

## PRESENTATION

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Building a Union Culture: A Case Study of Hotel Workers

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## GREETINGS:

### Introduction

The particular case study of hotel workers which I am referring to today involves a rank-and-file intensive campaign for a new contract. A months-long campaign through which a new, albeit nascent culture appears.

(The case study itself is entitled: "Union Renewal and Precarious Employment: A Case Study of Hotel Workers," and is in the forthcoming publication edited by Leah Vosko entitled Precarious Employment: Understanding Labour Market Insecurity.) This presentation is a short overview with the goal of stimulating discussion.

With workers at the hotel having consolidated their most basic workplace rights in their first and second collective agreements, came a new sense of purpose, growing membership solidarity and eventually the strength to successfully confront the employer over such outstanding issues as workload.

The Union Local and Bargaining Unit:

Let me first give you a flavour of the union, the hotel and the employees.

In 2002, the Journey Hotel in Toronto employed between upwards of 50 full-time and part-time employees, most of whom were, and remain to this day, women who immigrated from the Phillipines.<sup>1</sup>

Room attendants were and remain the largest classification constituting approximately 50% of the bargaining unit.

Indeed, hotels are known for their pyramid occupational structures with the "front-of-the-

house" that interacts with guests, ranked higher, paid more and often excluded from the union. The "back-of-the-house" is usually ranked lower and paid less. This unequal ranking also relates to ones ability to speak English, to gender, to colour and to immigrant status. White males (and increasingly females) educated and with a more middle class demeanour tend to dominate the front desk in many hotels. The back-of-the-house tends to be immigrant women for whom English is a second language.

To shorten the story, HERE Local 75 came out of a trusteeship and the newly elected leadership together with rank-and-file activists turned this pyramid upside down: the back of the house, immigrant women of colour in the most numerous but poorest paid classification gradually moved into the leadership of the bargaining unit and made its workload issues the centre of the 2002 round of bargaining.

Whole new layers of members now, for the first time, began to participate in union decision-making.

This also involved a structural change. Not only were there new elections for local executive positions, but Action Committees were formed which enabled what are termed the natural leaders, as opposed to the old regime favourites and appointees, and rank-and-file activists to be included in decision making process. These Action Committees consist of formal horizontal structures in which any member can participate.

Membership Mobilization and Bargaining:

The Journey Hotel both paid its employees less than the major downtown hotels and compelled them to work more. RAs had to clean 18 rooms per day as opposed to 16 rooms per day in other hotels. As a new round of bargaining appeared on the horizon, one member seemed to capture a common view in the bargaining unit: "Either we win in this round of bargaining or we kept on cleaning 18 rooms instead of 16".

The core of the union strategy was to first negotiate with the big three downtown hotels – the Sheraton, the Hilton and the Delta Chelsea – plus the Royal York Hotel. The aim was to successfully conclude agreements with these hotels and to the extent possible gain equal wage increases, comparable benefit improvements, the same workload formula in terms of the number of rooms to be cleaned and common contract expiry dates. The later was important as central bargaining had broken down in an earlier round of bargaining and there was a consensus on the importance of regaining it. The challenge would then be to extend this pattern to the smaller hotels.

This strategy meant that bargaining units in the smaller hotels, such as the Journey, had to agree to wait for what was termed the "Big Three plus One" hotels to settle before they could engage in bargaining with their employer.

Bargaining with the major hotels dragged on for months. Frustrated, room cleaners at the Journey hotel began giving 2 uncleaned rooms back to the management every day.

Needless to say the employer went to the Labour Board and had these actions were deemed an illegal strike.

The result of these events was intensive membership participation in picketing on a daily basis. What began as picketing following the day shift (at 5:00 p.m.) was soon extended to morning "wake-up" pickets complete with banging pots and pans. As if this wasn't bad enough, from the perspective of the employer, the after shift picket was now joined by a huge 12' balloon rat.

I can't detail all of this here, but this picketing, led by immigrant Philippine women, continued for 5 solid months – twice a day, every day. Every issue of concern during this period was discussed on the picket line and in numerous, often hastily called, meetings.

The hotel became known as the RAT HOLE. Guests began to leave under these circumstances – indeed they were encouraged to move to another unionized hotel by the picketers.

Let me move to the result:

Finally, after 5 months of picketing and a one day strike, workers at the Journey Hotel voted to accept the new contract. Over the life of the new collective agreement they achieved:

- Full coverage under the jointly trustee benefit plan (union/management) paid by the employer (drug plan and card, life insurance, sick leave, basic dental coverage and topped up maternity leave;

- wage increases - for example housekeepers and room attendants, by far the largest classifications, saw staged in increases from \$10.95 per hour to \$14.25 in January 2006;

- following each 8 hour shift, overtime to be paid at time-and-one-half;

- workload reduction: rooms cleaned per day reduced to 17 and then to 16 over the life of the contract bringing them into sink with most other hotels;

- job security from sub-contracting (the employer could not layoff unionized staff as a result of contracting out any work "during the life of the collective agreement);

- expiry of collective agreement: The bargaining unit also won common expiry dates with other hotels organized by the same union. This was a major step toward regaining a master agreement with other hotels.

The long months of persistent activity, picketing, strike preparations, meetings, high moral and solidarity finally proved successful. The owners of the hotel recognized the situation and immediately fired the hotel manager, hiring a new manager in hopes of

improving relations with employees.

### New Solidarities - New Union Culture

At this point I would like to raise some key aspects of these workers fight for a better contract on their own union culture and consciousness.

First, it is next to impossible to participate in a 5 month struggle like these workers without either crumbling in the face of adversity or gaining in confidence, in your own collective strength as workers and in the belief of the justice of your cause;

Second, in this case there appeared to be a high degree of membership cohesion and a belief in the efficacy of being united. As one member said "it was only our unity that kept the employer from winning."

Third, Members also showed strong support for their union – it was not seen as a 3rd party. This view seemed to be enhanced by widespread participation in local and bargaining unit decision making – city-wide local meetings, Action Committee meetings, hurriedly called informal get togethers, immediate tasks and tactics, discussions on the picket line, etc.

Fourth, also evident was aspects of a new perspective by a number of the hotel workers involved. It is perhaps not necessary here to mention specifically what these workers thought of their own hotel management and owners – it should now be obvious, but interestingly there were also comments concerning the owners and managers at other hotels.

Comments such as "they are all the same," they "only look out for themselves" and "we have to join together with workers in other hotels if we are going to win."

Furthermore, workers that had been employed in hotels in other parts of the world expressed the view that hotel workers in that country had the same kinds of problems as "we do here" because employers there "stuck together" – "all they want is money," or "they don't care about us" or "they will pay us as little as they can get away with" were typical comments.

There was also a willingness expressed to help their fellow workers in other hotels "if they [employers] are going to stick together, so are we" said one.

### Conclusions:

In my view what we are seeing in the bargaining unit is a nascent culture of struggle. A developing union culture with new insights as to their own needs and aspirations versus that of hotel owners.

How permanent such views are will be interesting to follow. Whether such a union culture will continue and how it will evolve depends upon a number of factors.

Nonetheless, it does suggest that participation in prolonged and victorious campaigns or struggles brings about new perspectives on the world and new solidarities.

This case also raises issues such as: Is it possible that such solidarities can be maintained? If it is possible to maintain them how can this be achieved? Can such solidarities be deepened and spread to all members of the bargaining unit and the city-wide local? Can this culture of struggle for a new contract expand to a culture of organizing? What do our explorations of these questions mean for the new union UNITE/HERE?