

# HOTEL WORKERS RISING!

Lifting one another above the poverty line

**Hotel Workers Rising** was a continent-wide campaign by the hospitality workers union UNITEHERE to raise standards in the hotel industry and secure organizing rights for new workplaces. Toronto was one of eleven cities united in a co-ordinated bargaining strategy, and the campaign partnered with the Toronto & York Region Labour Council to engage the entire labour movement and key community organizations.

Toronto is a global, multicultural city. Coming from scores of countries, speaking dozens of languages, six thousand members of UNITEHERE Local 75 mobilized over two years (2005-6) to join hotel workers across North America in *Hotel Workers Rising* (HWR), and to join local allies throughout greater Toronto to fight for social and economic justice.



## CONTEXT

In every major city across North America, workers from the four corners of the globe serve millions of travellers in the burgeoning hotel industry. While the continent's hotel workers had become more diverse, the corporate owners had become fewer and bigger. In the US, the largest corporations controlled the majority of full-service hotels, a trend was accelerating in Canada as well.

The global hotel corporations were and still are familiar names - Starwood (included Sheraton and Westin brands), Intercontinental (included Crown Plaza and Holiday Inn brands), Marriott (included the Renaissance and Ritz Carlton brand), Hilton International and Hyatt. The so-called "Canadian" global companies were Fairmont (included Delta), Four Seasons and Westmont (many Radisson and Choice Hotels).

In 2006, almost 60,000 UNITE HERE hotel workers faced off against these global giants in bargaining across North America in cities like New York, Chicago, Boston, Vancouver, Oahu and Toronto. These locals had coordinated since 2001 to get their collective agreements to expire in 2006 so that hotel workers could fight together. Over ten thousand hotel workers in San Francisco and Los Angeles had been without a contract since 2004 so they could join the fight with those locals with a 2006 expiration.

As in most other industries, the global hotel corporations were consolidating and expanding. The same big companies that were bargained against in 2002 had doubled in size and resources. Some of the smaller players had disappeared. Workers' bargaining power – based on local pattern agreements - was eroding as union

density within the big companies declined. The international union goals were two-fold: an improved standard of living and the right to grow as the industry grew. Bargaining to organize meant finding ways of using union strength with a corporation to expand the rights of its non-union employees to join the union. In the U.S. that strategy often included the negotiation of a "Labour Peace" agreement when hotels were being built or expanded.



***"The biggest challenge? Unity was needed within each hotel. Solidarity was needed across the city between every hotel workplace so members could feel their citywide power. Solidarity was built between hotel workers in the major cities of North America and with workers of the global hotel corporations in countries around the world through the global union federation. And finally true solidarity within the labour movement and the community".*** Paul Clifford, Local 75 President

The International Union was committed to a process of union renewal. It was ramping up

member militancy combined with well-researched corporate campaigns and sharing best practices from its strongest locals. Over the previous decade, Local 75 President Paul Clifford had built a new leadership team to pursue an aggressive stance in bargaining and organizing non-union hotels. It had weathered the tough challenges of the 2003 SARS crisis when nearly a third of members lost their jobs almost overnight. As the industry recovered, a number of new hotel developments were planned. Local 75 was building research and political capacity to set the stage for organizing these new properties. And it wanted hotel workers to be able to make a decent living with only one job.

In early 2005, Clifford approached the Labour Council with a request to partner around the Hotel Worker Rising campaign. Labour Council leadership supported the goals of the campaign and felt that it could be best positioned within a common labour-led effort to tackle income inequality and falling wages. Unions were trying to win better labour law from the provincial government, and Labour Council was highlighting the shameful conditions many immigrant workers were facing, particularly with non-union employers.

As manufacturing declined and more jobs shifted to the service sector research showed that over a million people in the GTA were earning less than \$29,800 per year – a figure that shocked many Torontonians. Labour Council was determined to address the issue, and soon launched an umbrella campaign under the slogan **A Million Reasons to Take Action**. It laid out a strategy with four themes: fighting for good jobs; bargaining to raise standards; mass union organizing; and restoring the social wage. The hotel campaign fit perfectly

within the Million Reasons framework, which made it easier for other unions to support the work ahead.

