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1985 NEW YORK HOTEL STRIKE

by Ramon Castellblanch

Last June, the New York hotel workers showed that the national anti-union drive could be stopped as it attempted to make inroads on a labor stronghold. The traditional methods of winning strikes, labor solidarity and political support, proved more than a match for the multi-national corporations that confronted them.

Employers Threaten "Givebacks"--The New York hotel workers struck in response to the hotel owners' attempt to impose "givebacks" as employers had done in other industries. The normal rules of labor relations did not dictate a confrontation in the New York hotels. The local hotel industry is not in financial difficulty. The hotels have had enough money for nearly 50 years to settle with their unions without a strike. This year was no exception. Even at their \$100-plus room rates, New York's hotels had an 80% occupancy rate in 1984, whereas 60% is generally considered to be a "breakeven" point. Employment in the industry was up 24% over the past seven years. Regardless, some of the multinational corporations involved in the hotel industry wanted union concessions. Hilton and Sheraton corporations in particular set the owners' plans

Three of the hotels' "give-back" demands illustrate their approach to bargaining. First, they wanted to impose a two-tier wage structure paying new workers less than current workers. This would expose older workers to discriminatory harassment, as it would be in the owners' interest to get rid of them. Second, the hotels demanded that workers start paying for health coverage out of their own pockets. Health insurance, a traditional union benefit, had always been provided free to the workers and, in fact, the cost of insurance to employers had been leveling off. Finally, the owners wanted to deny union protection to lower management positions, although these jobs had always been filled by members of the union. The hotels' bargaining position was inspired by their desire to hit hotel workers when they might be at their weakest, and not by financial hardship.

Labor Solidarity--Labor used some of its most potent weapons to meet the multinationals' challenge. Labor solidarity began with all AFL-CIO unions in the hotels being united under one contract with one expiration date. The Hotel Employees & Restaurant Employees (HERE), Operating Engineers, Service Employees, Oilers, Office Employees, Upholstery, and Carpenters unions all struck together. Their picket lines were honored by the musicians, garbage collectors, kosher caterers, a majority of taxi drivers, and some of the laundry and delivery workers. The music stopped, beds went unmade, restaurants closed, guests carried their own bags, and garbage piled up around the hotels. Strikebreakers could not pick up the slack. One picket recognized a strikebreaker as the man who mugged her on Mother's Day and had him arrested. Solidarity fostered militance. The shouts of thousands of pickets in the cavernous midtown streets kept guests on the top floors of the hotels awake all night. What deliveries were made often were dropped off a block from their intended destination. Solidarity helped overwhelm the hotel owners.

Political Support--Political support of the strike was led by Mayor Koch. HERE, Local 6 had been one of the few New York unions to support Koch in his last race for mayor. When Koch announced he would not cross any hotel picket line, union staff noticed an immediate improvement in the police respect for pickets' rights. By the end of the strike, union marches were snaking through the Manhattan hotel district without parade permits and with police escorts. When the city sanitation department finally collected the garbage the hotels were piling up, they charged the hotels \$50,000. Banquets were cancelled for the Tony Awards, other actors' groups, Jewish groups, Democratic politicians, the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts. A major hotel accounting firm estimated the strike losses to hotels at \$16.2 million. Over the objections of the Hilton corporation, political support and labor solidarity caused the hotel owners to throw in the towel after 26 days.

Unions Win--The union called the settlement "great"; the hotels' public relations man said "there were no victors." The workers got a 23-1/2% wage increase over five years. No positions were conceded from union jurisdiction and the hotels agreed to continue paying the full bill for workers' health coverage. In addition, a scholarship fund was set up for union members and their children. Other gains included one extra holiday, one more day of sick leave each year, increases in pensions, hospital care payments, drug and alcohol abuse programs, nursery care for newborns, psychiatric benefits, and legal assistance. In return, the hotels gained the right to combine such positions as bathmaid and roommaid. They called this increased flexibility. The owners cannot eliminate any present worker's job and combination job workers will be paid at the rate of the higher paying job, with a \$10 a week premium in some cases. New employees will be paid at 75% of scale for their first year and then go up to regular wages. By pre-Reagan as well as post-Reagan standards, the strike was a success.

The New York victory underscores the importance of labor solidarity and political support in union struggles. Without solidarity, employers can often successfully plan to replace one part of their workforce. If many sectors of their workforce strike together, employers' problems in coping with a strike seem to increase geometrically. Locals in the same industry should be working with one another before a contract negotiation. They should meet regularly if possible. Each union will increase its chances of cooperation with other unions if it does its best preparing for a showdown with employers. Unions are more likely to join together if it appears that such action is mutually beneficial. Locals which don't stick together should remember that they may each eventually find themselves out on a limb.

Political support when it is needed should be a condition of labor support of politicians. Labor should support such office-seekers with all its available resources. A mayor can make a strike's chances for success greater by using his or her office in at least a neutral fashion. City departments that answer to a mayor, as the police often do, can have a significant effect on a strike's outcome.

If labor leaders build the solidarity and political support to improve a strike's likelihood of victory, the type of militance displayed by New York's hotel workers will often follow. Labor grew with solidarity and political support and these factors will be indispensable if it is to continue its fight for working people.

- Ramon Castellblanch

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