

MAKING BEDS, MAKING CHANGE:
HOTEL WORKERS RISING IN TORONTO

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Abstract

Recent work on gender and immigration has turned its focus to the influx of multiple voices and multiple oppressions brought on by interlinked processes of economic globalization, low-wage labour migration and the feminization of the workforce. With this focus have come new areas of exploration important to contemporary understandings of struggle, solidarity, and structures of exploitative labour. In this paper, I contend that the North American labour movement is rebuilding itself amidst these processes, with immigrant women emerging as important players in struggles over fair wages and working conditions. The Hotel Workers Rising campaign, a movement led by UNITE HERE that aims to improve the working conditions of employees in this heavily gendered, racialized industry, serves as a prime example of this. Based on secondary data and empirical data collected in Toronto in 2006-2007, I explore an array of mobilization and resistance strategies employed during this campaign that have involved first generation immigrant women working as room attendants. These actions reflect a direct focus on the cultural, social and political characteristics of these workers, revealing important insights into the dynamic interplay among agency, structure and culture when immigrant women resist and incite changes to the conditions under which they live and work.

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Section One: Introduction

Research Context and Approach

In recent years, the North American labour movement has attempted to rebuild itself and challenge the exploitative nature of the ‘new economy.’ This has involved strategizing ways in which to organize and represent the interests of workers from a variety of backgrounds across barriers of work, community, race, class and gender while also matching the organized power of large multinational employers. In this paper, I question how union-led initiatives within this context enable immigrant women workers, with their varying backgrounds, interests and challenges, to mobilize and resist the exploitation that many face in the Canadian labour market¹. The Hotel Workers Rising campaign, led by UNITE HERE², serves as a prime example of an initiative that addresses these issues. This on-going movement, begun in December of 2005, aims to improve the working conditions of hotel employees in cities across North America. Using secondary data and empirical data collected in Toronto in 2006 and 2007, I explore how this campaign has tapped into the collective agency of immigrant women working as room attendants through various mobilization and resistance strategies that have involved workers and the broader community. I argue that the union leaders and worker activists at the forefront of this campaign have supported a feminist and anti-racist discourse that is central to dominant North American union renewal strategies. I argue further that this has contributed significantly to the

¹ I use the term “immigrant” in straightforward, legal terms, to regard anyone who was born outside Canada and has attained permanent residency as a landed immigrant or full Canadian citizenship. “Migrant” refers to those who are legal workers on contract, who will likely return to their land of origin, or undocumented workers who do not have legal status. ‘Im/migrant’ is used to refer to all of these categories as a whole.

² UNITE stands for the former Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees, which merged with HERE, the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union in 2004, as discussed in the third section of this paper.

mobilization of workers and targeted the systematically racialized, gendered structures that condition these women's work.

While there is a growing literature on immigrant women working in low-wage jobs in the Canadian labour market, few studies have explored ways in which transformative measures have been (or might be) employed to challenge the situations that they face. Canadian scholarship on gender and immigration has tended to focus instead on the 'victimization' of these workers, deconstructing structural barriers and policy implications that have limited skilled immigrant workers' access to jobs that meet their qualifications and contribute to a growing racialized and gendered "economic apartheid" (Galabuzi 2003; 2006). These processes depict women's and immigrants' entry into the labor force as it correlates with global capital's search for cheap, flexible labour. This has revealed processes of labour segmentation and discrimination that have been mediated by historically rooted social and cultural constructions (i.e. not biological facts). Such insights are central to this work and I do not therefore intend to devalue them. However, I do intend to emphasize the collective organizing potential and agency of immigrant women who hold exploitative jobs in the Canadian service-sector. This focus represents an emerging literature that concentrates on ways in which immigrant workers in low-wage service jobs are essential to the functions of the 'new economy.' Such scholarship has revealed that new forms of political and social mobilization can arise from this indispensability (Aguilar and Herod 2006; Burawoy 2000; Mohanty 1997; Sassen 1998).