For UNITEHERE, Toronto was a key location in the HWR strategy. Most Toronto hotel contracts would expire in February - months before the other ten North American cities, and the Local 75 members needed to be strong enough to withstand the anticipated pressure from the companies to derail the HRW strategy, including the possibility of a lock-out. The International Union was willing to invest in staff resources to build solidarity with other unions and communities, and a series of discussions led to a formal partnership with the Labour Council.



*Local 75 members pack Toronto City Hall*

The union had built a multi-faceted program to tap the full strength of its membership, including their own ties to their communities. It had developed a comprehensive “High Road Vision” plan that included training, workload issues, career advancement, a living wage with benefits and worker retention. It had used that vision to enter into discussion with community leaders and elected officials about the responsibility of the

industry to contribute to a shared prosperity and healthy communities. It also was designed to give rank and file workers the confidence to take on strikes and embrace difficult tactics that challenged their own managers.

## DEEP ORGANIZING

Long before the campaign started, the union had developed a program for deep membership organizing, spending time and resources to ensure every member was part of a conversation about power and how the union could be strong enough to take on global chains. The program included making house visits to people who were seen as key leaders in each hotel property, to patiently walk through all aspects of building organizational power. House visits are something most unions only do when organizing a non-union workplace, but for UNITEHERE it was essential to gauge how strong the union actually was in each hotel. When it called for any kind of action, the participation of members was tracked to identify who was turning out from each department.

Member leaders were booked off to carry out this deep organizing, and to be the public voices of the campaign. One of the key groups the union was focusing on was the house-keepers. Their punishing workload extracted a price for many of these women, and they were to be at the centre of the HWR strategy. The standard requirement was for house-keepers to clean 16-18 rooms each day, and as more amenities and bedding were added the physical strain grew worse. Their personal stories were incredibly powerful and became central to the overall campaign narrative. Every presentation included a call to action.

“I was leading the work of building committees in the major hotels. We had to spend time with every leader, sometimes at their home, to know they were confident in taking on the boss. We brought housekeepers together in the workplace to create a body map of how the pain was felt in their bodies. People saw how everyone was in the same boat, and that things would only improve with a fight. We would co-ordinate turnout during the day to confront management. It took time, but you could see how people responded with a new sense of power – it was like they were on fire!” *Andria Babbington, 1st Vice-President*

In August, the union held a large rally at the Fairmount Royal York Hotel, featuring the International President John Wilhelm. The event focused on the workload of room attendants, and media coverage reflected their message that counterposed the luxury accommodation for guests to the pain suffered by many room attendants. The Royal York contract came due in August, and the union was vying to achieve new gains to take to other hotels involved in pattern bargaining.

On Labour Day of 2005, Local 75 members marched in the parade wearing signs that listed how many beds they had made in their careers. The numbers were staggering – some up to 80,000. The image became symbolic of the resolve of the union members to tackle the global hotel chains.



## STRATEGIC PLANNING

By October the campaign started gearing up. The union developed a calendar that identified goals for 30, 60 and 90 days leading up to the pattern contract expiry. Union members were being organized to sign pledge cards and surveyed to see if they were involved in community or faith organizations. The Labour Council started meeting regularly with senior staff from the International Union and Local 75. A spirited presentation was made to Labour Council Delegates, including table discussions to identify how other unions could build solidarity in the coming months.

The concept of a “high road vision” was reinforced with the publishing of a detailed report by the Labour Council’s Labour Education Centre supported by the City of Toronto’s Access and Equity program. It pointed to examples of a high road approach in other cities and proposed the creation of a formal industry partnership to assist in developing training, career ladders, and social inclusion.



*Local 75 President Paul Clifford*

On November 10th the union celebrated International Hotel Workers Day with a mass meeting of members and allies. A week later a breakthrough deal was reached at the Royal York. It included language on workload, training, job security, pension and benefits, an employer paid transit pass and a 9% wage increase. The standard was set for the others to match.

On December 3rd the Hotel Workers Rising campaign was formally kicked off at the Royal York ballroom. Rank and file workers spoke first, followed by top union leaders. For many, the highlight was the appearance of movie star Danny Glover, who toured the kitchen and met with staff before taking stage along with Mayor David Miller. A lifelong social justice activist, Glover would go on to lead a tour of key cities to support the campaign, meeting political and community leaders along with rank and file hotel workers.

