

Housekeepers: Hotel workers organize

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [March 24, 2009](#) issue

One Thursday afternoon this past October, along the main road to Los Angeles International Airport, members of the hotel workers union unrolled a banquet scene. Tables were put up in front of the Hilton LAX, one of the airport hotels most hostile to unions, and workers from unionized hotels, dressed in tuxedos, set the tables with tablecloths and plastic champagne goblets. Meanwhile, other workers set up a picket line in front of the Hilton.

The symbolism of a banquet for hotel workers was not lost on Altagracia Perez, an Episcopal priest who is a member of a clergy and laity group that has long been supportive of the union. "As a priest and a mom, I love this celebration because it is about people gathered around a table, eating together and sharing a vision of justice."

As she led the crowd in an opening prayer, Perez sounded a slightly more defiant note: "Someday we will be inside having a banquet. We'll start the party out here and then, when the management catches up with reality, we'll move inside."

The struggle by the local branch of the union Unite Here to organize Hilton LAX workers has been long, and there is no end in sight. But the intent of this day's protest was to celebrate the community groups that have backed workers' efforts. The atmosphere was celebratory and hospitable. Three hotel workers invited me to sit at their table after I had been standing in the sun for several hours. Without asking me any questions, they made a place for me, ushered me to a seat and pushed a plate of spaghetti in front of me.

José Molina, a former worker at the Hilton, told the crowd how he lost his job because he tried to organize a union. He spoke in Spanish about the intimidation he had experienced, about his worries over how to support his family and about his desire to see working conditions improve. "People say, 'Why not just go find another job?'" he said. "But this isn't only about me."

Looking through the gate in front of the hotel entrance, Molina spotted his former manager and yelled out a greeting from the stage. The people at the tables turned to look, and for a moment the air was charged with defiance.

Tom Eggebeen, a Presbyterian minister who has worked on workers' rights issues for years, found the scene moving. "All people want is a shot at ordinary life," he said. "It is important for workers to know that someone is behind them, that someone cares."

Unite Here is famous for staging creative protests. It recently held a march called "The Day of the Dead Tired," in which hotel workers carried a "Quilt of Pain and Tears." The squares of the quilt represented various job-related hazards, from inhaling dangerous chemicals to suffering injuries that lead to back pain or miscarriages. In another union protest, housekeepers made beds in the streets.

Since the effort began four years ago to organize hotel workers on Century Boulevard and in the airport area, one of its key allies has been Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE), the organization that brought Perez and Eggebeen to the protest. Well into its second decade of existence, CLUE has become adept at mixing symbolic gestures and politics and at lending moral and spiritual authority to the workers' movement. In 2001, CLUE supported unions in a Holy Week/Passover march in Santa Monica. The marchers went from hotel to hotel: at hotels where workers had won the right to organize along with obtaining higher pay and benefits, they left milk and honey; on the steps of those hotels still resisting the unions, the marchers left bitter herbs.

Women are playing increasingly prominent roles in labor movements, especially in the hotel industry, where more than half of the workers are women. In CLUE and in the hotel workers' union, one can see women making connections between the various tables in their lives: the kitchen table, the communion or Shabbat table, the banquet table and the negotiating table.

María Elena Durazo, who was president of Unite Here Local 11 until March 2006 and is now a leader in the Los Angeles branch of the AFL-CIO, has been a significant force in the organizing movement. Her role is sometimes compared to that of Cesar Chavez's in the grape-workers movement. CLUE's executive director is Lutheran minister Alexia Salvatierra. She has turned CLUE from a local operation into a statewide organization with more than 700 members.

The powerful role of women in the movement was underscored when President Obama chose Hilda Solis, a member of Congress from California, as secretary of labor. Solis is the daughter of a Mexican union shop steward and a Nicaraguan assembly line worker.

The day before the LAX protest, the Hilton LAX management lost its final court challenge to Los Angeles's living-wage law. The law requires that hotels pay workers a minimum of \$10.40 per hour with health benefits—or \$12.40 if they don't pay health benefits. The living wage is tied to the cost of living, with automatic adjustments every year. The hotel lost another court case when a federal judge found that it had wrongfully suspended 77 workers as well as threatened others for participating in the organizing effort.

Trying to unionize the Hilton LAX is an important step in what has been a largely successful campaign to organize the hotels on Century Boulevard. Most of the hotels in the area have accepted the living-wage law, and four of the 11 airport hotels have entered into negotiations with unions. But Hilton LAX has said no to both, claiming that the union bullies workers into joining and that the hotel's wages and benefits are compatible with living-wage laws.

