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# TORONTO LIFE

## **The housekeepers revolt: behind the labour dispute at the Royal York Hotel**

**In an era of decline for organized labour, an aggressive hospitality workers' union is determined to turn menial labour into middle-class employment. To do so, they need to galvanize the recent immigrants who overwhelmingly staff the service industry. First stop, the Royal York**

**By Nicholas Hune-Brown    March 16, 2011**

On a warm morning last September, the managers of the Fairmont Royal York Hotel had a PR problem. The Toronto International Film Festival had just begun, and celebrities were trickling into the city. The 1,365-room downtown hotel was booked solid, and the lush Library Bar stocked with the ingredients for \$14 TIFF Tinis, but outside on the sidewalk, hundreds of unionized Royal York workers were on strike, angrily accusing the hotel of exploiting them. They pounded on overturned buckets and exchanged call-and-response chants: "What do we want?" "Contract!" "When do we want it?" "Now!" And they marched back and forth across the grand Front Street entrance singing "We want a contract" to the tune of K'naan's "Wavin' Flag," and hoisting red and



black banners emblazoned with the logo of UNITE HERE, the aggressive international union that represents 8,000 hospitality workers across the GTA.

*Battleground: the hotel union has co-opted celebrity guests, such as Martin Sheen, to draw attention to its cause (Photographs: Strikers by Cristal Cruz-Haicken; Street by Jerryb8/dreamstime.com/Getstock. Illustration by James Dawe)*

Outside the main doors, Martin Sheen stepped onto the pavement and was immediately mobbed by the crowd. He gave a thumbs-up to the strikers and began shaking hands and slapping backs, looking every bit the left-wing political hero he once played on television. The strikers eagerly linked arms with him and marched before the cameras and TV crews that were scrambling to get the best angle. Someone thrust a megaphone into Sheen's hands, and he gamely improvised a few slogans. "When it gets tough in labour disputes like these, people say that it's a lost cause," he said, his voice rising passionately. "Well, I'm here to remind you that lost causes are the only causes worth fighting for!" The logic seemed a little shaky, but the crowd roared its approval anyway. "Stick to it like a stamp!" he shouted with a final wave, before he and his son Emilio Estevez were whisked off in a white Escalade.

Sheen's appearance on the picket lines was on all the newscasts that night—as the union knew it would be—adding a little flash and glam to the story of a labour dispute. For the Royal York, a hotel with a history of peaceful and relatively progressive labour relations, the one-day strike was an embarrassment, the first time workers had walked out in almost 50 years. For UNITE HERE, it was a successful media event—a protest shrewdly designed to gain public support for the workers and send hotel owners across the city a message.

The hospitality industry is bouncing back after a disastrous 2009. Though it may be a few years before hotels return to the record profits of 2007, Canadian occupancy levels and revenue have both nudged upward. As hospitality corporations grow, UNITE HERE wants to make sure that workers' benefits and salaries grow, as well. What was at stake at the Royal York was job security: the hotel's owners wanted more power to add and subtract shifts depending on daily demand, while the union wanted a stable schedule—and a stable living—for a group of workers who are mostly visible minorities and immigrant women.

The union's leaders have an even bigger agenda. In 2010, there were contracts up for negotiation at close to 30 hotels across the GTA. "We want to do for the hospitality industry what organized labour did for the auto sector," says J.J. Fueser, a research analyst at Local 75, the Toronto branch of UNITE HERE. "We want to turn menial labour into middle-class employment." It's a tall order: they're up against powerful multinational corporations and a public largely unsympathetic to unions.

**The Fairmont Royal York** is a behemoth, a château-shaped slab of limestone that stretches out over a large city block. The hotel's main-floor kitchen is an east-to-west airport runway of fluorescent lighting, ochre tiles and gas oven ranges. Each year, the hotel washes five million pounds of laundry, which workers pile into industrial machines the size of suburban garages. When it was first constructed in 1929, across the street from the newly inaugurated Union Station, the hotel was the tallest building in the British

Empire and the ultimate symbol of modern opulence. Ads from the time called it “a city within a city block,” but it’s more like a medieval castle, with managers and cooks and maids all coexisting under an almost feudal hierarchy within the building’s thick stone walls.

