I've been going to university for four years and I haven't been promoted."

In February, Filipino hotel workers held a forum for their community, co-hosted by Filipino migrant worker organization SIKLAB. Women spoke about their working conditions and rallied community solidarity. The meeting was a chance for organizers to make critical links between the political economy of Filipino migration and the current situation of female Filipino workers who clean hotel rooms. Organizers detailed the poverty caused by neoliberal globalization and government policies that have caused mass migration of Filipino women to Canada in search of better work. These women, many of whom are university educated, often end up as domestic workers, live-in caregivers in a problematic government-sponsored program, or in low-paid service jobs. They send billions of dollars in remittances back to the Philippines, which is used to pay down foreign debt. Their government has called them the "modern heroes" of the Philippines and, more recently, "internationally shared human resources."

Acutely aware of the global context in which she works, Victoria Sobrepená, a room attendant at the Delta Chelsea, made it clear that hotel workers are serious about this campaign being

a global one. They have requested language in their new contracts that guarantees non-unionized workers at hotels in foreign countries the right to organize. Says Sobrepená, “If we keep quiet they are going to eat us alive.”

Lilian Salvador, who also spoke at the forum, has been a room attendant for nine years. Thanks to a shoulder injury sustained on the job she was on modified duties at the Holiday Inn on Bloor Street until they told her they had no work for her. While she survives on worker’s compensation, she is involved in the campaign, sitting on the health and safety committee of UNITE HERE and on the executive board of her local.

“It’s time for us to make a change,” she said in her brief speech. Salvador has helped bring about change before. She used to have to clean 18 rooms per eight-hour shift, for \$9.25 per hour. After a five-month “work and walk” job action, her workload was reduced to 16 rooms per shift and her hourly wages rose to \$14.25. Victories such as this one, along with worker solidarity, have fuelled this campaign. In September, over-worked attendants at the Fairmont Royal York took their 15-minute breaks simultaneously to protest escalating workloads.

Last fall and winter, UNITE HERE held six room attendant workshops across North America on consciousness raising, developing leadership skills and brainstorming ways to solve problems in housekeeping departments. Facilitators from Toronto, Chicago, Boston and Los Angeles were trained together and workshops were held simultaneously, reflecting the need for unified resistance to global companies that have uniform corporate standards. “It literally is impossible in some cases to change things one hotel at a time,” says Calver. “To change standards it has to be a global campaign.”

In a show of global solidarity, hotel workers from Hawaii, Boston, Los Angeles, Chicago and New Jersey joined their Toronto counterparts in the rally and march for International Women’s Day. A delegation of room attendants and laundry

workers performed as the UNITE HERE choir, then hotel workers led the 3,500-strong demo through the downtown core. About 100 workers from the Delta Chelsea hotel who were on break emerged as the march passed and were greeted with the chant, “Women’s work has value too, Delta Chelsea shame on you!” They were overwhelmed by the support.

“What transforms people in their understanding of the humanity of the issue is meeting each other and struggling together,” says Calver. Making community connections is critical to this campaign. Several hundred women signed letters at the rally outlining their concern for room attendants’ working conditions. At the end of March, letters were delivered to hotels by feminist

delegations. “This action empowers workers and the community, it’s crucial if we’re going to build a movement that’s going to address issues of the low-wage community.”

According to the Toronto and York Region Labour Council, one million workers in the Greater Toronto Area earn under \$29,800 per year. From a pool of just over two million workers, this means half of workers in the GTA are not making enough working one job to support their families. The Hotel Workers Rising campaign intends to address this poverty head-on.

It’s a broad-based effort to raise awareness and support for hotel workers’ struggles and to mobilize hotel workers to demand better standards of living and work from employers. The campaign is mobilizing on a global level and organizing across borders, raising awareness about the value of women’s work and the work of immigrants and low-paid workers in the service sector. Led by women like Zeleda Davis, Lilian Salvador and Victoria Sobrepená, thousands of hotel workers across North America are rising up to resist, refusing to suffer for a few extra pillows. **R**

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