

HARD-WORKING HOTEL EMPLOYEES FIGHT FOR BETTER LIFE

By Evelyn Myrie
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When I was in my last year of high school, I worked in the hotel industry on weekends as a room attendant. I hated the job but I was earning money to help pay for my university education.

Each Saturday and Sunday morning, I would trek down to the local Holiday Inn and work from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. I was one of a handful of female students who worked on the weekends to give weekends off to those with seniority.

At that time, during the late '70s, the majority of the workers were immigrant women from Europe. Women from Hungary, Germany, Yugoslavia and Ukraine made up the bulk of the cleaning staff and they were hard workers -- always willing to do what it took to get the job done. That involved cleaning 16 rooms, some with double beds, making sure every piece of furniture was dusted and cleaned to the satisfaction of the strict room inspector.

Sometimes cleaning staff would go without lunch breaks, just to make sure they finished work on time to get home to prepare meals for their children. The wages were low and those who fought to get unions in were reported to management and immediately let go.

I knew I was only there for a short time. I was heading to university to prepare for a better future. Today, every time I check in a hotel room I remember those hardworking women with whom I worked one summer at the Holiday Inn in Windsor.

I was excited to see a recent article on hotel workers organizing across North America. This article piqued my interest because I know first-hand how difficult room cleaning is and I know these women work for poverty wages.

The launching of the movement to raise their standard of living is welcome. Over the past couple of months, Unite Here, a union representing hotel workers that claims 50,000 members in Canada and 440,000 across North America, has launched an aggressive campaign to give voice to its membership, which includes many recent immigrants and visible minorities (and a high proportion of women).

Over the past months, the union has been focusing on hotel workers involved in what the hotel industry calls "bed wars" or "luxury wars" as hotels compete for guests by upgrading amenities and offering suites with thicker mattresses and more luxurious bedding. Housekeeping staff at these hotels say they are in pain -- literally -- because of this strategy.

"Everybody I know has a pain ... from the heavy lifting, heavy mattresses" says Karen Dublin, a 13-year employee who works at a hotel in Toronto. She recently told a reporter that she suffers from shoulder pain, which she attributes to her work. She has to lift each side of a mattress several times as she double-sheets a bed and change up to 10 pillowcases when she makes up a room. Some women complain of going home at 11 p.m. some nights because of additional duties they have in hotels that have introduced bigger beds and heavy duvet covers.

Many of these women are holding down two and three jobs to make ends meet. They live in poverty and are often referred to as the "working poor" -- never getting ahead and barely making ends meet. Their children are counted in Statistics Canada's child-poverty numbers.

In the midst of adversity, there emerges a voice -- one that will not be silenced: Grassroots women organizing, mobilizing and bringing their issue to the table. Instead of sitting by and quietly working in unhealthy, low-paying jobs, these women are taking action to change their situation. These hard-working immigrant women are leading the union's organizing efforts at hotels and janitorial contractors across the United States and Canada. For that I applaud them.

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