At the top of the chain are the mostly white and decently paid front-of-house workers. Craig Reaume, the manager in charge of day-to-day operations, presides over the hotel’s 1,200 staff. Reaume is a tall, slender, seemingly unflappable man whose most animated facial expression, produced during moments of extreme stress, is a bemused knitting of the eyebrows. Like so many of the managers at the Royal York, Reaume is able to appear simultaneously aloof and attentive—the precise demeanour that you’d hope to find in an experienced butler. Like many of the managers, too, Reaume is a lifelong student of the science of Making People Feel Comfortable. Hospitality is something that everyone at a hotel takes extremely seriously, from the managers to the bellhops. All high-class hotels have beds and televisions and tiny bottles of complimentary shampoo, so the difference between a satisfied guest and a less-than-satisfied guest—and this is not a minor, touchy-feely difference, but a multimillion-dollar distinction empirically measured by market research firms and then endlessly analyzed and worried over by upper-level management—generally comes down to hospitality, that delicate mixture of servility and human warmth that hotel managers have done their best to systematically instill in their workers.

Near the bottom of the hierarchy are people like Cicely Phillips. When she first arrived in Toronto in 1992, Phillips had no idea what she was getting herself into. She flew in from Guyana in February wearing her finest clothes, shocked to discover that the Canadian winter had lingered so late into the new year. The city was a mystery to her. She found a job cleaning rooms at the Royal York through a friend who worked there as a housekeeper, and has been doing it ever since.

Phillips is in her 50s now. She’s a charismatic grandmother with smooth, dark skin and a broad smile that reveals the flash of a gold tooth. She’s worked as a housekeeper for the past 18 years, but, like most people in the industry, hotel work wasn’t her first choice.



*Women’s work: Cicely Phillips (far left), a maid at the Royal York and a former lance colonel in the Guyanese army, helped lead a protest last September. (Photograph by Cristal Cruz-Haicken)*

In Guyana, Phillips served as a lance corporal in the army. For seven and a half years, she maintained army vehicles, commanding the soldiers beneath her in the Guyana Defence Force. The army toughened her. She trained in the jungle, dug trenches, learned to handle weapons. She spent anxious nights out in the bush with only a poncho for shelter, terrified by the sound of rattlesnakes. Still, when she first began work at the hotel, she cried almost every day. Hotel work was humiliating, and it was hard. Lifting mattresses and scrubbing tubs is physically demanding, and housekeepers get injured on the job far more often than the average service industry worker. By the end of her shift, her wrists and feet would be in agony from the strain.

A room attendant's job is a series of discrete tasks: strip the bed, make the bed, dust the night tables and vacuum the carpet. Then move on to the bathroom to clear the used towels, scrub the sink and bathtub, clean the toilet, mop the floor, and make sure that the surface most visitors spend a disproportionate amount of time examining, the mirror, is absolutely spotless. Rooms are supposed to take about half an hour, but every room is different. Some are much quicker to clean ("When a visitor doesn't use any of the amenities, the soaps and shampoos, that's a good day for a room attendant," says Phillips), and some take forever ("Sometimes it looks like a tornado has passed through. The furniture is knocked over, everything's a mess. You just open the door and sigh"). Repeating that routine for 15 rooms a day can be gruelling. According to a 1999 study, 75 per cent of room cleaners said they suffered work-related pain, and 53 per cent had to take time off work due to pain. In 1992, as a newcomer, Phillips could barely keep up with her quota of rooms (16 a day, at that time). If she hadn't finished by the end of her shift, she was expected to continue working until she was done.

