Echoes of the 1930s: Today’s Hotel Workers Lead the Struggle to ‘Upgrade’ the Service Economy

Sedef Arat-Koc, Aparna Sundar and Bryan Evans

The organizing struggles of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in the 1930s and 1940s contributed significantly to transforming work and life for industrial workers and their communities by creating the means to bargain for better wages and working conditions. Now, in the first decade of the 21st century, North American hotel workers can honourably make a claim to being the legitimate heirs of this history as they struggle to transform the quality of work and life in the service economy.

The hotel workers are represented by UNITE-HERE which launched the ‘Hotel Workers Rising’ campaign in December 2005 with the active and very public support of actor Danny Glover who linked the necessity for supporting the struggles of low wage workers. And it is more than low wages at the centre of this struggle. The intersection of race and class in the hotel industry is anything but ambiguous. The higher-end front-line positions which also allow for career progress are invariably staffed by white workers. The back-room, largely dead-end positions are reserved for black workers and immigrants. The statistics make clear the racialization of hotel work, where fully seventy per cent (70%) of hotel workers are immigrants and fifty-two per cent (52%) are visible minority. The median wage for Toronto hotel workers – union and non-union – is $26,000 per year. Not exactly a princely sum in one of Canada’s most expensive cities. Median hourly wages run from $10.48 to $11.22, depending on the type of job. The union factor is significant as unionized workers average $14/hour – a differential approaching 40 per cent! Working conditions are a 21st century Dickens tale characterized by intensification of work, a lack of job control and consequently, soaring injury rates. Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSD’s) are amongst the highest in any industrial sector as a result of the volume of heavy lifting required, especially among hotel housekeepers. One massive study of 40,000 hotel employees found that injury rates were increasing as hotels added heavier beds and room amenities such as treadmills.

The Hotel Workers Rising campaign is creative and enthusiastic. Its actions and events are heavily attended by not only hotel workers, but their families and community allies. It isn’t so much
It isn’t so much a campaign as a social movement that looks and feels like it’s not only central but on the winning side of change.