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Hotel Workers Engage in Nonviolent Civil Disobedience

*Despite record profits, companies continue proposing permanent healthcare cuts.
Fed up workers escalate street pressure to fight back.*

(September 24, 2009, San Francisco, CA) – Over 1,700 hotel workers and community members protested in Union Square today. Ninety-two were arrested while participating in simultaneous nonviolent sit-ins demanding a fair contract in front of the Westin St. Francis and Grand Hyatt hotels today.

These sit-ins are a result of brewing anger amid negotiations for a new city-wide hotel contract affecting about 9,000 workers and 62 hotels – 32 of which are San Francisco’s largest and most luxurious hotels. These hotel workers, all members of Unite Here Local 2 include room cleaners, dishwashers, bellmen, cooks, and others who are the backbone of the city’s tourism economy.

Local 2 is in the midst of negotiations with the largest operators in San Francisco’s hotel industry, including the Starwood Corporation (operator of the Westin St. Francis, Palace, St. Regis, and W Hotels), Hyatt (Grand Hyatt and Hyatt Regency), and the Blackstone Group (Hilton).

San Francisco hotel workers are not alone in their fight. Along with local community support, Chicago hotel workers in the midst of simultaneous contract negotiations will be engaging in non-violent civil disobedience today as well.

As hotel contract negotiations continue, corporations are seeking permanent takeaways from hotel workers. Hotel corporations such as Hyatt, Blackstone and Starwood are using the economy as an excuse, despite having generated \$200 billion in profits over the past decade. Proposals made by these three corporations seek to increase workloads and shift huge costs onto workers who make an average \$30,000 a year. As recently as last month, Hyatt terminated 100 non-union hotel workers in Boston.

“I can either send my son to college or pay exorbitant health care premiums,” said Omni Hotel cook Linda Knighten, “If I don’t have low-cost, high quality healthcare through my employer, then who is going to pay for it? Will you?”

“We’ve sacrificed increases in wages and our pension for affordable and quality healthcare,” said Francisca Ramos a linen room attendant at the St. Francis. “We’re not going to give all that up so hotel companies can continue making profits at our expense.”

Frustrated by the negotiation progress thus far, hundreds of hotel workers and community supporters are fighting back by “taking the streets” in San Francisco. “We’re not afraid of speaking out, protesting, or even getting arrested to secure our healthcare benefits and jobs. These issues are too dear to us and our families,” said Guadalupe Chavez, a room cleaner at the Hilton.

Tourism is San Francisco’s biggest industry. Visitors generated \$528 million in tax revenue for the city in 2008. Hotel guests spent over \$5.3 billion last year. “As tourists come and go, we’re the ones who suffer from back pains by lifting heavy bedding all day. We’re the ones who struggle to raise our families in San Francisco. We’re the ones who experience the real realities of this economy. Not those hotel corporations who continue to make profits,” said Shuk Yee Wong, a room cleaner at the Marriott.

Together, hospitality workers throughout the country are fighting to rebuild the economy from the ground up, to transform poverty-wage jobs in the service sector — into solid, middle-class jobs with decent workloads and affordable healthcare.

UNITE HERE! Local 2 is the union of food service and hotel workers in San Francisco and San Mateo Counties. It represents about 12,000 members in the hospitality industry. For more information visit www.unitehere2.org or contact Riddhi Mehta at 707-695-2364 or rmehta@unitehere2.org.