

PEOPLE'S WORLD

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October 22, 2010

Hilton Hotel workers walk out in three cities

By Marilyn Bechtel



Hotel workers in three cities are giving “taxpayer outrage” a new meaning, as they strike Hilton hotels to protest the chain’s drive to increase work loads and take away benefits at the same time the Hilton’s owners, the giant private equity firm Blackstone Group, is getting away with \$180 million in federal bailout funds.

In San Francisco, some 850 Unite Here Local 2 members walked off the job at the Hilton Union Square, the second largest U.S. Hilton, in the early hours of Oct. 13. They were followed the next day by 1,500 Local 5 members who work at Honolulu’s Hilton Hawaiian Village - the largest facility in the worldwide chain. And on Oct. 16, they were joined by Chicago Hilton workers.

All are expected to return to their jobs early this week.

The workers say Hilton is pressing proposals that would increase family health care costs by hundreds of dollars a month, freeze pensions, cut staff and increase workloads.

Though room cleaners face a particularly onerous threat to hike their daily quota from 14 rooms to 20, which workers say would greatly increase their already high injury rate, they are far from the only group experiencing speedup.

On the picket line in San Francisco, Ingrid

Carp, a cook at the Hilton for 30 years, said she is now “doing the work of two or three people.” The hotel is seeking “some very nasty things” in the contract talks, she said, including combining jobs and curtailing seniority rights.

While Carp is still working full shifts, she said many wait staff and bussers have had their hours cut.

“We also want better pensions,” she said. “With hotel workers’ wages averaging around

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\$35,000 a year, and area living costs so high, who can afford to stay here in the Bay Area?”

The San Francisco and Chicago workers’ contracts expired in August 2009; the Hawaii workers’ contract expired June 30.

The strikers’ slogan, “Taxpayers Strike Hil-

Workers say Hilton is pressing proposals that would increase health care costs, freeze pensions, cut staff and increase workloads.

ton,” reflects the deal struck by Blackstone Group with the Federal Reserve, to accept just \$142 million in payment of a \$320 million debt. The Reserve had taken on the debt as part of a bailout deal, when it assumed loans to Hilton by Bear Stearns. Blackstone Group, one of the country’s largest private equity groups, acquired the Hilton in 2007, just before the 2008 financial crisis hit.

“I’m not out here just for me,” said Debbie Tabar, an accounting clerk at the Hilton Hawaiian Village. “I’m a taxpayer too and I’m twice as upset over what the Hilston has done. The taxpayer money that Hilton took was supposed to towards helping to create jobs, and not be used to hurt workers in this economy.”

Calling Hilton “just another predator of the recession,” Tabar added, “They line their pockets with taxpayer money and now they want even more from workers by using the economy as an excuse to eliminate jobs, increase our workload and lock us into a permanent recession.”

Unite Here!’s contention that the hotel industry is recovering from the economic crisis is

receiving confirmation from within the industry. Just last month, Jonathan Gray, Blackstone’s senior managing director and co-head of real estate, spoke of a “dramatic pickup, I think, faster than we and many people expected” and affecting room rates as well as occupancy. Also last month, Hilton CEO Chris Nassetta said that while the chain was in “good shape” before the debt deal, it is in “exceptionally good shape” now.

Nor are Hilton workers in the U.S. the only ones to feel the pain. Hilton and other hotel workers in Melbourne, Australia participated in a survey whose results were released earlier this month by the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU). Interviews with over 300 room cleaners at 23 of the city’s best hotels found that the overwhelmingly immigrant and female room cleaners are commonly speeded up and deprived of overtime pay when they can’t finish their quotas on time. Most of the workers suffered from work-related injuries.



Marilyn Bechtel writes for the People’s World.

Don’t shoot the rest of us

By PW Editorial Board

Some voters who see the world in a progressive way are taking a powder on the elections. They claim that President Obama raised their hopes as a candidate and let them down as a president.

They expected bold action on the economic crisis, but it didn’t happen. The stimulus didn’t go far enough. Ditto for health care reform. The scale and pace of change has been too slow - too many people are out of work, out of affordable health care, and out of their homes.

Meanwhile, bloodletting continues in Afghanistan, corporations are sitting on nearly \$2 trillion of idle money, profits are up, inequality is growing, and tax cuts for the wealthy are draining our treasury and driving up the national deficit.

There is truth here, but the question is: Is it enough to stay home?

No. Even with shortcomings, the stimulus and health care laws brought a measure of relief to millions of people. And that is important.

If the Republicans regain control of Congress,

that relief will vanish - along with hope for more far-reaching measures.

“Austerity” will become the watchword, pressures to weaken Social Security and Medicare will grow, and economic pain for working people is likely to get much worse.

A Republican victory at the polls on Nov. 2 would be the opening act of a horror show, culminating in the Republican right reclaiming full dominance of Congress and the White House in 2012.

To believe otherwise is naïve. Millions will feel that the promise of 2008 evaporated in the voting booths in 2010. The mobilization of people in the post-election period will become more difficult.

The elections in less than three weeks will mark a new phase in this process. No one with an iota of common sense will sit it out. Shoot yourself in the foot if you like, but don’t do it on Nov. 2 because the buckshot will hit the rest of us!

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African American leaders launch Illinois voter drive

By John Bachtell

African American community leaders have announced a drive to turn out 100,000 votes in Cook County for Gov. Pat Quinn. The campaign will emphasize what's at stake for the African American community in an election that is expected to be very close.

Quinn's opponent is Republican State Sen. Bill Brady from Bloomington. Brady has called for repeal of minimum wage laws, outlawing abortion in all cases and deep cuts in aid to education. As voters have learned how extreme his positions are, Brady has been sinking in the polls.