Phillips and her husband, Eglan, have three children. At first, she was making approximately \$22,000 a year picking up as many shifts as she could. "When I got home, I would be so down," she says. "Eglan would ask me, 'What's wrong?' and I would say, 'I'm not going back to that place.'"

After a few years at the hotel, she began looking into her rights and reading her contract. She found that the collective bargaining agreement had always specified that housekeepers were paid by the hour, not the room, but housekeepers hadn't challenged managers who pressured them to finish their quotas. What recent immigrant working in a strange new country would dare to question the boss? "I started educating myself, and I started educating the people behind me," Phillips says. She became a shop steward with the union and began speaking out about conditions. "Finally, at a meeting with my manager, I told her, 'As long as I'm here, anyone who comes after me must not go through what I went through. I am here to represent these people.'"

The manager was shocked. "Before that, I had been very, very quiet."





**It's no secret** that organized labour is in decline. Over the past three decades, union membership has steadily dropped across North America, from 38 per cent to 31 per cent of the workforce in Canada and down to a mere 12 per cent in the U.S. More than that, labour is increasingly unpopular, blamed for everything from exacerbating the current recession to the collapse of the auto industry. When most people think of unions, they think of public-sector employees like the much-maligned TTC workers, or large industrial unions like the autoworkers. Today, however, the typical blue collar worker isn't the man building SUVs at the Ford plant; it's the Filipino woman working the counter at Tim Hortons or sweeping the floors in a downtown office building. According to a 2007 Toronto industry report, 93 per cent of the lowest earners in a hotel are

immigrants, 82 per cent are visible minorities and 80 per cent are women. **"People who work in consumer service industries are the new working class," says Steven Tufts, an associate professor at York University who has studied local service unions extensively. "It's where the most exploitative work happens and where the employment is most precarious."**

*Monarch's choice: hotel staff gather to greet Queen Elizabeth, who stayed at the Royal York during her 2010 Canadian tour*

Ironically, the same factors that make private service work so uncertain, and therefore in need of the protections that organized labour can provide, also make it notoriously difficult to organize. Employers have been aggressive in keeping unions out of their sector—just look at how difficult it's been for unions to break into Walmart. Consumer service jobs are low-paying and have high turnover; workers often see their jobs as stepping stones and aren't inclined to battle owners for long-term gains. They often don't come from cultures with strong labour movements. And, most fundamentally, the way that service jobs are distributed makes them difficult to unionize. Historically, unions have been successful in places like factories, where thousands of workers are under the same roof and can be organized at once. Unionizing a dozen servers at a McDonald's, in contrast, is far less efficient. Hotels, particularly big hotels like the Royal York, are one of the few places in the service industry where large numbers of workers are available in

one space. Consequently, they've become the focal point of intense battles with owners and even between rival unions looking for a foothold in a growing industry.

UNITE HERE has had a rocky recent history. The international union was formed in 2004, when HERE, a growing hospitality workers' union without much money, merged with UNITE, an apparel and laundry workers' union that was financially flush but was losing members as clothing manufacturers moved overseas. It seemed like the perfect marriage, but the merger quickly turned sour over rifts about strategy and clashes between the strong personalities at the head of each union. By 2009, the partnership had dissolved into a vicious civil war over money and territory, including UNITE's Amalgamated Bank, a union-owned bank with \$4 billion in assets. Accusations and lawsuits were thrown around by both sides, with leaders using the kind of inflammatory language they usually reserve for management. The merger ended in an embarrassing and acrimonious split. Most hotel workers stayed with UNITE HERE, while many of the original garment workers left to form Workers United.

