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## **Background on the Baltimore Hotel / Labor issue**

Betsy Taylor (Virginia Tech)

*The Human Rights and Social Justice Committee has been tasked by the board to assess the situation of the Baltimore Sheraton union boycott and recommend appropriate action, not just for this year's situation but draft a policy and procedure to proactively address potential problems in the future. Betsy Taylor, who is from the area, assembled this history for the benefit of the Committee and the overall SfAA membership.*

SfAA met this year in a Baltimore hotel which unions have boycotted for years because of widely publicized and serious labor problems.<sup>1</sup> In early November 2007, workers at the Baltimore Sheraton voted to call for a boycott of their own workplace. The workers were represented by two unions – UNITE HERE Local 7 and the International Union of Operating Engineers (IOUE). These unions kicked off the boycott campaign on Nov 18, 2007 with a rally at Baltimore's City Hall, followed by a march to the Baltimore Sheraton with hundreds of people from over 30 social justice organizations and unions.<sup>2</sup> Within a year, the boycott had been endorsed by the Baltimore City Council, several members of the Maryland State General Assembly, the Women's Law Center of Maryland, and other prominent local organizations. The unions estimate that the hotel lost \$2.2 million in revenue by the end of 2008, as major organizations canceled events – including the Democratic National Committee National Convention, NAACP, and United Way. By July 2010, the AFL-CIO – the official national umbrella organization for American unions – had endorsed the UNITE HERE boycott.

In annual rallies, the breadth of this boycott campaign can be seen, as UNITE HERE workers have come to support their colleagues in Baltimore from Nevada, Atlantic City, Philadelphia, Virginia, California, Alaska and many other union locals around the country.<sup>3</sup> The hotel had been unionized since the 1970s under previous ownership. Many workers had worked there for decades under good conditions. In 2006, the hotel was bought by William Yung III – a Kentucky-based speculator in casinos, land and hotels. Negotiations over labor contracts quickly broke down over health insurance and pension coverage, workload and wages (e.g., whether workers would get a 50c or 35c hourly wage increase on annual wages of just over \$18,000, whether workers would get only 60% of the 21% gratuity charged on banquets).

Anthropologists converged on the Baltimore Sheraton in March 2012, 4 ½ years after it became a nationally watched battle ground for workers' rights. A line had been drawn at that site by a many stranded and multiscalar coalition of groups concerned about social justice. On one side was William Yung III, whose labile empire of hotels and casino made the Forbes list of America's largest private

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<sup>1</sup> For a list of hotels boycotted by the major union representing hotel workers, see [http://www.hotelworkersrising.org/HotelGuide/boycott\\_list.php](http://www.hotelworkersrising.org/HotelGuide/boycott_list.php) (accessed May 3, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> For local descriptions of this event, see: Ken Morgan. "Hotel workers say: people should not eat, meet or sleep at the Sheraton Center City". *Baltimore Times*. 11/30/2007; Ron Kipling Williams. "Unite Here! March and Food Drive For Baltimore Hotel Workers". *Independent Reader*. November 14, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> For 2008 rally see: "Sheraton City Center Hotel Workers Fight On". *Inmexnews* (the newsletter of the Informed Meetings Exchange). Vol 3, No. 2 (December 2008). For 2009, see: Ron Kipling Williams. "Unite Here! Rallies City Council Support for Sheraton Boycott". *Independent Reader*. March 10, 2009; For 2010, see: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cT2oXZSu\\_Fc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cT2oXZSu_Fc); for 2010, see: "Rally to Support Baltimore Hotel Workers" <http://www.youngtradeunionists.org/2010/01/rally-to-support-baltimore-hotel-workers/>; for joint 2011 rally with Baltimore Sheraton workers, Occupy Baltimore and workers at Baltimore Convention Center, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHEX1bQHJvc> (all internet sites accessed May 3, 2012).

companies (at #281) for the first time in 2007 with annual revenues of \$2.7 billion. On the other side was the new national coalition of hotel workers whose battle cry is "Lifting One Another Above the Poverty Line" (a portal website for this coalition is <http://www.hotelworkersrising.org/>). For an SfAA member like myself who was not involved in planning the meetings, it has not yet become clear how the SfAA ended up in a union-boycotted hotel. The SfAA collectively spent hundreds of thousands of dollars at the Baltimore Sheraton. As we go forward, it will be helpful if we can reflect together about why this happened and whether it accords with our individual and collective values.

From a bottom up perspective, the past years of struggle around the Baltimore Sheraton exemplify vibrant new cultural processes for political identity formation – that join difference and unity in complex and supple ways to forge united political collective identity out of tapestries of difference. Watch the video of the Nov. 18, 2008 rally (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvm3WjrZ5gg>), and watch class-based solidarity being constructed by celebrating individual identities and difference (ethnic, racial, gender or place-based). The hotel industry is ground zero for this new kind of politics. Hospitality is a major sector in many American cities now. It is the second largest industry in Baltimore – so its wage and unionization trends will have significant impacts across the city and on other sectors. Nationally, the hotel industry is showing unexpected growth – with 8% annual growth appearing sustainable for several years. Felicia Hendrix of Barclays Capital wrote that “The domestic industry is at the cusp of a protracted recovery period that should be bolstered by a dearth of new supply”.<sup>4</sup> UNITE HERE researchers argue that this is because “hotel companies have seized on economic downturns as an opportunity to extract more out of their workers” for two decades. They say “In 1988, nearly 71 workers were employed to service 100 occupied guestrooms. Last year, that number was down to 53 – a 25% reduction. During this time, hotels have added more amenities and heavier linens to the rooms – increasing the workload, even as the number of workers doing it has fallen.”<sup>5</sup> Robert Reich says “one of the most striking legacies of the Great Recession has been the decline of full-time employment...typical workers are either unemployed or underemployed, or else getting wages and benefits whose real value continues to drop. The portion of total income going to capital rather than labor is the highest since the 1920s.”<sup>6</sup>

The political line that UNITE HERE and its justice allies drew at the Baltimore Sheraton runs along some of the most significant political fault lines of our time – where vast tectonic shifts in the global economy are fundamentally altering macrostructures of class and inequality in the US. Higher paying union jobs have been in steep decline. An important source of leverage for this activism has been the willingness of many groups and individuals to support boycotts and strikes of hotels – see, for instance, the well-established networks for solidarity among professional (and other) societies for sharing resources and strategies in making ethical choices of meetings (e.g., the Informed Meetings Exchange <http://www.inmex.org/>).

*Members who wish to participate in formulating a response to this issue, both SfAA's past and future actions, are invited to contact Human Rights and Social Justice Committee chair Mark Schuller: [mschuller@york.cuny.edu](mailto:mschuller@york.cuny.edu)*

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<sup>4</sup> “Analyst upgrades lodging, sees signs of recovery” April 27, 2010, Associated Press, *Bloomsburg Week*. <http://www.businessweek.com/ap/financialnews/D9FBI6QO0.htm> (accessed May 3, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> See UNITE HERE fact sheet at <http://www.hotelworkersrising.org/Campaign/> (accessed May 3, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Reich. “The Tinder-Box Society”. *Reader Supported News*. May 2, 2012. <http://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/279-82/11241-the-tinder-box-society> (accessed May 3, 2012).