

Echoes of the 1930s:

Today's Hotel Workers Lead the Struggle to 'Upgrade' the Service Economy

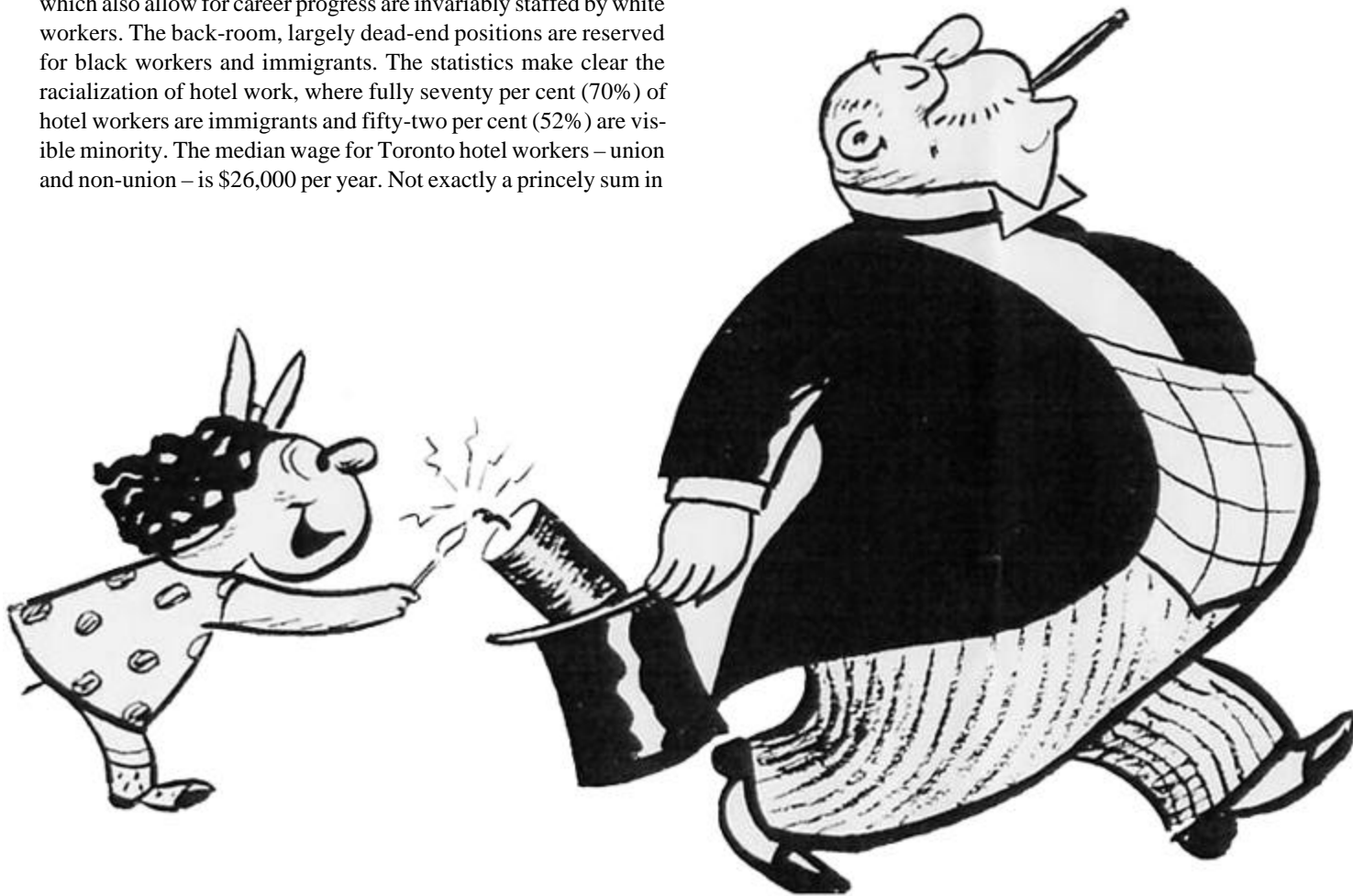
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The organizing struggles of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in the 1930s and 1940s contributed significantly to transforming work and life for industrial workers and their communities by creating the means to bargain for better wages and working conditions. Now, in the first decade of the 21st century, North American hotel workers can honourably make a claim to being the legitimate heirs of this history as they struggle to transform the quality of work and life in the service economy.

