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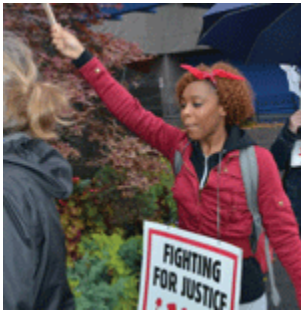
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The Great Divide: How Unionization And Diversity Affects the Work Environment In Canadian Hotels

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The news came at the end of September, almost four years to the day from when the drive to unionize began. The Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) made its decision. Mississauga, Ont.'s Novotel now had a union — Unite Here Local 75.

The Board ordered automatic union certification at the Accor-owned hotel. The decision came after managers allegedly linked unionization with job losses and told employees they would have to switch doctors and dentists if a labour union was introduced.

According to reports, it was argued, managers led employees to believe they'd no longer qualify for the company RRSPs. "Taken as a whole, the hotel's illegal activity was of such a nature that the wishes of the employees cannot be ascertained in a representation vote," the OLRB declared.

But, the decision wasn't the end of the story. A similar case regarding the Novotel Ottawa is now before the OLRB and another is scheduled to begin for the Novotel North York in February. Though Novotel declined to comment, in early December, it issued a statement emphasizing its position. "Since 2008, Novotel hotels in Canada have been subject to a confrontational organizing effort by Unite Here. The union has disrupted guest services, organized boycotts, filed legal proceedings and used systemic and repeated misinformation in an effort to organize our locations in North York and Ottawa."

According to the release, the company initiated mediation with Unite Here regarding the North York and Ottawa hotels "to allow our employees to focus on their jobs and continue to provide outstanding service to our clients.... Through mediation and subsequent discussion, we agreed to the vast majority of the union's requests, including offering to allow Unite Here to hold meetings in the hotel to discuss their union with employees, offering to hold a secret ballot vote to allow employees to decide for themselves if they wanted to be represented by the union and offering an alternate membership-card process, which the

union said they preferred to a democratic vote.”

The release goes on to state, “The union has refused these offers and chose to continue with its litigation and its ongoing efforts to damage Novotel’s business. This is regrettable and Novotel can only assume that it is because Unite Here is not confident our employees would support them if given a fair chance to decide.”

Whatever the reason for the union’s refusal to accept Novotel’s offers, Daniel Bastien, a former employee at Novotel North York and now a Unite Here organizer says, “Workers in a non-unionized environment, in the back of their heads, are always thinking ‘I might get fired for this’ or ‘this will ruin my chance for advancement.’”

The Novotel case is not unique. In recent months, other hotel union stories have made headlines. For example, Quebec City’s Hilton hotel and Laval’s Holiday Inn negotiated an agreement with Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux (CSN), while Montreal’s Holiday Inn Select Sinomonde and Hotel Espresso had staff lockouts.

POWER STRUGGLE

Even while some hotel staff continue to reject the idea of unionizing their workforces, Steven Tufts says workers aren’t the only ones who can benefit from unions. Tufts, an associate professor at Toronto’s York University, and author of a report called, [“Immigrants and the Toronto Foodservices and Accommodation Services Sector,”](#) believes unions certainly cost hotels in wages and benefits, but they also simplify and institutionalize human resource policies and create an “efficient way of controlling the labour process and administering workers.” In fact, they’ve already demonstrated what they can achieve by helping advocate for Toronto’s 2015 Pan Am/Parapan Am Games. The month-long event is expected to bring sports-tourism dollars to Toronto, a potentially lucrative opportunity for hotels.

“[Union] power is increasing,” Tufts says. “Politically they’re starting to be a player ... that kind of power can be used by hotels.” Unions in the service industry aren’t as strong as those in the automotive industry, he adds, but as the partnership between management and unions matures and their work comes together more closely, the benefits seen in other industries could come to fruition. “The hotel industry isn’t quite there yet,” he adds.

That said, some of the benefits unions bring can also cause problems. For example, the “one-size-fits-all system” isn’t always a good thing, says John Martin, executive director, Employee Relations at Fairmont Hotels & Resorts. “Unfortunately, this isn’t always in the best interest of our colleagues, who sometimes prefer a more individualistic approach,” he points out. Approximately 40 per cent of Fairmont’s global employees have union representation, and Fairmont actively fosters that relationship by holding regular meetings with its unions — trying to stay abreast of the issues to prevent any surprises.

It’s a two-way relationship. “Our unions regularly tell us they have healthy relationships with us, and we treat our colleagues well and work with them, not against them,” says Martin. “This doesn’t mean we agree on everything, but when we disagree, it’s respectful, and we follow the process in place to deal with disagreements.”

TODAY’S DIVERSE WORKPLACE

A big benefit of unions is they can give a voice to those who feel they have none, such as immigrant workers, says Nuredin Bulle, secretary-treasurer for Unite Here. Bulle worked at the unionized Delta Chelsea Toronto for 15 years, starting employment at the property soon after he arrived in Canada from his native Ethiopia.

It's no surprise the hotel industry relies heavily on an immigrant workforce. "In one of our hotels, we have people coming from 18 different countries," Bulle says. Such diversity can pose challenges, explains York University's Tufts. While the hotel industry represents one of the country's most diverse labour markets, it's also a segmented market as some specific groups of employees are over-represented in certain jobs. For example, women from the Philippines, the West Indies and China often work in the housekeeping department, and immigrant workers are generally over-represented in back-of-the-house jobs, meaning more Canadian-born workers are on the frontlines. While language can be a barrier, it isn't always the problem. "[Employers] can stereotype certain groups as being good at certain things," Tufts explains, adding employers don't always recognize skills from abroad. "So if people don't have a very big résumé they get [an] entry-level position at the back-of-the-house."

However, Tufts suggests that climate may gradually change. As generation 1.5 — or immigrants who come to Canada at a young age and adapt to the culture — continue to enter the college system and find front-of-house hotel work, awareness and understanding of the needs of immigrant workers could improve. In fact, unions have helped train workers, expanding their skills, and in doing so, improving their opportunities for advancement. "Of course, hotels, like every other big corporation, have equity hiring policies," Tufts adds. "It varies a great deal by company."

Fairmont Hotels & Resorts has incorporated information on diversity into its Code of Ethics, introducing a range of initiatives meant to help immigrant workers transition to Canada, from assistance with applications — including employment and permanent residency paperwork — to a mentorship program that partners employees with someone from their country of origin to help them acclimatize.

Diversity isn't just a buzzword anymore, adds Michelle D'Souza, Fairmont's manager of HR Compliance. She believes the success of a company depends on its "ability to attract and retain a diverse workforce." Starwood Canada is also creating a new diversity and inclusion policy that should be finalized by 2013.

The HR effort is paying off at Fairmont. "Colleagues who bring different work styles, experiences and cultural backgrounds learn to adapt to varying situations, which can foster an environment of mutual respect and understanding," D'Souza says.

And, with today's diverse customer base, that's something every hotel should get behind.