**The Royal York's owners, citing the popularity of last-minute Internet bookings, wanted workers to accept flexible hours. The union was apoplectic**

The ugly divorce came at an inopportune time, in the middle of an international campaign to raise wages for North American workers. Over the past two decades, unions have had to evolve to match the changing hospitality industry. Originally, the Royal York was part of a chain of hotels owned by the Canadian Pacific Railroad, which ran its own properties across Canada. Today, many large hotels are controlled by a dizzying mixture of management companies, real estate investment trusts, private equity companies and asset managers. The name on the building—Hyatt, Hilton or Travelodge—can have little to do with who is in control. Fairmont is the Royal York's brand and the management company that controls the day-to-day operation of the hotel and employs people like Craig Reaume. The property itself is primarily owned by Caisse de dépôt et placement, the Quebec pension fund, but controlled by a minority owner, the Westmont Hospitality Group, an international giant that operates 500 properties across three continents.

Westmont was started by the Mangalji family in 1975, when they bought an apartment-hotel in Vancouver and transformed it into a profitable 80-room hotel. They quickly expanded, acquiring more properties in Vancouver and then across the United States. In 2007, Westmont partnered with Caisse de dépôt to buy Legacy Hotels, a real estate investment trust that controlled a bundle of highly coveted, first-class hotels including the Château Laurier in Ottawa, the Château Frontenac in Quebec City, the Queen Elizabeth in Montreal and the Fairmont Royal York. With 13 hotels in the GTA, from the Royal York to the tiny Holiday Inn Express, Westmont sets the tone for hotel negotiations in the city. In 2007, a fight over job security for food and beverage employees at what was then called the Holiday Inn on King (now the Hyatt Regency) escalated into a standoff with management. According to UNITE HERE, the hotel locked out employees for a month; management said they were simply laid off due to declining business. For workers, the signal was clear: when it came to union negotiations, Westmont and its partners weren't going to play nice.

With more and more hotels owned by massive multinational companies, unions have been forced to change their bargaining strategy. Threatening a strike at one hotel is no longer as effective an approach as it was in the past; a company like Westmont or Intercontinental can afford to bleed money at one location if its other properties remain profitable. In the early 2000s, UNITE HERE began slowly and quietly coordinating its contracts so that they would expire in the same year in cities across North America. If globalization was creating multinational hotel owners, then the union's response would have to go global, as well. In 2010, union contracts expired in Honolulu, Chicago and San Francisco, as well as at more than two dozen UNITE HERE hotels in Toronto.

Cicely Phillips and the rest of the hotel workers are proud of their role in a larger movement. "The Royal York is the leader for all the other Toronto hotels. We are the largest, and we are the strongest," Phillips told me. "We want to send a very strong message. Don't take us for granted. We are fighters, and we are not going to give up easily."

After her years of dedication to the union, Phillips was appointed the vice-president of UNITE HERE Local 75. At the time the workers' contract expired, she was paid the same hourly rate for her union duties—\$17.64—as she made as a housekeeper. Her total annual income of \$36,000 reflects the extra hours and shifts she's entitled to because of her seniority. She and Egland, a car mechanic, own a modest, semi-detached home in Scarborough near Morningside and Sheppard. It often takes Phillips two hours to get to work via bus and subway. She returns home most nights at around nine. At that hour, she's usually too exhausted to cook, so on her days off she prepares huge batches of food and divides it into Tupperware containers for the week.

**Before it expired**, the Royal York's unionized workers had one of the best contracts in the city. The room attendants' wage was one of the highest in Toronto, workers were allowed to take five personal days without a doctor's note, and they were the first to receive a small subsidy on a TTC pass, something that has since become standard at other unionized Toronto hotels. Since Westmont took control of the property in 2007, however, Phillips and other union members have noticed the Royal York taking a new direction.

When the workers began negotiating a new agreement last July, the hotel took a hard line. Citing the recession, management wanted to freeze wages and demanded concessions across the board. The main sticking point was scheduling. The hotel announced it wanted to be able to cancel shifts without notice, based on how many paying guests are projected to be in the hotel from day to day. People are booking their hotel rooms later and later—a change that managers attribute to the recession, which has pushed people to wait for last-minute Internet deals—so being able to add or subtract shifts at the last-minute is a sensible idea. The union was apoplectic. Management already had the right to cancel a shift with as little as 24 hours' notice. How can workers arrange childcare if they don't know when they'll be working? How can they survive without knowing how much they'll earn from week to week?