Paulina Gonzalez, an organizer for Unite Here, says the Hilton LAX is important to the union mainly because the union wants to support the workers' commitment and dedication. "This is a hotel where the workers have risked everything to become unionized. So the union will stand with them until they win recognition."

The conflict between the Hilton and Unite Here is in part a battle over how unionization takes place, and in that sense it is emblematic of a nationwide debate. Unite Here supports legislation called the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), which would require employers to accept union representation once a majority of employees sign cards indicating their desire for a union. All of the hotels that have unionized on Century Boulevard have voluntarily accepted the card check system for the formation of unions.

The common practice over the past several decades has been for employees to hold a secret-ballot election on whether to unionize after 30 percent of employees have signed union cards. If unionization prevails in that election, the employer is required by law to enter into union negotiations. The problem with that system for unions, says Unite Here, is that it allows owners, prior to the vote, to hire union busters, to

undertake aggressive antiunion campaigns and to delay action.

The hotels argue that a worker's signature on a card does not mean that the employee really supports the union. Furthermore, they say, unions engage in their own bullying of employees, which prevents a fair election.

For the union, one of the greatest benefits of EFCA would be curtailing the drawn-out, nasty fights that often are a part of unionizing—as in the case of the Hilton LAX. The boycott of Hilton LAX started in 2006. A street protest that brought thousands of marchers in the fall of that year led to 400 arrests. More than 60 members of CLUE, both clergy and lay leaders, were arrested in the carefully orchestrated act of civil disobedience. In the winter of that year, Hilton LAX workers participated in a “Living Wage Fast” that took place outside the hotel, supported by CLUE. In addition, CLUE members visited hotel workers in their homes, helped in staging protests, visited people in jail or went to jail themselves with the workers.

In addition to providing spiritual support, CLUE has been instrumental in pressing religious organizations to abide by the boycott. The Muslim American Society, the Episcopal Jubilee and All Nations Church are among the organizations that have joined the boycott, and Gonzalez credits CLUE with making the spiritual stakes in the battle clear. While the union has always enjoyed the backing of individual clergy, CLUE has been able to recruit and organize additional religious support.

Relations between the unions and clergy are not always smooth. Unions do not always see the relevance of clergy involvement, or if they do, some are interested only in “renting a collar,” as one of CLUE's organizers put it. Clergy, for their part, can be pushed in uncomfortable ways by the conflict between workers and management. The us-versus-them rhetoric of union organizing can be difficult for clergy to support, especially when the management side includes church members who have their own concerns and stories to tell.

One of CLUE's organizers, LaMikia Castillo, told of an owner in a downtown hotel who suddenly slashed workers' wages from \$12 an hour to \$7.55—just 5 cents over the minimum wage. The workers were devastated, and the union was furious. But workers also knew that the owner was going through a personal struggle. CLUE wanted to reach out to him and to express the organization's concern for him in a letter. The union was not sure that expressing sympathy was the right strategy. Another awkward situation emerged when a clergyperson agreed to perform a

wedding ceremony for the family of the owner of a boycotted hotel.

Castillo said she runs into church members who worry that work with the unions sullies the church. One clergy member who is a part of the workers coalition said he worries that unions are just another agency exploiting workers—another boss, not a means of empowerment. While Los Angeles’s Unite Here is a grassroots, heavily community-oriented union, not all unions have the same history, and some have a reputation for corruption and exploitation.

Nevertheless, religious leaders are instrumental in the labor movement. They can help managers and owners connect their beliefs and their behavior. For workers, integrating faith and work means demanding respect and dignified treatment. For managers, it can mean challenging accepted business practices.

Hotel workers are part of the hospitality industry, and as such are connected to religious traditions of hospitality. The labor that hotel workers do is intimate: it is the work of a host for a guest. In nearly every religious tradition, such work is treated as sacred. In American culture, that work is secular and typically invisible—we know of, but don’t really know, the people who make our beds in the hotel rooms and who prepare and clean up after our meals. But they are really the ones doing the work of hosting us.

Some of the most effective union actions are those that make work visible and link it to sacred symbols—as in the demonstration banquet. For the Christian the banquet might be, as Perez suggested, a little glimpse of the kingdom of God. A Jewish person might see in it a hint of the peace and gathering of the Shabbat table or hear ancient Hebrew edicts about the welcoming of the stranger. Jews and Christians share the tradition that every stranger who sits at the table is an angel and brings a gift. In offering hospitality, hotel workers are doing the work of Christ and of Moses.

Castillo noted that religious communities can help workers through sacred stories about struggles. The Hebrews wandered in the desert for 40 years before entering the Promised Land. Union actions often take a very long time to bear fruit. “Because we stand on traditions with long histories,” Castillo said, “we sometimes can see the bigger picture. We can give people hope for the long haul.”