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

In January 2006, Labour Council hired three contract staff to help with community outreach. The focus was on communities that had a sizeable presence in the hospitality sector, and where the hotels might draw on for staffing in the event there was a protracted labour dispute. Those were the Tamil, Chinese and Latin American communities. Alejandra Bravo, the vice-president of the Canadian Hispanic Congress, would go on to play a key role in community organizing and be elected to Toronto City Council. By the end of January, the team had mapped out key influencers, connected with ethnic language media, and convened a meeting of community and faith leaders to build broader support. Progressive politicians were engaged, and there

was a separate initiative in the Filipino community which was growing dramatically in the industry.

The high profile of housekeepers in the campaign meant HWR was also portrayed as a women's issue. Toronto's annual International Women's Day march - the largest in North America - brings thousands to the streets each year. For 2006, the

IWD planning committee included Hotel Workers Rising in the days' themes, and the union did a massive turnout of members for the parade, joined by rank-and-file leaders from U.S. cities.

As bargaining kicked off, the Globe and Mail carried a story headline reflected the central public message:

THE GLOBE AND MAIL  
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2006

A15

## Hotel workers take up arms in 'bed wars'

Housekeepers from two dozen Toronto hotels are organizing to press for better working conditions, saying their health has been a casualty of hotel-chain luxury wars. Talks on new contracts at 23 hotels, including the Sheraton Centre, Toronto Hilton and Delta Chelsea, are set to begin tomorrow. As the previous contracts were about to expire on Tuesday, more than 100 housekeepers met at a downtown union hall to discuss how Unite Here, a union representing

hotel workers across North America, will handle negotiations.

The focus of the meeting was on educating the hotel workers -- many of them female, visible minorities and new immigrants -- about their right to a safe workplace and on encouraging them to negotiate with their employers without feeling intimidated. Delegates from Interfaith Worker Justice, a network that mobilizes religious support for low-wage workers, flew in from the United States.



*Andria Babbington and Zeleda Davis*

The same message was repeated in ethnic community media. Local 75 member Zeleda Davis joined Danny Glover's North American tour to be the voice of Toronto hotel workers. Her message was clear: "When workers and their families can lift themselves out of poverty, then the communities in which we live, worship and pay taxes become better places to live."

## BARGAINING MOMENTUM

The union wanted to put pressure on the other “big three” hotels (Sheraton, Delta and Hilton) that were bargaining for the pattern agreement. It organized a series of delegations to the hotel managers, led by employees accompanied by high-profile allies. But it did not want to conclude any agreement until the full continent-wide campaign came to bear on the global chains.

Contract talks progressed slowly during the spring. Parallel to the local negotiations, the International Union was meeting with the big chains to demand a global approach to address workload, safety and the right of unrepresented hotel workers to organize without fear. Rebuilding union density in different regions was a key goal of the union, and its internal messaging to members was that higher density was absolutely connected to better wages and benefits. Winning a Labour Peace accord was the vehicle the union had used for new developments in various cities, often supported by local elected officials. Local 75 had secured such an accord for the new Shangri-la hotel with the help of downtown City Councillor Olivia Chow.



A large part of hotel business depends on visitors to special events, and there was an influential community the union wanted to reach. Toronto Pride Parade had grown into a huge tourist attraction, and the 2006 World Aids Conference was scheduled for Toronto in the summer. UNITEHERE had built an extensive network of contacts in LGBT communities. San Francisco’s Cleve Jones, the originator of the AIDS Quilt Project, became an ambassador for the union campaign entitled “*Sleep With the Right People*”. It sought to have LGBT clients and organizations to make a conscious choice to book unionized hotels in order to support the social justice efforts of hotel workers. Cleve collaborated with Labour Council staff to connect with Toronto queer community leaders and activists.



At the end of May, the stage was set for a new stage of the campaign. One thousand hotel workers and community allies packed the Metropolitan United Church to launch **Community Rising**.

