
ORGANIZING FOR BETTER WORKING CONDITIONS AND WAGES: THE UNITE HERE! HOTEL WORKERS RISING CAMPAIGN

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George Chan, a 50-year-old Houseman at the unionized Globe Hotel Vancouver, emigrated to Vancouver from Fujian, China. In China, he was the manager of a large department store. He reflects that because of challenges mastering the English language that in Vancouver, “No going to hire you as manager.” When asked about his impression of the union at his hotel, he replied, “How you say. In the union; the union protects; the boss not able to fire you. Here you never make mistake, the boss cannot fire you [...] and the payments is [...] the union will argue, bargain with the boss and there will be a little higher.”

This paper examines the strategies and success of the UNITE HERE! union in its ongoing *Hotel Workers Rising!: Lifting One Another Above the Poverty Line* campaign in the United States and Canada. This unique campaign has generated national attention in both countries, and highlighted how changes in corporate policies aimed at pleasing the consumer – such as the shift to ‘heavenly’ beds – has had deleterious consequences for Room Attendants. The campaign has generated national media attention and attracted the support of celebrities, such as Danny Glover, and national political figures, including John Edwards. This campaign has utilized grassroots organizing bargaining and organizing methods and certainly been invigorating, but what do early assessments tell us about the success of this strategy, challenges in organizing hotel workers, and what are some policy and theoretical lessons? The current success and challenges of the *Hotel Workers Rising* campaign reflect the broader challenges and opportunities of the broader *Change to Win* coalition and union organizing of the service sector, more generally.

UNIONIZING HOTEL WORKERS MATTERS

First, why should we care about the union status of hotel workers? My previous research involved in-depth interviews with 77 hotel workers working

in the same jobs for the same two multinational hotel chains in downtown Seattle and Vancouver². Comparing the experiences of these workers revealed that unionized hotel workers enjoyed much greater job security, better benefits, and qualitatively better working conditions (see Zuberi, 2006).

Many employees at the unionized hotel branches studied in both cities were positive about working in a union job and described the union benefits as a safety net or in terms of concrete programs and benefits: Kendra Smith, an African-American Laundry Attendant at the unionized Hotel Deluxe Seattle³, said that the union helped her out when she was hurt in a serious accident in the previous year. She couldn't work and the union covered a percentage of lost wages for this period, which made an enormous difference for her and her children.

Yes, they did. They come through with that. Other than disciplinary actions, I've never had any, I don't have anything to do with the union, unless if I got injured or maternity, they would come in and kick in of the funds. But I think we need to keep them. We definitely need to keep them.

Other unionized workers also focused on the benefits and services provided by the union. For example, James Allen, a 45-year-old African-American works as a Banquet Server, at the unionized Hotel Deluxe Seattle. He said the union provided:

The benefits, you know, you get the free food, uniforms cleaned for free, plus you get like metro/bus pass they give you like little voucher type things so you get metro/bus whatever you need. Your transportation. And I think that for people who's handicapped, they have the extra bus come here and pick them up and take them home.

The services provide important advantages, but the main benefit of union membership is perceived to be the job security afforded to unionized employees and the union's advocacy for better benefits, wages and working conditions for the workers. The Maintenance Engineers were unionized by a skill-specific union. Joey Harrison, a Maintenance Engineer described it as:

There are some old guys that are just real union, union, union and then there's a lot of new guys that just don't care if we're union or not. But if we weren't union, they could say, we don't need you anymore. We have a kind of strength that we can, if we hold together we can keep our jobs. So it's kind, of in that sense, nice. And higher wages, we have the highest wages in Seattle as [Maintenance] Engineers.

In Seattle, not only did the unionized hotel workers earn somewhat more than their non-unionized counterparts, they also did not lose benefits as easily even during low-season hours cuts.

In Vancouver, many hotel workers mentioned the increased job security afforded unionized workers. For example, Sven Johannsen, a 53-year-old immigrant from Norway who works at the Globe Hotel Vancouver said:

I truly believe in the union [...] because [the] new managers we get. They really bug me because they come in and they think they know the world and they somehow, they don't like older people in the service industry and the first thing they try is to fire them. (Zuberi, 2006: 58)

Others, like Gee Young Chow, a 51-year-old Maintenance Engineer at the Globe Hotel Vancouver, focused on the union's role in settling grievances with management.

