

## Service workers look for decent standard of living

An average hotel housekeeper's salary in Toronto is \$29,000 and the majority of housekeepers are immigrant women of Latin and Asian origin.

by Jenn Watt  
March 8, 2006

Lilian Salvador has been living on workers' compensation since the Holiday Inn told her they had no modified work left for her to do.

After injuring her shoulder on the job as a housekeeper at the Bloor Street hotel over five months ago, she was given an easier workload to take the strain off her torn tendon — until her employer told her there was nothing left for her to do.

“They are smart in a stupid way,” says Salvador about the Holiday Inn.

Salvador has been active in her union, [UNITE HERE](#), sitting on the health and safety committee and on the executive board of her local.

Negotiations are coming up, and Salvador thinks the sudden lack of work is a tactic to get the outspoken worker out of the way.

So now she stays at home, paid by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, but she's still not far from her co-workers.

“If I'm home, I have more time to talk to other workers,” smiles Salvador. “I fight for [health and safety] and that's why they hate me so much.”

Members of UNITE HERE, a union of garment and hotel workers, met with Toronto feminist groups at Oakham House on Ryerson University campus Monday night to talk about how to strategize for the upcoming negotiations between the union and 23 Toronto hotels.

The International Women's Day march in Toronto, scheduled for March 11, will be led by UNITE HERE as a symbol of the current struggles in labour and women's movements.

“Often certain women's groups will be in the lead (of the women's march) because their struggle is symbolic,” says Judy Rebick, CAW-Sam Gindin Chair in Social Justice and Democracy at Ryerson University and publisher of *rabble.ca*.

“What this struggle is about is transforming our society so that service workers can have a decent standard of living,” she says.

An average hotel housekeeper's salary in Toronto is \$29,000 and the majority of housekeepers are immigrant women of Latin and Asian origin.

At the meeting, hotel workers took turns describing their working conditions to an audience of about 65 people.

The audience was then divided into smaller groups to strategize on how to help UNITE HERE in the coming year.

2006 is a big year for hotel workers in North America: most four-year contracts expire, meaning that they will all go into negotiations with their employers at the same time.

Strategically, UNITE HERE hopes this will allow for ground-breaking collective agreements to be signed, since so many workers will all be focused on pressuring their employers for better pay and lighter workloads.

The standard workload for housekeeping staff in Toronto hotels is between 18 and 16 rooms to be cleaned and prepared per eight-hour day.

The workers criticized the hotels for upscaling the bedrooms to include heavier mattresses, and more pillows, sheets and duvets — taking workers longer to perform their duties.

“People at my hotel are scared of not completing their work on time, so they don't take their breaks,” says Salvador.

She describes to the group how she used to eat her lunch while on the job, skipping her break so that she wouldn't be reprimanded by the Holiday Inn.

“I used to drink water in the hotel cups over the tub,” she says.

“I don't do that anymore.”

Salvador began working at the Holiday Inn nine years ago, as the sole provider for her five children.

Originally from the Philippines, Salvador is now a Canadian citizen, but when she started working, she was often afraid of losing her job.

Finally, she got tired of hiding her breaks from her employer and got more active in the union.

She says having the support of the community and the union behind her allowed her to challenge her workplace conditions, and now she is more vocal about workers' rights.

UNITE HERE has begun bargaining with three major hotels downtown and will soon be entering negotiations with the others.

A collective agreement was reached late in 2005 by the workers at the Royal York Hotel.

Though they are pursuing an aggressive awareness campaign in Toronto, UNITE HERE

organizer, Andrea Calver, says that they don't want supporters to boycott hotels.

“Some day we will come to the point where we are doing lobbying actions, but we're not there yet,” she says.

Calver is also optimistic about the bargaining process and hopes that the strength of so many bargaining locals and supporters will ease the process.

“We're not bargaining together,” she says. “But we're coming together in the largest possible way.”

*Jenn Watt is a journalism student at Ryerson University and an editorial intern at rabble.ca.*