



70 Hotel Workers Suspended For Wearing AIDS Awareness Buttons

by *The Canadian Press*

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(Toronto, Ontario) Seventy Toronto hotel workers have been dealt one-day suspensions for refusing management orders to remove a union button that supports AIDS awareness.

Their suspension sparked a protest Friday by some employees of the Delta Chelsea in downtown Toronto, on the last day of the International AIDS Conference.

Two employees were suspended on Thursday for wearing the lapel buttons, which differed from the ones employees had been authorized to wear.

The black button is for the union Unite Here, which has worked to raise hotel employee wages.

Fastened to the button is a red AIDS ribbon.

The suspension of the two workers prompted dozens of their colleagues to put on their buttons, leading the hotel to give one-day suspensions to 70 employees.

A handful of hotel guests from around the world, who were also conference delegates, joined the protest, with one calling the management's actions "shameful."

But the hotel's lawyer said the Delta Chelsea has been a keen supporter of the AIDS conference.

"The hotel made the decision to show support for the conference, the employees would only wear the official AIDS conference button," Stephan Shamie told CTV News.

He said the hotel decided it would look unprofessional to have two buttons, and didn't give employees permission to wear their union button with a red AIDS ribbon.

Toronto hotel workers were close to a strike last week, but held off so they wouldn't disrupt the conference that drew about 30,000 people.

Hotel Workers Suspended For Wearing AIDS Pins

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Jacob Cherian - All Headline News Staff Writer

Toronto, Canada (AHN) - The 16th International AIDS Conference ended rather unpleasantly on Friday when nearly 70 Delta Chelsea Hotel employees were suspended by the management for wearing AIDS buttons.

Unite Here Local 75 spokesperson Andrea Calver said the AIDS button was worn by employees in 25 hotels in Toronto in support of the conference.

The Unite 75 union represents 8,000 hotel employees in the Toronto area. The Chelsea was the only hotel to have a problem with workers wearing the buttons.

Calver said two Chelsea employees were suspended on Thursday for coming to work with pins on when they had been instructed not to do so.

Seventy of the other employees supported the two in a show of solidarity.

Calver said that all 70 have now been suspended.

Delegates of the conference also joined the employees in yelling loud and angry protest outside the hotel on Gerard Street in Toronto.

A number of delegates said they were appalled by the way the hotel managed such a sensitive issue.

Gerard Audaz, a conference delegate from France, told CTV News that one of the main topics of the gathering was AIDS in the workplace.

Alan Leather, a delegate at the conference from Geneva agreed: "We're here at an international AIDS conference where we're trying to set a partnership between the workplace and the management...And they're showing complete disrespect for workers who are actually prepared to stand up and do something about HIV and AIDS."

The Unite Here Local 75 union is one of the hosts of the AIDS conference.



Hot-button issue surrounds AIDS event

TORONTO -- It was a hot-button issue that hotel housekeeping staff refused to put to bed.

On the day the AIDS conference wrapped up, the Delta Chelsea Hotel suspended 45 room attendants for refusing to take off a union button fastened with a red AIDS ribbon - a show of solidarity with their delegate guests and the conference, the employees say.

Their union, UNITE HERE, is a sponsor for the conference.

Eva Opalinska, a room attendant for 15 years at the downtown hotel, was one of the first to be suspended Thursday when she refused to remove the button.

"I removed it at first, but then felt like a coward," she said yesterday as colleagues shouted "Shame, Shame" at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre.

The small black button says "lifting one another above the poverty line."

It was not approved by the hotel and has "nothing to do with AIDS at all," said Delta Chelsea spokesman and lawyer Stephen Shamie. "It's a management and union issue," he said, adding the employees were allowed to wear the official AIDS pin.

The hotel workers have been without a contract since Jan. 31, 2006.

Hotel workers retracted a threat to walk off the job at the beginning of the conference.

But steward Mahen Krishnamoorthay, 46, said the suspension was disproportionate to the crime, adding it's just a pin. "It's not obstructing our work. We can work with a button."

AIDS delegates and hotel guests Remy and Francisco Pascal called the move unfair.

"We will reconsider booking this hotel," said Francisco, a delegate from the Philippines. "It's unfortunate for people to be treated like that."

Hotel employees fight suspension
Workers say it's about their AIDS pins

Delta blames ongoing union dispute
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THULASI SRIKANTHAN
STAFF REPORTER

What started with a tiny workers' solidarity button, pinned on top of a red ribbon two days ago, escalated to a full-scale protest march through downtown yesterday. Hotel workers at Toronto's Delta Chelsea hotel say they were showing their solidarity with the international AIDS conference by donning ribbons and buttons inscribed with the words "lifting one another above the poverty line" to work. But their actions drew the ire of the hotel, which suspended about 45 workers yesterday. (Organizers put the figure at 75.)

As they marched with the support of some conference delegates, cars honked support as the mostly female crowd chanted: "HIV is a workplace issue" and "What do we want? Justice." They carried signs emblazoned with the words: "Reinstate Delta Workers." "It's about workers, it's about AIDS — what's wrong with that?" asked Medhin Gheber, who was also among the suspended. She has worked at the hotel for more than 14 years. The hotel is not in any way against the AIDS conference, said lawyer Steve Shamie, who spoke on the hotel's behalf. He said conference organizers asked the hotel about allowing employees to wear pins with the conference's official logo, to which the management had immediately agreed. He also said the staff and hotel are in-between collective agreements.

"This is not an issue about AIDS; both the Delta and the Delta Chelsea are supportive of AIDS. This is simply a union management issue."

One of the demonstrators, Otis Anderson, who has worked at the hotel 16 years, disagreed, saying the demonstration was not about contract negotiations but about having the freedom to express an opinion. "We are fighting for AIDS, for our brothers and our mothers. This is not about a contract — this is about freedom of speech," he said. Equally important to many of the demonstrators were workplace grievances, including low pay and lack of job stability. In particular, said rally organizers, the button represents the struggle of workers to earn a living above the poverty line.

Shamie said those issues will be addressed at the bargaining table. For many in the rally, AIDS is an issue close to the heart.

"I come from a third-world country where they cannot afford medicine and where they don't get the help they need, and I am a woman, too," said Irene Tuazon, who emigrated from the Philippines more than 15 years ago.

Wendi Walsh, one of the rally organizers, said the hotel should have let the workers wear the buttons and ribbons to show support for the conference. "There was no need for this to ever come to a dispute."

Conference delegate Clementine Dehwe, who flew in from France last week, said she couldn't believe this happened during the week "the world had come to Toronto."

"I am shocked that employers in a developed country like Canada would go to the extent of suspending the employees for expressing their opinion."