Greater job security, better benefits, and higher wages were all described as benefits of unionization. On the other hand, some of the lower seniority Room Attendants and other unionized workers complained about dues, particularly having to pay the same amount of dues when their hours were cut or they were temporarily laid off (Zuberi, 2006). Overall, the data collected on unionization in my research supported the findings of other research on hotel workers in different locations across North America (see Adler and Adler, 2004; Tufts, 2006a).

At the same time, the research also pointed to broader social and political consequences resulting from high rates of union density. These included labour code protections that helped all workers in the province of British Columbia, union or non-union. These protections include the right not to be fired from your job without just cause, two weeks paid vacation guaranteed after 1 year of employment, and 1 year paid maternity leave. Beyond the labour code, unions in British Columbia continue to fight for the kinds of progressive social safety net and against privatization of the health care system and other public services (currently the largest union sector of all). They act as a critical counter-weight to the growing power of corporate lobbyists and others representing the interests of entrenched elites and wealthy individuals as well as grassroots social conservatives at all levels of the political system - from the local, state/provincial, federal, and global.

The findings of this research also suggest that union organizing rule differences explain the divergence of union coverage over the past thirty-five years between the United States and Canada, in contrast to the contention of Seymour Martin Lipset and Noah Meltz (2004) that U.S. exceptionalism (Lipset, 1996) make the 1950 to 1970 period where the countries shared similar relatively high rates of unionization an unusual period in U.S. history. First their own

evidence suggests that workers in the U.S. express more positive views of unions than Canadians (Lipset and Meltz, 2004). Focused on politics and differences in political structure, they ignore the interaction of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) rules that constrain organizing and the dramatic shift to the service sector in both countries. In Canadian provinces, like British Columbia, where – at least until very recently⁴ – workers can have a union represent them within ten days of a majority signing union cards, they have been able to stem the negative consequences of a dramatically shifting economy in terms of union coverage. In the US, the shifts away from manufacturing and spatially to the suburbs and Southwest, in interaction with NLRB and so-called ‘Right to Work’, state level legislation has precipitated the rapid decline of union coverage of the labour force with severe consequences for unionized and non-unionized workers alike⁵.

Contrasting policy, poverty, and inequality trajectories in the United States, compared to Canada over this period, reveals the consequences of sharp declines in union coverage of the labour force. Canadian union organizing rules are similar to ‘card check’ procedures in the US, cases where even in the US, if the majority of workers want to unionize, they can generally be successfully organized. Yet beyond promoting the occasional ‘card check’ through organizing politically or through the influence of union pension funds, a major national coalition needs to continue the fight to replace the cumbersome and undemocratic NLRB procedures with ‘card check’ union organizing rules for all workplaces. Communicating the importance of reforming union organizing rules to rank and file members and holding every politicians feet to the fire by making the ‘card check’ type reform the litmus test for any union support is the critical step to bringing union density back to at least 35% in the United States and ending working poverty in the richest country in the world.

The low rates of unionization of the service sector – lower in the United States than Canada, but low in both countries – threaten to spell the end of unions in both countries. “Today, just 2 million manufacturing workers [in the United States] belong to unions. That compares with more than 3 million workers in service and retail unions, and more than 7 million in public sector unions.” (Greenhouse, 2006). At the same time, governments at the local, provincial and state, as well as federal level, continue to privatize and reduce public sector employment (see Cohen, 2006). While more service sector workers total are currently unionized than manufacturing workers in the US, they represent a much smaller percentage of the private service sector, which over the past forty years has rapidly become the predominant sector of the US and Canadian economies, with little hope of potential reversal.

