

Hilton suspends about 75 workers in what organizers say is anti-union action

by Kendra Gilbert - LA City Beat

A recent campaign to unionize hotel workers near Los Angeles International Airport took a much more serious turn in the last week when the LAX Hilton suspended approximately 75 workers, many of them immigrants, and then reinstated them Monday. The workers were indefinitely suspended after they asked to speak with the general manager about a disciplinary action taken against their co-worker, Sergio Reyes. All this came after a Mother's Day action staged by hotel employees and their supporters called attention to the arduous working conditions, high injury rates, and low wages of housekeepers.

In charges filed May 12 with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) against the hotel, Local 11 of UNITE HERE, the union attempting to organize the workers, alleged that Hilton "discriminated against employees in order to discourage their support for the union."

"When workers stood up and said 'enough is enough,' the company has decided to go after them," said Kurt Petersen, organizing director for Local 11.

This is not the only action against Hilton hotels occurring in the L.A. area. As the workers were organizing at the LAX Hilton for the Mother's Day protest, charges were being filed with the NLRB against another of Hilton's hotels, this one in Glendale. The Glendale charges were the result of alleged incidents of unfair labor practices dating back to July and August 2005. These charges included intimidation and harassment of hotel employees by the hotel management, allegedly in order to discourage workers from organizing. This has landed the Glendale Hilton on UNITE HERE's boycott list.

In the case of the LAX Hilton, however, Juan Jimenez, a suspended waiter at the hotel, speculated that fellow waiter Reyes was not disciplined because of union organizing, but due to an error on a customer's check. But workers gathered in the hotel cafeteria on Thursday and refused to leave until management spoke with them in order to clarify the matter. Management never came, only the word that they were suspended.

The general manager at the LAX Hilton did not return calls from CityBeat.

On Friday, the suspended workers, along with city and state officials and local religious organizations, took to the sidewalk along Century Boulevard outside the LAX Hilton to voice their anger about the hotel's treatment of its employees. Dozens of protesters circled the pavement wearing red shirts printed with black and white letters that read "UNITE HERE," thrusting signs in the air and chanting "Si, se puede!" ("Yes, we can!").

The LAX Hilton's location on Century Boulevard puts it smack in the middle of the so-called Century Corridor, a stretch from Sepulveda Boulevard to La Cienega Boulevard that has been at the center of a campaign by the Coalition for a New Century. The alliance of community groups, religious organizations, and residents seeks to improve the conditions of the area and its workers, many of whom are residents of the surrounding communities.

"It's time for a new Century Boulevard," said Donald Wilson, a pastor who has worked as a chef at the Century Plaza Hotel for 27 years.

While the city has been responsive to the coalition's plans to clean up the corridor, hotels have been less than welcoming to the coalition's concurrent fight to enact a living wage for hotel workers, said Danny Feingold, communications director for the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), an organization involved with the Coalition. "The kind of response we have seen is suspending workers for exercising their rights. We had hoped to make it a joint cooperative project, but hotels have taken a hard line."

According to a plan put together by LAANE in February, the hospitality industry in Los Angeles is a \$21 billion industry and L.A. is the fourth-largest visitor destination in the U.S.

"These hotels are making hand-over-fist in money," said Wilson. "But they never renovate the lives of workers who make the hotels."

From the back of a black pickup truck on Friday, city Councilwoman Janice Hahn, joined by state Assemblymember Judy Chu, both of whose districts include the LAX area, showed support for the workers. Joined by other workers' rights advocates, Hahn said, "You are the workers who have been loyal to the Hilton hotel. I'm on your side and I want you to go back to work tomorrow."

That didn't happen. The workers' suspension continued through the weekend to Monday. And so did the protests. Although the suspension was finally lifted on Monday, the 75 employees will not be allowed to go back to work until Friday, minus a week's pay and one of their co-workers.

Reyes was fired. The hotel has not come forward with the exact reason for his termination.

Although the lawsuit filed with the NLRB against the LAX Hilton will seek to recover the lost wages, "it will take time," Feingold said.

The actions of the hotel came as a surprise to some people. Jimenez, a father of three and employee at the hotel since 1986, said he had never seen anything like this in his 20 years of service. "This is the first time," he said. "I think the reason is because we tried to organize a union here."

Even those who have been involved in the long struggle to unionize hotel workers on Century Boulevard were shocked by Hilton's actions. "In my 10 years of doing this, I've never seen anything like this," noted Petersen.

On Tuesday, workers testified before the L.A. City Council about the suspensions and their loss of pay and the council, led by Hahn, unanimously passed a resolution urging the LAX Hilton to cooperate with plans to improve Century Boulevard and the lives of workers there. The testimony served as a fresh reminder of the continuing struggle to improve conditions throughout Century Corridor. While a week's pay may not seem like much, said Feingold, it is a "severe hardship for people already struggling to get by."

According to the resolution, Century Corridor, with more than 7,000 rooms and 3,500 employees, represents a significant percentage of the hotel industry in L.A.

On Friday, as planeloads of travelers flew overhead into LAX, protesters marched once again in a city that has seen many a fierce unionization battle. In 2004, grocery workers citywide were embroiled in a bitter strike that lasted almost four months. "Why is it that these maids make \$8-an-hour with no benefits and the ones in the union hotels are making \$11-something with benefits?" questioned Wilson, who's worked in the hotel industry for 31 years.

Other area hotels have come to terms with UNITE HERE Local 11. In June 2005, seven L.A.-area hotels, including the Regent Beverly Wilshire, Hyatt West Hollywood, and the Millennium Biltmore downtown, agreed to a contract with the union that would last until November 2006. Under the terms of the agreement, hotel workers would receive a \$.65 raise and would be allowed to use sick time for family issues.

Earlier that year, the Beverly Hilton signed a contract with UNITE HERE Local 11. That contract will also expire this year.

Not even the roar of jet engines could drown the voices of strikers chanting, "The workers united will never be divided," last Friday. It is a chorus that Angelenos have come to know well.