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Women and Labor: Evolution of Housekeeping Work Around the Globe

Beijing +20: Women and the Economy

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Abstract

As stated in the Beijing Platform for Action, Women and Labor is a key area of concern for women's human rights; but how can activists utilize these goals to affect change in the lives of everyday women around the globe? In this paper, I will seek to describe the struggles female housekeeping workers face in North Carolina, in the United States, and globally. I will then provide strategies for translating the Platform for Action into industry-specific tactics for furthering equality and human rights. Student Action with Workers, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is my main best practice organization, showing how outsiders, in this case students, can work alongside women to address grievances and enact change. I will also look at the successes and best practices of Local 150, an organization working for housekeepers at North Carolina State University, the New York Hotel Trades Council and the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy. On the global stage, the IUF international union compiles research on housekeeping workers worldwide and attempts to connect these workers with needed resources while the Ritz-Carlton hotel chain demonstrates employer best practices. These groups' various strategies, including alliances with local politicians, provide important lessons for all attempting to improve the lives of working women.

Introduction

My personal introduction to labor in North Carolina comes thanks to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) Kenan Eminent Professor, in the Department of History, Zaragosa Vargas. In his "American Labor History Seminar" I first learned about the struggles of workers and unions in this state and around the country, gaining a new appreciation for worker solidarity and the power of collective bargaining. With the encouragement of the WomenNC team, I narrowed my focus to UNC housekeepers, local connection, and hotel housekeepers throughout the US and



worldwide, national and global connection. I believe this topic can illuminate the unique challenges women often face in low-paid service work. Meanwhile, my best practice organizations demonstrate unique and varied solutions for advancing women's fundamental human rights, often facing harsh legal and institutional environments. In the 20 years since the introduction of the Beijing Platform for Action, working women's human rights have greatly improved, but much work remains. I hope my research may inspire further study of the possibility of human rights frameworks in advancing fair labor conditions, improving worker satisfaction and protecting human dignity in all industries.

Local

North Carolina is the least unionized state in the entire United States, thanks to anti-union labor laws, making advocating on working women's behalf even more difficult than it is for most states. How do various organizations confront this challenge and succeed in securing better labor conditions for workers without political power? Student Action with Workers (SAW) utilizes the power of students, while UE 150, the North Carolina Public Workers' Union, has mobilized despite many legal ramifications.¹ Through these methods, greater provisions for workers and concrete improvement have been achieved since the introduction of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995.

The history of labor in North Carolina involves an anti-union stance from businesses and government. While textile factories and agricultural plants, notably hog farming and tobacco processing, remain important aspects of the North Carolina economy, union growth never reached this southern state. According to MaryBe McMillan, North Carolina AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer, most unions in the state merely act as advocacy organizations, especially those working with public

¹ SAW, established in 2004, is a UNC student group dedicated to worker power and enacting change.



employees.^{2,3} North Carolina public employees are legally prohibited from bargaining collectively under North Carolina General Statute 95-98, passed in 1959.⁴ Despite this, SAW has accomplished more worker protections in concert with UNC housekeepers, demonstrating the power to improve the lives of women and secure human dignity and human rights, even outside of organized labor.

Student Action with Workers and The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), the oldest public university in the United States, housekeepers, an often-unseen workforce, labor 24/7 to continue to support university operations. Composed overwhelmingly of women, mostly low-income African-American, Hispanic and Burmese refugees, housekeepers work one of three shifts, in pairs.⁵ Housekeeping management is mostly male, often returning veterans. Over the past twenty years, conflict between management and workers, especially surrounding sexual harassment and unsafe working conditions have become visible and were resolved with the help of Student Action with Workers, a fully student-run organization.⁶ More work remains; especially needed are systemic and long-lasting changes in employee and manager relations, which SAW has not yet been successful in addressing.

With a membership of around 25 students, SAW addresses housekeeping worker complaints if they arise within the UNC campus. When that is the case, SAW works to create an action plan alongside workers to address grievances and make these issues public. In addition to focusing on

² Interview with the author.

³ The AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of International Organizations) is the largest union federation in the United States.

⁴ NC General Statute 95-98. 1959.

http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter_95/GS_95-98.html

⁵ Chapel Hill, North Carolina contains a large Burmese refugee population, primarily of the Karen ethnic group.

⁶ Conflict between employees often occurs between management and subordinates, which tends to also have a gender divide. See Kanter, Rosabeth Moss. *The Impact of Hierarchical Structures on the Work Behavior of Women and Men* for more information.



UNC housekeepers, SAW also pressures UNC administrators to cut ties with unsafe clothing manufacturers, specifically in Bangladesh. Established in 2004, SAW grew to work alongside with UNC Housekeepers, who had organized in the UNC Housekeepers' Association throughout the 1990s. Following the end of the Housekeepers' Association in the early 2000s, SAW became the main avenue for housekeeper organization on campus.