Although the details differed from hotel to hotel, management was pushing to build recessionary measures into its labour contracts across the board. In the week following Martin Sheen's appearance at the Royal York, UNITE HERE staged one-day strikes at Westmont's other hotels. On September 11, they hit the Holiday Inn on Bloor. The next day, at a street party to celebrate the opening of the TIFF Bell Lightbox, Hyatt Regency workers created an "alternative red carpet" where passersby could have their photo taken with a Hyatt worker. While TIFF-goers buzzed around the hotel's bar, across the road a mammoth inflatable rat with the word "Hyatt" printed on its chest rocked menacingly in the breeze.

In total, the union held one-day strikes at nine Westmont properties that month. As the year dragged on, however, and as the publicity began to fade, workers at most hotels still hadn't signed agreements. By New Year's, 3,000 hotel employees at 28 hotels were still working without new contracts. Some of them had been negotiating for a year.

For all their fiery rhetoric, union leaders were reluctant to start an outright fight, perhaps mindful of what happened the last time there was a prolonged strike at the Royal York, in 1961. Just like today, the conflict then was mainly about flexible scheduling. Workers rejected a contract that would give management the right to cancel shifts with just 48 hours' notice, and on April 24, 1,200 union members walked off the job. The strike was big news—Laurence Olivier walked out of the hotel carrying his own luggage, as did Saskatchewan Premier Tommy Douglas, who predicted a swift victory for the union. During the next few weeks, however, management hired scabs, the hotel remained near full occupancy, and it became increasingly clear that the union had badly misjudged its own strength. Over a bitter year, with limited strike pay, bellhops and chambermaids quickly ran out of money. Management, sensing weakness, pushed for more and more concessions. In April 1962, after nearly a year on the picket lines, desperate workers finally agreed to an offer that was virtually identical to the one they had rejected 12 months earlier. The union was crushed—indebted and demoralized—and didn't really recover until decades later.

The defeat is a cautionary tale. Despite all the talk about union strength and solidarity, the fight remains grossly imbalanced: enormous multinational corporations against a group of relatively unskilled, poorly funded immigrant women.

**The last time I saw Phillips**, on a cold evening in January, she was recovering from surgery. Nearly 20 years of cleaning had taken a toll on her body, and doctors had recently removed a ganglion cyst—a marble-shaped lump that forms on the wrists due to repetitive strain, a common ailment among housekeepers. The thin scar was still visible, and sharp pain shot along her hand when she touched it, but Phillips had already returned to work. The army had made her tough, she explained. More than that, it had made her disciplined. "The way you think, the way you walk, the way you approach people in your everyday life—everything must be done with discipline," she told me.

That evening, after six months of negotiations, workers finally ratified a new contract with the hotel. In a small office in the basement of the Royal York, with the slim pink



ballots counted and collated, union organizers and hotel workers hugged one another and exchanged congratulations. The workers voted 89 per cent in favour of an agreement that gives them a modest two per cent wage increase a year and new protections against subcontracting. Most significantly, it doesn't include a concession to flexible scheduling. They'll continue to get their 24 hours' notice. UNITE HERE expects the settlement will lead to favourable agreements at some of the city's other hotels.

The small gains from this new contract will be added to the long list the union has won over the past 20 years: free supportive stockings to protect against varicose veins, access to podiatrists to help with all those hours on their feet, and all the other mundane and seemingly minor victories that, when eventually tallied up, Phillips hopes will one day amount to a secure and stable life. But for now, their goal of transforming the status of hospitality workers across the city, of changing the face of urban labour on a grand scale, seems as distant as ever.