The Community Rising campaign drew the connection between raising family incomes, benefits for service sector workers, and thriving communities. The crowd heard from a number of community leaders and Mayor David Miller, followed by the announcement of a Toronto Task Force on the Hotel Industry. It was spearheaded by Janet Dassinger, former Executive Director of the Labour Education Centre, and consisted of respected academics, training experts and social advocates. The evening ended with a call to action:

*“Will you leave this place and talk to your neighbors, your friends, your family about the need to come together. Will you speak to every group in your neighborhood? Take the pledge cards and let’s gather thousands. We are calling on ministers of every faith to take a stand – if you worship regularly take the faith statement and ask that it be signed. The people of Toronto must stand together and demand with one voice: good jobs and strong communities – we are rising together.”* Reverend Elias Morales

Bargaining and mobilization continued through the summer. The union got 90% strike authorization votes at seven hotels but promised not to withdraw labour during the World Aids Conference. Every week there was leafletting. Two leaders at the Delta Chelsea were fired for leading one of the many job actions designed to pressure the companies.

At the international level, Hilton was chosen as the target of a major corporate campaign, which included reaching out to institutional shareholders with detailed information about the company’s performance in every major market. A major breakthrough was achieved when the Hilton Hotels chain agreed to a ‘Partnership for Future Growth’ which upheld the right of workers to join a union through a card-check process, where a neutral third party would certify if a majority wanted union representation.

That helped unlock the bargaining at the local level. Finally, the key Toronto players settled for a pattern agreement that reflected the major demands of the union. It took many months for that contract to be won at the other hotels, during which thousands of rank and file Local 75 members stepped into the struggle. The tactics they used were courageous and creative – from early morning pickets to “buttoning up” to show support, to delegations confronting their own managers. There was often an element of “civil” disobedience – helping to build confidence and solidarity while sending a clear signal to management that without fairness there would be no peace in the workplace. The collective agreements they won were the best the industry had ever seen.





## MORE THAN WAGES + CONDITIONS

As well as better wages and workplace improvements, there were other significant gains that flowed out of the momentum of the campaign. During the SARS crisis, a resource centre was formed to provide supports to jobless members. It ran skills training and literacy/ESL classes for those who were out of work so that they would stay connected with the industry during the downturn. But the union set its sights on a more robust role envisioned in the High Road Task Force Report. It had seen the value of union training centres for the building trades and for UNITEHERE in cities like Las Vegas. The 2006 contracts included employer contributions to fund a more ambitious training agenda and led to the *Hospitality Workers Training Centre*.

Another initiative was the Local 75 Housing Coop at 60 Richmond St East. The cost of housing was beginning to escalate dramatically, pushing hotel workers farther out of the city. For downtown hotel workers the commute became longer and more onerous. The Task Force Report included the issue of housing, and Councillor Pam McConnel became a driving force for a model of downtown housing so hotel workers could live closer to where they worked. The Training Centre

became the first-floor tenant in the commercial space and conducted classes in the co-op meeting rooms.

The following year Local 75 focused on the proposed Woodbine Live entertainment complex in Rexdale, proactively shaping an agenda for decent work. The coalition Communities Organizing for Responsible Development (CORD) introduced a concept of “Community Benefits” to guarantee good jobs and careers based on equity and inclusion. That concept helped set the stage for the creation of the Toronto Community Benefits Network, and when the original development proposal was replaced by the Woodbine Casino, community benefits were central to the City’s approvals negotiations.



## OUTCOMES

Alejandra Bravo summarized Hotel Workers Rising in an article for the Labour Council’s yearbook:

*In participating with the hotel workers, Labour Council sees three measures for success. Along with lifting the standards of workers, a key goal is to*

*ensure that non-union hotel workers can organize without reprisal so that they too can benefit from long-term improvement. Just as importantly, is the building of a model for how labour links with communities for broader social justice fights.*

Hotel Workers Rising was one of the most comprehensive campaigns the labour movement had undertaken for many years. It modelled the way for a new level of labour-community alliance building.

And most importantly, it realized the vision that the hotel sector of the City's economy could provide good jobs and a rising standard of living - especially if the labour movement harnessed the power of growing numbers of members.

Through this fight, the collective agreements were dramatically improved, organizing rights were expanded, and a new sense of solidarity was built for immigrant workers in Toronto's growing service sector.



***This study was co-authored by Paul Clifford and John Cartwright.  
Photographs by John MacLennan***