The service sector is the new economy, but it does not have to necessarily be more unequal than a manufacturing-based economy. Unions are – again – the key factor in re-creating a large middle-class, one of the cornerstones of a vibrant

democracy. The massive expansion of the service sector has created a new poverty in the United States and Canada: the working poor. The working poor are a much larger group than most imagine. Most of the working poor survive at, or near, the poverty line, only a paycheck away from possible material hardship. Many public assistance recipients are actually somewhat better off than working poor, cobbling together resources from multiple sources trying to make ends meet (Edin and Lein, 1997). For all the attention to the welfare reform, very little academic or public attention noticed the massive attrition of the minimum wage – frozen at a shameful \$5.15 per hour in the United States.

As part of the service sector, hotels employ many kinds of service sector employees that cannot be outsourced⁶. At the same time, downtown hotels represent some of the most profitable branches of multinational hotel chains (Applebaum, Dresser, and Hatton, 2003). Most hotel employees are not students working part-time to earn some extra cash, but many are immigrants to the United States and Canada struggling to raise their families and join the middle-class. In hotels, back-of-the-house employees, particularly Room Attendants, make up the largest group of employees. Unionizing these employees across the United States and Canada – particularly in large urban centres – has the potential to create a critical new rung in the service sector job ladder: the secure living wage service sector job.

UNITE HERE! HOTEL WORKERS RISING

The UNITE and HERE unions merged after my fieldwork for *Differences That Matter* was completed, and subsequently launched an exciting campaign called *Hotel Workers Rising: Lifting One Another Out of Poverty*. How successful has UNITE HERE! been so far in organizing urban, suburban, and rural hotel employees through this unique high profile campaign? In some ways, it depends how success is defined. Has it pushed hotels to sign contracts with the union? In some places, yes. For example, the campaign appears to be a success in San Francisco and Chicago.

The UNITE HERE! Hotel Workers Rising campaign has clearly resulted in some concrete victories, including the signing of non-renewed collective agreements. According to a September 15, 2006 press release on the UNITE HERE! website:

After almost two years of working without a contract, San Francisco hotel workers concluded a new contract this week with the Multi-Employer Group (MEG), that encompasses five years, three years forward and two years back. The contract grants higher wages, better pensions and full healthcare benefits to more than 4,200 members of UNITE HERE Local 2 [...] Most importantly, the contract

includes card check for all future hotels by all the MEG employers in San Francisco and in all of San Mateo County [...]

This kind of success has not been limited to progressive San Francisco:

In Chicago, UNITE HERE Local 1 announced a tentative agreement with Starwood covering over 900 workers at five hotels... Another 11 Chicago properties have signed ‘me-too’ agreements with the union. A ‘me-too’ agreement means the hotels will adopt the same terms negotiated for the Starwood- managed properties.
<http://www.unitehere.org/frontpagedetail.asp?ID=174> accessed Sept. 27, 2006).

At the same time, an incredible disparity exists between metropolitan regions in the success of UNITE-HERE, in terms of organized hotels. For example, while 39 hotels are unionized in the Vancouver region, only 9 are in the similar size city of Seattle and 3 in nearby Portland. While 72 hotels are unionized in the San Francisco region, only 3 are in Miami (See Table 1). Huge variations exist even within the same region. For example, the Baltimore region has only two hotels listed as unionized by UNITE HERE! In contrast, the Washington DC region – a mere one hour driving distance away – has 28 unionized hotels. The following table outlines the numbers of unionized hotels in specific U.S. and Canadian cities⁷.

Table 1:
 Number of UNITE-HERE Unionized Hotels by Metropolitan Region

Metropolitan Region	Number of UNITE-HERE Unionized Hotels
Atlanta	1
Baltimore	2
Boston	18
Chicago	46
Las Vegas	32
Los Angeles	27
Minneapolis-St. Paul	18
New York	114
Phoenix	1
Pittsburgh	6
San Francisco	72
Seattle	9
Toronto	38
Vancouver	39
Washington DC	28

Source: <http://www.unitehere.org/> accessed September 27, 2006

In most cities, UNITE HERE!, or other unions involved in organizing hotel workers, do not represent close to the majority of hotels. Based on the metropolitan populations of this group, only Las Vegas, Washington DC, Toronto, and Vancouver, can really be considered to have somewhat high union density. Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis-St. Paul, New York are medium density. Boston, Pittsburgh, and Seattle are somewhat low density, and Atlanta, Baltimore, and Phoenix very low density. Additionally, there are disparities between many high union density cities and lower union density in nearby edge cities and suburbs in the same region. This suggests much progress remains to be made in terms of organizing new hotels in many regions across the United States and Canada.