In related works, unionization has represented the most direct manner through which change to present structures might occur. To this end, a number of studies have concentrated on union renewal strategies that have employed large-scale campaigns to match the power of global employers and actively involve rank-and file members in low-wage workforces dominated by

immigrant populations (Milkman and Voss 2004; Moody 1997; Hurd, Milkman and Turner: 2003; Cranford 2004; Rudy 2004). Explorations of union renewal strategies either in the hotel industry and/or in a Canadian context are limited, however, and have tended to explore how unions might better recruit and represent diverse, precariously employed workforces at the local level (Black 2005; Cranford and Ladd 2003; Shenck 2006; Tufts 2003; 2006a; 2006b). This literature has not adequately explored the changing infrastructure of either the global economy or the Canadian labour movement itself, nor has it concentrated on how unionized resistance has represented and/or involved its members when unions attempt to challenge the global exploitative structures confronting low-wage workers. With these issues in mind, the goal of this work is to add to the growing body of literature on gender, work and immigration by achieving a greater understanding of means through which immigrant populations have participated in the transformative project of the Hotel Workers Rising campaign. Specifically, this research provides insights into challenges and potential opportunities that have involved immigrant women workers, with their varying backgrounds, interests and challenges, to mobilize and resist exploitations that they face in the hospitality industry at the local level and how this has contributed to broader social trajectories within the labour movement and labour movement renewal processes. I do so by carefully considering concepts of “agency,” “power,” and “resistance,” all integral to understanding action and how it plays out in transformative practices and strategies.

UNITE HERE’s recent strategic unionized actions comprising the Hotel Workers Rising campaign offers an advantageous and vital opportunity to explore the workings of such processes. This campaign represents the largest collective-bargaining year in the hotel industry’s history. Since late 2005, there have been no fewer than 400 hotel contracts up for negotiation

involving over 60 000 workers across North America. Based on the increasingly exploitative, globalized nature of the hospitality industry, UNITE HERE has fought to achieve more power at the bargaining table by bringing together both workers and members of the broader community and labour movement. Through such measures, they have attempted to influence and put pressure on the North American hospitality industry to make changes to how it treats its workers.

In Toronto specifically, UNITE HERE Local 75 began contract negotiations with 23 hotels on January 31, 2006. These negotiations have involved a series of public events garnering support from the broader public for its 7500 members. Embedded in the actions that have taken place are hundreds of immigrant women from low-income countries, predominantly from the Philippines and the Caribbean, who hold most of the 'back-of-house' positions in these hotels working as room attendants. These women work in this heavily gendered, racialized, 'flexible' employment without mobility, for low wages under increasingly harsh, physically strenuous conditions as the hotels attempt to meet competitive industry standards and consumer demands. In turn, they have been at the centre of this labour struggle, participating with members of their wider communities in strong and visible coalitions. However, because of their political engagement, many of the women actively involved risk creating potential tensions in their workplaces among management, supervisors and co-workers, and even dismissal. They take these risks within a labour market where gaining employment is often difficult. This situation signifies a need to explore the structure of the hotel industry and this campaign. Doing so will reveal insights into strategies and challenges unions confront as they attempt to both account for particular workers and workplaces, and initiate sufficient collective action that is able to challenge national and global capitalist forces (Savage 2006: 231).

Overview

The following section of this paper begins with a discussion of literature that explores contemporary changes within both the North American economy and the labour movement, concentrating on the role played by immigrant women working low-wage jobs. I then shed light on ways in which to conceptualize and understand these women's agency and (potential) resistance within these processes. In section three, I describe work carried out by room attendants in Toronto, emphasizing changes imposed by the tourism and hospitality industry over the last decade that have put increased pressures on room attendants and deepened labour segmentation within the hotels. Following this, I discuss how UNITE HERE's structures have changed amid these increasingly exploitative practices. Having established the impetus for the Hotel Workers Rising campaign, I then discuss actions that were initially carried out in order to launch the movement in the US and Canada. Subsequent sub-sections discuss strategies and tactics employed by UNITE HERE in Toronto during 2006 and 2007, examining the progress of the Hotel Workers Rising campaign to date. Insights into what role immigrant women working as room attendants have played in the construction of the campaign, its challenges and successes are discussed leading into a consideration of possible future directions of both the campaign and the Toronto labour movement more generally. The paper concludes with a discussion of findings from this research, broader implications of this study, and directions for future work.