

GROUND ZERO L.A.

Low wages put L.A. at the hot center of a national hotel workers union fight

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

The international hotel workers union moved closer to the perfect storm last week after employees working without a contract since April voted in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles to authorize a strike. A walk out in three cities by almost 10,000 housekeepers, cooks, room service workers, and others who keep hotels humming could be crippling to the industry. The vote is a gloves-off gesture in a contract fight that started out tense in the spring and has only increased in acrimony.

In Los Angeles, 75 percent of some 2,800 members of the hotel workers union, UNITE HERE, turned out to vote on September 13, and 83 percent voted to authorize a strike. Ninety-two percent of the membership had already rejected the employers' final offer on July 1 after three and a half months of negotiations.

Management, too, is ready to rumble. A compact among the nine Los Angeles hotels that make up the Hotel Employers Council - operated by such chains as Hilton, Starwood, Hyatt, and Marriott - calls on all to lock out workers if one hotel is struck, and extracts a fine of tens of thousands of dollars a day from any hotel that doesn't comply. A lockout was only narrowly averted on August 13. And last week, the downtown Wilshire Grande locked out laundry workers represented by a different union after their contract expired; UNITE HERE refrained from striking in solidarity, but the signal sent was duly noted.

Both sides insist they don't want a strike, but both are gearing up. Reports of replacement hiring abound, including what appeared to be a training session for some 200 replacement workers at the St. Regis over the weekend. Fred Muir, a spokesman for the employers' council, is unable to say just how many of the nine member hotels were doing the same. "I can say that all of these hotels have some kind of contingency plan and have had them for many, many months," he says.

The union, meanwhile, is doing all it can to vanquish the specter of the recent failed grocery workers strike that had picketers on 24-hour-a-day strike lines for four and a half months, only to be forced to cave in to many management demands.

UNITE HERE officials say that the hotel struggle is different because of the union's level of preparation. Grocery workers were not positioned to harness the goodwill of community members who refused to cross picket lines, while the hotel workers have been building community support around the current negotiations for over a year. They have, in fact, been cultivating support among low-wage and union workers as part of a decade-long strategy. Los Angeles has the lowest rate of hotel unionization among the three affected cities, and has had to adapt by building community ties to add to its clout.

The low unionization rate makes L.A. ground zero in the national fight; unionized hotel workers here earn far less than those in cities like New York, where 85 percent of hotels are organized and a housekeeper makes around \$18 an hour to her L.A. counterpart's \$11. Labor observers predict that hotel management will try to leverage the advantage of a less unionized workforce.

One of the not-so-secret weapons in the union's community-support strategy is the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, (LAANE), a long-time HERE ally that works to build community support among low-wage workers all over Los Angeles. UNITE HERE concentrates on the traditional union battle fronts - rank-and-file support and negotiations.

LAANE Deputy Director Vivian Rothstein reels off a list of community support mobilizations: In one action, some 1,000 workers recently demonstrated outside the Hyatt and the Century Plaza hotels while community members went inside the lobby with signs that urged management to "Listen to your workers' voices." On Tuesday, a group of African-American elected officials and ministers exhorted constituents and congregants not to cross picket lines to take replacement jobs.

Churches, temples, and community groups are "adopting" individual hotels with pledges to join workers once a week on picket lines and collect funds to help supplement the \$200-a-week the union has promised picketing strikers. Over the last year, at least 45 congregations have pledged support to the workers at individual hotels, organized by Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice. Delegations have made clear that there will be no receptions, conferences, or bat or bar mitzvahs held at hotels with unresolved labor troubles.

Labor is also closing ranks. Mike Farrell, a vice president of the Screen Actors Guild, and John Connelly, president of the American Federation of Television and Radio Actors, joined the line-up of speakers at a UNITE HERE event near MacArthur Park last week. "It's disheartening once again to hear terms like 'lockout' and 'intimidation'," said Farrell, who vowed that "SAG will not have any meetings at any of the nine hotels involved until there is a contract." Connelly provoked a roar when he declared, "AFTRA members don't cross picket lines!"

Health care issues are a central sticking point in the negotiations. Muir of the hotel council says that employers are offering full coverage; the union holds that the hotel's proposal doesn't guarantee that employers will pay for increases.

But both sides refuse to budge on a seemingly obscure issue: contract length. Union negotiators in the three cities where a strike looms want a contract that expires in 2006 so it will align with hotel contract expirations in seven other cities, maximizing power for future negotiations. Employers are dead-set against it.

Union officials argue that it is the only way to proceed against operators who have consolidated to the point where five chains run most of the hotel market. Labor, says David Koff of UNITE HERE, has to change the rules of engagement to win any gains. "Manufacturing jobs were transformed from dead-end low-wage jobs through organizing and in the 1940s and '50s became the basis of expansion of the middle class."

At issue now in L.A., he says: "Can the burgeoning service sector become a path to the middle class?"

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