BARRIERS TO ORGANIZING HOTEL WORKERS

What kinds of barriers do unions like UNITE HERE face when organizing hotel workers? One major barrier is the perception that hotel work is not difficult nor dangerous. UNITE HERE! has attempted to counter the impression, by describing the Tayloristic (1919) work routines of many back of the house hotel employees and particularly by emphasizing increasing rates of employee injury. For example, they prominently display the report *Creating Luxury, Enduring Pain: How Hotel Work is Hurting Housekeepers*.

This report makes clear that 'heavenly beds' may be luxurious for the hotel guest, they have increased back injuries as a result of heavier mattresses. The increased number of sheets also require additional time to make up beds, making a tight 16 rooms in an 8 hour shift even more stressful. It also links injuries among hotel workers, particularly cleaners due to overexertion, strain, chemical exposure, etc... (<http://www.unitehere.org/> accessed September 27, 2006).⁸ The statistics on injuries are shocking. Room Attendant, Kendra Smith at the Hotel Deluxe Seattle commented on the strains of the job and potential negative health consequences:

So I don't want to be at the hotel for the next five years. That's not something I want to do. It's not good for the body, standing on concrete all day. And I'm constantly hurting, you get tendentious, you get carpel tunnel, bad back, I don't want to do that. I'm too young to have a torn up body.

As much of the cleaning work is completed by women, unions must also fight public perceptions that these hotel jobs are simply providing 'supplemental' incomes to households already enjoying family wage earnings from male breadwinners.

A second set of barriers relate to the unique challenges of organizing workplaces with diverse workforces - in terms of ethnic backgrounds and

immigration statuses. Many hotel workers are also visible minority women, and the gender dimension adds an additional barrier in societies where work completed primarily by women continues to be undervalued. In large urban centres like New York and Toronto, many of these workplaces do indeed have workforces that resemble the United Nations General Assembly in terms of diversity⁹. The President of the Seattle Local of the hotel union described their union as having “ [...a]lot of East African, Eritreans, Zimbabwe, all countries represented. We also have Pakistanis, Indians, Middle Easterners, Mexicans, South Americans, Italians, etc.”

While in some ways, it may seem extraordinarily challenging to organize workplaces with undocumented Latino workers, for example, Ruth Milkman (2000) points out, “despite the widespread belief that such workers are extremely difficult to organize, they have been at the core of the L.A. labor movement’s revival.” Undocumented Latinos and other vulnerable and extremely diverse employee workforces have historically been successfully organized in many instances, as witnessed by success of the ‘Justice for Janitors’ movement, as well (see Delgado, 2003). At the same time, there is no doubt language and communication issues are challenges union organizers must grapple with as they attempt to organize many service sector workplaces.

A third barrier is management opposition to successfully unionizing hotels. Management opposition, and the demonstrated willingness of managers to subvert organizing campaigns with many resources available at their disposal remains a particularly trenchant challenge in the United States, where the NLRB organizing procedures allow management many opportunities to attempt to block the successful unionizing of a hotel or other worksite. In Canada, managers in Toronto and Vancouver resort to desperate measures, including paying higher hourly wages than unionized hotels (see Zuberi, 2006; Tufts, 2006) to dissuade hotel unionization.

In my research, I found that managers¹⁰ at non-unionized hotels tended to vehemently oppose unionization, whereas managers at unionized hotels tended to have a somewhat more balanced view of the benefits and costs (with feeling like their hands are tied in disciplining workers as one of the most frequent complaints). For example, the General Manager at the unionized Hotel Deluxe Seattle said:

In some ways, the union provides some advantages. Being a union hotel allows us to attract people who really want to work here. For example we get real professionals in banquet services, and the hotel can benefit from their skill levels.

