

Room service: Hotel workers demand a fair contract

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [November 14, 2006](#) issue

Many Christians' image of a labor leader is of a Jimmy Hoffa-like cigar-chomping political boss—a figure as morally suspect as the industry captains labor tangles with. I tended to have this image in mind too until I met some pastor-organizers and found them to be not only zealous for social justice, which I expected, but people who love the church and seek its good—like many of the workers they aim to organize. They might even be called evangelical for their idealism and their willingness to be fools for Christ.

Unite Here/Local 1 in Chicago recently held a prayer breakfast to encourage religious leaders to support hotel workers' campaign for a new contract. Father Larry Dowling of St. Denis Catholic Church on the South Side gave a rousing call for worker justice in the tradition of Catholic social consciousness. Stephen Greer, pastor of Christian Valley Missionary Baptist Church on the West Side, spoke about the preference for the poor in God's kingdom. (I learned later that black participation in the unions is the fruit of major conciliatory work; some unions' former racist stands on membership are not easily forgotten.) Rabbi Victor Mirelman of suburban Temple Har Zion quoted a Talmudic call for giving workers fair pay even if the employer takes a loss. Imam Kifah Mustapha of the Mosque Foundation in Bridgeview quoted the Prophet Muhammad's words on an employer's responsibility to employees: "Let him feed him from the same food he eats; let him dress him from the same clothes he dresses; do not order what is hard on him." Cleopatria Kyles, a dishwasher at the Chicago Hilton & Towers, brought the crowd to its feet: "God planted me at the Hilton, and I'm honored that God gave me this blessing, so I can bless others." All this was enough to make one think that interfaith cooperation for the sake of justice is not a thing of the past.

Lou Weeks of Unite Here told me I might be the only member of the press at the event. Interreligious solidarity with workers is a dated concept to the mainstream media. But then WGN-TV showed up, as did several local cable stations. What

happened? I asked. “The Muslims called their people and they got the TV coverage,” Weeks said, as we jokingly remembered the day when Christians had such media pull.

After the speeches I found myself being swept along with a group of union leaders who went to the Hyatt Regency to hand out copies of “Hospitality and Human Dignity.” This petition, signed by 400 area religious leaders, calls for hotel hospitality to extend not only to the customer and the stockholder but to workers as well. I looked on a bit nervously—I was there as press, after all—as Imam Mustapha spoke to a group of workers of the clergy group’s solidarity with them.

Then we burrowed our way into the subterranean employees cafeteria (which looks more like a prison chow hall than the elegant rooms upstairs), where Calvin Morris of Chicago’s Community Renewal Society hollered over the blaring televisions, “We support you, we love you, and we want a higher standard of living for all of you.” It struck me how similar this was to evangelical street preaching: these religious leaders were trying to bring about conversions as they shouted to strangers about their love for them.

It’s hard in our culture to move past a theoretical commitment to social justice. When I check into a hotel, I don’t usually think about its workers’ wages or working conditions. One of the hotel industry’s responses to the dip in travel and tourism that followed 9/11 was to tout greater luxury comforts—more pillows, heavier sheets and blankets, and more tightly tucked sheet corners. Some hotels now offer what they call the “heavenly bed”—for pets as well as humans. Some feature two bathrooms for each room.

Someone has to make those beds, change those sheets, scrub both toilets, and clean up after those nonhuman guests. If some owners have their way, workers will be paid the same amount despite having to do the extra work—and should be happy just to have a job. An organizer with Unite Here, in from San Francisco to work on the Chicago campaign, told me that some 75 percent of hotel housekeepers suffer a job-related injury—not from accidents but from the ordinary work of cleaning and bed-making.

This year the hospitality industry in the U.S. expects to return to pre-9/11 profit levels: \$25.6 billion before taxes. Since labor costs make up close to half of hotel budgets, the obvious way to increase profits is to keep labor costs down.

The hospitality industry is a prime arena for union organizing. Hotel jobs cannot be outsourced to India. The industry's workers also tend to be vulnerable—some are undocumented, others are grateful for any sort of work. Such vulnerabilities can lead to exploitation—unless workers are able to speak with one voice.

Unite Here/Local 1 scored a major victory in 2005 with the passage of an Illinois law that requires hotel workers to get two paid 15-minute breaks during the day and a half-hour unpaid lunch break. Hotel owners challenged the law in court, but it was upheld last summer. Now hotel workers across the country are gearing up to fight for a new contract. The unions worked to have all their contracts expire at the same time this year so as to increase their negotiating strength.

Lest anyone think organized labor makes no difference: in cities like New York and San Francisco, where almost all hotel workers are organized, they make, on average, \$19 per hour. In cities like Chicago and Los Angeles, where many hotel workers are unionized, wages average \$12. In cities like Phoenix and New Orleans, where most are not unionized, the figure is \$7. Unions make the difference between earning a living wage and being part of the working poor.

There are things that union supporters can do without ever going near a union organizing site. Unite Here offers an information service called "Inmex," short for "informed meeting exchange" (www.inmex.org). Organizations that sign on to Inmex pledge to hold their conventions at hotels that treat their workers well. Inmex provides information about labor issues and possible strikes so that convention planners can avoid having to cross picket lines. And by using Inmex, convention organizers can tell hotel owners that they chose their hotels *because* they are fair to workers.

Among the organizations that have joined Inmex are the American Academy of Religion, the National Council of Churches, the United Church of Christ and the United Methodist Church. (Curiously, the Society for Biblical Literature is not on the list.) Inmex suggests that organizations try to obtain an option to cancel a contract in the event that labor disputes erupt. Such opt-out clauses are often opposed by hotel management. A similar service is in the works for individual consumers.

The UCC recently decided to change the site of its 2007 General Synod to avoid patronizing the Connecticut Convention Center, whose owners refused to allow workers to decide whether to unionize without fear of reprisal. (The UCC planners

could not have foreseen the problem because the Convention Center is new.) This was a difficult decision for the UCC not because of the moral issues—the UCC has a strong record of supporting organized labor—but because of the cost of switching sites. Also, the UCC wanted to hold its 50th anniversary meeting in Connecticut, the state where the denomination was organized. In this case, the Connecticut Economic Development Authority moved in with a \$100,000 grant to keep the synod—and the accompanying dollars it would bring (some \$5 to \$10 million)—in the state by moving the meeting to the Hartford Civic Center.

All of this can become a bit of a blur for those newly interested in labor issues, like myself. But as I found myself unexpectedly touring a hotel with representatives of organized labor, something interesting happened. The people who work in hotels were no longer faceless to me. As I got out of the taxi, the uniformed bellhop wasn't just an employee to be treated with *noblesse oblige*, but a man—Will, with a ready smile and firm handshake. “Here, you need one of these,” he said, as he pinned a Unite Here/Local 1 button to my shirt. Carmen, who will sell you a latte in the hotel lobby, was no longer just someone whom you might or might not tip; she is a mother of American children, someone who wants what all workers want: decent enough pay and benefits to support her family and make her feel proud of her job.

The grateful looks on the faces of those in the union suggested that they appreciate the religious and moral support; ownership cannot claim that they're isolated or without advocates outside the hotel.