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Union Makes Its Bed

On September 29 in San Francisco, 4,000 hotel employees--all members of the newly merged union UNITE HERE--walked out on strike or were locked out of their workplaces after their contracts expire

Peter Dreier and Kelly Candaele October 7, 2004 | This article appeared in the October 25, 2004 edition of The Nation.

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On September 29 in San Francisco, 4,000 hotel employees--all members of the newly merged union UNITE HERE--walked out on strike or were locked out of their workplaces after their contracts expired. Other lockouts or strikes are expected shortly in Los Angeles and Washington, DC. Critical of the labor movement's fragmentation and weakness in the face of increasing corporate concentration, HERE's John Wilhelm and UNITE's Bruce Raynor, the two leaders who orchestrated the merger of their unions in July, are seeking to provide a model of what a stronger, more militant union can accomplish. This strike is the first major test of their strategy.

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The decentralized structure of most national unions is a disadvantage in a world of gigantic national and international corporations. Earlier this year, for example, 60,000 United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union members in Southern California ended a five-month strike against three national retail food chains, forced to accept what many viewed as an unfavorable deal. The local unions were successful at keeping their members and customers out of the Los Angeles-area stores but failed to hurt the stores' business elsewhere.

In San Francisco, UNITE HERE is resisting the hotels' demands to remove health coverage for more than 1,000 workers. It is also battling to keep fully funded pensions and to reduce heavy workloads. But the ongoing conflict is also about changing the balance of power between the union and employers. The union locals in San Francisco, LA and DC want their contracts to expire on the same timetable as those of locals in New York, Boston, Chicago, Honolulu and Toronto, which are set to bargain again in 2006. The locals will be in a far stronger position if they can negotiate their contracts with the national hotel chains simultaneously. The hotel chains, of course, want to keep the union at a strategic disadvantage with staggered contracts.

Today, few hotels are locally owned. The four largest companies--Marriott, Hilton, Starwood and Hyatt--account for 22 percent of total room sales in the industry nationwide. The union argues that there is no good reason why workers making beds and cleaning toilets in Los Angeles should make \$11.02 an hour while their San Francisco counterparts make \$15.09 an hour at the same chain. According to Maria Elena Durazo, president of UNITE HERE's Local 11 in Los Angeles, "We can't take on

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national corporations hotel by hotel, city by city, area by area."

UNITE HERE has spent several years preparing its members for this conflict. It patiently developed rank-and-file leadership cadres at each hotel, educated them about tourism industry economics and brought union

workers from other cities to Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington to express their solidarity.

Margarita Rubio, one of those rank-and-file workers, is not afraid of this fight. A housekeeper at the Regent Beverly Wilshire in LA, she made her way to California in 1981, fleeing what she calls "persecution from both sides" during the Salvadoran revolution. Rubio, a single mother, says she is "willing to sacrifice everything so that my daughter can go to college." Local 11 members recently voted by an 83 percent margin to authorize a strike.

The current three-city strategy is part of a bold plan by a new generation of labor leaders to mobilize their members through political action, community coalition-building and street protests. UNITE HERE's membership is composed largely of immigrants who are not afraid to struggle for a broad view of "citizenship" that includes workplace rights.

Wilhelm—who is often talked about as a possible successor to John Sweeney as AFL-CIO president—wants to see more consolidation of unions and more union resources spent on organizing new workers. The outcome of his high-stakes strategy may determine whether he can project himself as someone who can re-energize a diminished labor movement, which now represents only 13 percent of the nation's workforce.

To win this strike, it won't be sufficient for the workers simply to withhold their labor. The hotels can hire strikebreakers. The union is working to get customers to cancel reservations at targeted hotels because of concerns about poor service, fear of crossing a picket line or solidarity with the cause of helping low-wage workers. The national union and its local affiliates have worked for several years to forge alliances with a wide variety of religious, social justice and community groups, many of which have already canceled meetings and conferences, as have a number of trade associations and businesses.

Many labor experts view strikes as a last resort, an act of desperation after negotiations and compromises have failed. But UNITE HERE leaders know that powerful business and political forces rarely make significant concessions willingly. After being battered by plant closings, declining membership and political defeats, the American labor movement recognizes that if it does not grow, it will wither away. Unions must re-learn how to battle effectively. The new members and idealistic organizers who have flocked to UNITE HERE and other activist unions signed up for a good fight. They, and their religious and community allies, have now got one.

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