The Human Resources Director of the Hotel Deluxe Seattle echoed a similar sentiment:

A union hotel has a much more professional workforce. The people who work in a unionized environment are very good at their jobs because it is their life blood. In non-union hotels, much of the workforce is there as a transitional stop to somewhere else. In a union hotel, this is where the employee wants to be.

This director also surprisingly disagreed with the view that it is harder to dismiss poor workers from a unionized job; he said, “[I] don't necessarily agree with the idea that it is harder to dismiss a poor worker in a union hotel. As long as the management documents progressively and consistently, then you can get poor workers.” The General Manager of the Hotel Deluxe Seattle also saw a positive aspect to the collective agreement contract language on employee discipline and dismissal:

From a management perspective, the union contract specifies a really rigid framework, which in some ways makes our job simpler. We simply have to follow the contract language.

Of course, not all comments from these managers were positive. Some complained about when “the union starts acting up and rabble rouses”, and felt that it can be “difficult to get rid of problem associates.” Yet overall, those managers in unionized hotels were rather positive. For example, the Chief Housekeeper at the unionized Hotel Deluxe Seattle said:

Personally I have to say that I think working in a union house keeps the managers good. Managers can't do really outrageous things or they will be called to account for it real quick. I wonder about Managers who complain a lot about the union, I wonder what is wrong with their leadership style.

With serious employee infractions like stealing or drinking on the job, employees can be dismissed quite easily, union or non-union. Additional research should be carried out at unionized hotels in order to communicate some of the potential benefits of unionization to hotel management in terms of professionalization of the workforce, lower training, inspection and theft-recovery costs, and perhaps even a more skilled workforce if the union helps with training and skill development following the example of the unique UNITE-HERE Local in Las Vegas (Meyerson, 2004).

The UNITE-HERE Locals must build capacity to attempt more organizing campaigns at non-unionized hotels, particularly where there is employee discontentment and a desire to unionize. At the non-union Globe Hotel Seattle,

the workers overwhelmingly spoke of a desire for their workplace to be unionized. Michael Smith, a 26-year-old painter and maintenance engineer at the non-unionized Globe Hotel Seattle emphasized, like many others, the importance of the perceived benefits of union representation in terms of job security: “Well, representation, you know with, you don't just get to walk in on Monday and be fired for no reason. You know, you have a little bit of recourse.”

As a result of recent mass firings and demotions, even the hourly supervisors said they would like to see their hotel unionized. Sheila Chang, a 47-year-old immigrant from China works as an hourly ‘Public Space Supervisor’ at the non-unionized Globe Hotel Seattle. She explained that she would like the workplace to be unionized because, “Yea, because I think, maybe I don't know because our hotel don't have a union, but I just heard about the union always stand by the employees side and then talk with owner to get more benefits for the employee.” At this non-unionized hotel, many workers expressed a strong desire to see their workplace unionized. For example, Kin Wa Lee, a 58-year-old immigrant from Vietnam, works as an hourly inspector and supervisor at the Globe Hotel Seattle. She said:

You know sometimes union take care of people, sometimes if you have mistake, little mistake, you need the protection. Sometimes, employees have little mistakes but no have union, no protections. Get in trouble. But I think if I have company, I have the union. It's fair. It's fair. Sometimes employees they need protection, but no have union. (Zuberi, 2006: 59)

At the time of my interviews, the local hotel union had not even attempted to organize a new hotel in several years – rather they were concerned with stemming the ongoing flow of hotel de-certifications and focusing on future ‘card check’ opportunities, where they felt they had a much higher chance of succeeding (Zuberi, 2006). By joining forces with the UNITE HERE! union and the *Change to Win* coalition, perhaps more resources now exist to attempt to organize hotels like the Globe Hotel Seattle despite the chance of failure. If so, they could succeed with the help of respected insider employees like Florence McDaniels, a 37-year-old immigrant from Taiwan who works as a mini-bar attendant at the non-unionized Globe Hotel Seattle. She said she wished to see her current workplace unionized because: “Yea, I think the employees do need some representative to, who can speak fluently and communicate with the employer. It can be healthy thing, doesn't mean always fighting. Sometimes it's just a wish of employees and can make environment better that they would like to stay.”