The hotel workers are represented by UNITE-HERE which launched the 'Hotel Workers Rising' campaign in December 2005 with the active and very public support of actor Danny Glover who linked the necessity for supporting the struggles of low wage workers. And it is more than low wages at the centre of this struggle. The intersection of race and class in the hotel industry is anything but ambiguous. The higher-end front-line positions which also allow for career progress are invariably staffed by white workers. The back-room, largely dead-end positions are reserved for black workers and immigrants. The statistics make clear the racialization of hotel work, where fully seventy per cent (70%) of hotel workers are immigrants and fifty-two per cent (52%) are visible minority. The median wage for Toronto hotel workers – union and non-union – is \$26,000 per year. Not exactly a princely sum in

one of Canada's most expensive cities. Median hourly wages run from \$10.48 to \$11.22, depending on the type of job. The union factor is significant as unionized workers average \$14/hour – a differential approaching 40 per cent! Working conditions are a 21st century Dickens tale characterized by intensification of work, a lack of job control and consequently, soaring injury rates. Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSD's) are amongst the highest in any industrial sector as a result of the volume of heavy lifting required, especially among hotel housekeepers. One massive study of 40,000 hotel employees found that injury rates were increasing as hotels added heavier beds and room amenities such as treadmills.

The Hotel Workers Rising campaign is creative and enthusiastic. Its actions and events are heavily attended by not only hotel workers, but their families and community allies. It isn't so much



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a campaign as a social movement that looks and feels like it's not only central but on the winning side of change. And it is! This success is no doubt in part the result of the campaign vision and strategy to link these industry issues to larger questions of what kind of quality of life, what kind of society and economy, do we want to have in Canada and in North America? Hotel Workers Rising explicitly links their efforts to the Toronto Labour Council's *Million Reasons to Take Action* campaign which seeks to mobilize around the damning fact that one million workers in the greater Toronto area earn less than \$30,000/ year. Again, the racialized dimension in these numbers cannot be lost as many of these underpaid and undervalued workers are people of colour and new Canadians. The Labour Council's campaign asks, as does Hotel Workers Rising: Are we willing to leave these people behind and if so what kind of society will we have built? The lesson of these campaigns is honest and true; when workers and their families can lift themselves out of poverty, then they and their communities become better places to live.

The battle Hotel Workers Rising has chosen to fight is nothing less than a direct and open challenge to the practices of neoliberal restructuring and the logic of global hyper-competition. In the hotel sector, the forces of globalization have forced a rationalization within the hotel industry which is increasingly populated by a handful of multinational chains – Hilton, Starwood (Sheraton, Four Points, Westin, and Le Meridian), Marriott, Fairmont (Delta), Intercontinental (Crown Plaza, Holiday Inns) to name the more prominent ones. The hotel sector, as with the service sector generally, confronted by the issue of productivity. It requires human labour and skill. Technology can do little to extract more profit in this sector. Instead, profit can only be increased the old fashioned way – through extreme exploitation of labour. And hence, the macro political problem the hotel workers and UNITE-HERE have chosen to take on. How to better distribute that profit. It's not an abstract problem. We are in serious trouble as a society as the numbers demonstrate.

Between 1981 and 2001 the poverty rate for immigrants in Toronto increased by 125%. So much for a rising tide lifting all boats! The 1990s were a decade of decline and stagnation for most Canadians – the worst since the Great Depression. In that bitter decade incomes of two-parent families dropped 13% in real dollars. The plight of single-parent families was, of course, worse. Their incomes dropped 18%. As of 2005, 35.1% of Toronto's children lived in poverty, a disgusting fact given that the economy has never been more robust in creating wealth. In 2004, corporate

profits reached an all-time, historic high composing 14% of the Canadian GDP. And all this while our modest welfare state continues to shrink and restrict benefits. For example only 26% of Toronto's jobless are even eligible for Employment Insurance. Again, this speaks volumes as to the importance of the hotel workers campaign to lift living standards throughout the service economy.

To advance the 'high road' vision of the campaign, over the past months UNITE-HERE has taken 14 strike votes in Toronto area hotels and ballots have given an astonishing 98% for strike authorization. The strategy has been to set in motion co-ordinated sector-based bargaining. Victories have been achieved at the downtown and airport Hilton and at the Sheraton Centre. The Delta Chelsea Hotel however is attempting to break the pattern being set by the union and have drawn a line. In particular, Delta Chelsea management is actively courting owners of some 25 new hotel projects now in the planning stage for Toronto to stop the union's progress at the bargaining table. Other unions which frequently do business with the Delta Chelsea – notably the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, and the Power Workers Union (Ontario hydro) are currently boycotting the Delta and have cancelled a number of contracts with that hotel.

At a political level, the mayors of San Francisco, Los Angeles and Toronto and have come out in support of the campaign. They understand that raising the living standards of service sector workers is a good thing for their cities, their economies and their communities. They understand there is no alternative. Toronto Mayor David Miller recently said "The prospect of better jobs, training and career advancement in the hotel sector holds out hope, not only to our hotel workers, but to our youth who are seeking meaningful employment." There can be no argument with this agenda. It is the minimum we can ask for. Our future depends on their success. **R**

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