The African American vote is a key block that must be turned out for a Quinn victory. There are some 875,000 voters alone in Cook County who didn't vote in 2006, but came out excitedly to vote for Barack Obama in 2008.

"We know participation in the upcoming elections is vital to address issues that are destabilizing our communities," said Jay Travis, an organizer for Kenwood Oaklawn Community Organization. "There are political and economic factors at every level of government that are drastically limiting the funding needed to address the problems. That's why we need a governor who will immediately and consistently fight on these issues."

The voter mobilization by the Coalition to Protect African American Interests is expected to help generate support for all the statewide Democratic candidates including U.S. Senate candidate Alexi Giannoulias, who is also in a very tight race. The coalition's efforts come amid an uproar over reports of a voter suppression plot being organized by Giannoulias' Republican opponent, Rep. Mark Kirk.

Kirk was caught on tape telling supporters, "I



have now funded the largest voter integrity program in 15 years for the state of Illinois." Kirk boasted, "These are lawyers and other people that will be deployed in key, vulnerable precincts. For example, south and west side of Chicago, Rockford, Metro East, where the other side might be tempted to jiggle the numbers somewhat."

The areas mentioned are predominantly African American and the plan is reminiscent of past voter intimidation efforts where Republican lawyers and operatives challenged votes in African American and Latino and other heavily Democratic voting communities.

The voter suppression tactics also come as right-wing outfits like FreedomWorks, led by Karl Rove, and the Chamber of Commerce are flooding Illinois with money in the Senate, governor and key congressional races. Kirk will spend \$5.2 million in television ads over the final days of the campaign. The coalition outlined four pressing issues facing the African American community: job creation and workforce development; criminal justice system reform; comprehensive education reform; and health care funding.

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Why Nov. 2 matters

By Esther Moroze

On a recent trip to Georgia, a “right to work for less” state, a friend gave us a note from a waitress. She said, “We the lower class people wish for better waitress pay, better health care, day care, and more jobs.”

The waitress told us she works in a local low-budget restaurant. Tips are low because of hard times.

Did you know that the national minimum wage for waiters and waitresses is \$2.13 per hour? The assumption is that tips will bring their actual income to the standard federal minimum of \$7.50 per hour. And did you know that if a waiter or waitress does not make enough in tips in addition to the \$2.13 per hour to equal the \$7.50 per hour federal minimum, the employer is required to make up the difference?

Often the tips and wages do not add up to the \$7.50 minimum wage. However, if a waitress reports the truth to the boss for too many weeks in a row she gets fired because the boss does not want to make up the difference. Many waitresses are forced to make false reports of higher tips to keep their jobs. That means that they do not even make the minimum wage. On top of that the employer deducts taxes for the higher amount reported. So the workers pay taxes on money they haven't even made.

A stronger labor movement and the passage of the Employee Free Choice Act would prevent these abuses. That is why it is so important to vote on Nov. 2!

Urzúa, el minero 33

Por Martín Granovsky

Se paró frente al presidente Sebastián Piñera y, de jefe a jefe, le dijo: “Espero que esto nunca vuelva a ocurrir”. Y también: “Estoy orgulloso de vivir en este país”.

Después, Luis Urzúa abrazó muy fuerte a su hijo. Terminó de pie cantando ese himno que pone a Chile como “tumba de los libres” o como “asilo contra la opresión”.

Su padre era dirigente sindical del Partido Comunista. Está desaparecido desde el comienzo de la dictadura de Augusto Pinochet, que el 11 de septiembre de 1973 derrocó a Salvador Allende.

Su padrastro, Benito Tapia, era dirigente sindical de los mineros del cobre y miembro del Comité Central de las Juventudes Socialistas. En octubre de 1973 lo asesinaron en el cementerio de Copiapó y lo enterraron en una fosa común sin ataúd junto a dos compañeros. Fue una de las víctimas de la Caravana de la Muerte, el escuadrón de exterminio que partió de Santiago en helicóptero al mando del general Sergio Arellano Stark y fue matando selectivamente a dirigentes sociales y funcionarios de Allende. Tapia tenía 32 años. Luis Urzúa, 17.

Luis, a quien los asesores de la NASA caracterizaron como “un líder natural”, tiene 54 años y es minero desde 1979. Era el más experimentado de los 33 mineros que quedaron bajo

tierra, fue quien los organizó desde el derrumbe y quien resolvió, como lo narró con elegancia a Piñera, “administrar las provisiones”. También contó que lo primero que se preguntaron, cuando las piedras taparon el fondo de socavón, fue qué habría pasado con los demás. Se habían salvado, pero ellos lo ignoraban. Estaban bajo un mar de polvo que tardó tres horas en disiparse.

Según la OIT, que encabeza el chileno Juan Somavía, existe constancia de que más de dos millones de personas mueren por año en el mundo por causa directa de sus condiciones de empleo o por enfermedades contraídas en él. Nadie puede decir seriamente que la simple exposición de un problema a mil millones de personas a la vez, en transmisión desde Copiapó, dejará ese problema resuelto. Pero si la política y la acción sindical se sumaran con eficacia a la exposición pública contarían a su favor con un dato evidente: el rescate que terminó anoche hizo más visible para el mundo cómo es la vida de un minero y qué riesgos corre cuando aumenta la desproporción entre la rentabilidad empresarial y la seguridad de los trabajadores.

Por eso Luis Urzúa, el minero 33, el último del grupo que dejó el socavón, el último al que le gritaron “Chichichi/lelele/ Minerosdechile”, se merece un buen pisco.

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