So what are some of the implications of these findings? In terms of organizing strategies, several non-mutually exclusive possibilities emerge as potentially successful options for UNITE HERE!. The first is democratic

grassroots community organizing; UNITE-HERE! should continue to partner with local community organizations to support living wage and other labor related social justice campaigns. In the UK, in LA, in cases across the US Southwest, these grassroots campaigns contain the promise of future organizing, and build the kinds of political coalitions that can and achieve benefits for all workers.

UNITE HERE! should also continue to develop the 'service' model of unionizing. While job security, better benefits and pay can be motivating for many non-unionized hotel workers, many unionized hotel workers discussed the union in terms of concrete benefits. If the union provides subsidized bus passes, free English language courses, picnics, skills training, they can help keep current union hotels organized and help stem the crippling de-certifications that have plagued unions particularly in the U.S. since the early '80s and Reagan's war against labor. The UNITE HERE! local in Las Vegas provides an excellent example of the possibility of service-sector unionism. By training workers with the specialized skills required for their jobs, they benefit the large casinos and hotels while maintaining high levels of union coverage of the workforce. The next recommendation can flow from the above regulation: unions should allow any worker to join, even if they currently do not work in a workplace with a collective agreement (Freeman, 2004).

CONCLUSION

The benefits of unionization in terms of job security and benefits for hotel workers are clear. Yet, the unionizing of hotel workers can also be viewed as a prism of the success and challenges around unionizing a much higher percentage of service-sector workers in the United States and Canada. With the dramatic and non-reversing shift of the economy in both countries to the service sector, increasing the percentage of service-sector unionized workers is critical for reducing working poverty and creating secure living wage jobs that are the bedrock of middle-class society and healthy dynamic democracies. This paper examined some of the successes and challenges to organizing hotel workers facing the ongoing UNITE-HERE! *Hotel Workers Rising* campaign.¹¹ Organizing new hotels will ultimately be the measure of success for UNITE-HERE and more broadly *Change to Win* coalition as they aim to change unionism in light of the massive shifts in the economy in the United States and Canada.

NOTES

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1. Dan Zuberi is author of: *Differences That Matter: Social Policy and the Working Poor in the United States and Canada* (Cornell University Press/ILR Press, 2006).
 2. The direct quotes from hotel workers in this article are based on a re-analysis of some of the interview data collected during the *Differences That Matter* study.

3. All names of workers and hotels are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the workers' interviewed.
4. Recent restrictions in British Columbia have required elections and made it more difficult to unionize a workplace (see Aguiar 2006 and Cohen 2006).
5. Legislation - called the Employee Free Choice Act - recently passed the U.S. House of Representatives that would change these rules to a card check system in the United States. This legislation is currently being debated in the U.S. Senate, but even if passed, U.S. President Bush has promised to veto it.
6. Although that of course does not mean some hotels do not outsource many jobs, such as laundry services. In the UK, one hotel even outsourced their cleaning staff. Yet most hotels employ housekeepers, house attendants, guest service staff, and food service staff directly and in-house.
7. Other unions, such as the CAW, represent hotel workers in some cities, but UNITE-HERE! represents the most hotel workers in the United States and Canada.
8. The website also includes a union hotel guide, lists of hotels to boycott, for example because workers have authorized a strike, and links to IMMEX to help conference planners to avoid labour disputes.
9. In Toronto, the diversity of the workforce was highlighted as part of the campaign to re-frame the hotel workers in light of the city's image as highly culturally diverse city (see Tufts, 2006b).
10. Management interviews were not tape-recorded, so the following quotes are from detailed notes transcribed immediately after the interviews.
11. The campaign's use of celebrities may be a creative tool to motivate workers. If building on Sherman's (2005, 2007) research on hotel workers, which suggests that workers derive status from their guests, perhaps the celebrity endorsements go beyond getting national media coverage.

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