According to former SAW member Ivanna Gonzalez, the strength of SAW, founded in 2003, lies in the unique position students have to leverage university official support and utilize media outlets. In 2011, housekeepers listed their issues— verbally abusive and threatening supervisors—to members of SAW, who then created action items presented at the annual UNC system-wide Board of Governors' meeting.⁷ This, as well as coverage by student publications including the newspaper *The Daily Tar Heel*, led to management change, an outside review of UNC housekeeping practices, and attempts to increase organization within UNC housekeeping.^{8,9} SAW's best practice is the ability of a non-union advocacy group to build the support of benefactors (students) of housekeeper's services, while students use their position to advocate on workers' behalves for university administration.

Despite these numerous successes, SAW continues to confront challenges in advocating for worker rights. Common management practice in UNC housekeeping is to pair workers of different ethnic groups, who often do not speak the same language, making communication and efficient work difficult. Furthermore, efforts to introduce regular worker meetings to organize and share grievances are thwarted by workers' varied work schedules, language barriers, and, finally, by lack

⁷ The Board of Governors is a non-elected body that makes administrative decisions for all 17 University of North Carolina system schools, including UNC-Chapel Hill.

⁸ McNeill, Claire. *Year in Review: Housekeeping reform focuses on long-term, quality changes*. ND. *The Daily Tar Heel*.

⁹ Quine, Katie. *UNC housekeepers' struggle for equal rights continues*. ND. *The Daily Tar Heel*.



of trust between housekeeping workers. Lacking the ability to easily communicate and time to meet together, housekeepers do not feel a communal atmosphere when attempting to enact any change in the large institution that is the University of North Carolina.

Over the past 20 years, since the introduction of the Beijing Platform for Action, housekeeping working conditions have greatly improved. In 1991, the UNC Housekeepers Association was founded to lobby UNC to demand better pay and working conditions. After a historic lawsuit, in which the university promised remuneration, workers continue to organize and request the proceeds from the lawsuit. Though a legal success, little material change was won. In the 2000's, after Student Action with Workers foundation, mobilization continued and students also began to lobby on workers' behalves.¹⁰ Following the successful 2011 SAW campaign, SAW leaders continue to partner with UNC housekeepers and attempt to organize across racial and linguistic lines, despite the challenges described above. The past two decades have seen improvements for UNC housekeepers, but the fight continues.

National

Nationwide, the struggle for better working conditions for female housekeeping workers has achieved various successes, including the raised minimum wage for hotel workers in Los Angeles in 2014. The industry most similar to university housekeeping throughout the United States, and the world, remains hotel work, in which many women work. Furthermore, racial divides and lack of unionization cause difficulties for enacting positive change. Likewise, these workers often represent the overlooked labor that supports America's metropolises: immigrants, racial minorities and low-income service workers. Hotel workers as part of the tourism industry also have a significant

¹⁰ "UNC Labor History." UNC-CH Student Action with Workers. 2005. <https://uncsaw.wordpress.com/unc-labor-history/>



impact throughout the country. As of 2004, “one in eight Americans [was] employed by the tourism industry...and tourism as an American industry [ranked] first in terms of global international export earnings.”¹¹ The lessons from national struggles for improved human rights for female housekeeping workers lie in the importance of a multifaceted approach and promise of cities as areas for change to garner support for increased wages and better working conditions.

LAANE

In November 2014, the Los Angeles City Council passed by a 12-3 vote a resolution to raise hotel workers’ minimum wage to \$15.37, a landmark decision in one of the United States’ largest tourist destination. This success is largely thanks to the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) and their RAISE L.A. campaign and coalition. This resolution, affecting thousands of workers currently living below the poverty line, demonstrates the power of non-union advocacy groups in promoting change for working women.

LAANE, founded in 1993, has contributed to many labor successes in Los Angeles. Founded as a bridge between organized labor and community groups, LAANE engages in extensive community outreach and political networking to better the lives of workers throughout L.A. LAANE’s structure is based in looking outside typical labor union activities to build coalitions with various non-profits, canvas door-to-door, and harness the mobilization of workers.¹² In 1997, LAANE’s work culminated in the city’s “living wage” ordinance, a landmark legislation that resulted in subsequent living wage acts in cities across the US.¹³ The ordinance mandated higher pay for

¹¹ Adler, Patricia A. and Peter Adler. *Paradise Laborers: Hotel Work in the Global Economy*. 2004. Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, p 4.

¹² “How We Win.” Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy. 2011. <http://www.laane.org/what-we-do/how-we-win/>

¹³ Zahniser, David and Emily Alpert Reyes. “L.A. City Council approves minimum-wage hike for hotel workers.” *L.A. Times*. September 24, 2014. <http://www.latimes.com/local/cityhall/la-me-hotel-minimum-wage-20140925-story.html#page=1>



workers on city contracts, which then spread to Austin, Texas, Phoenix, Arizona, and other cities. LAANE's executive director Roxana Tynan stated that "cities should serve as the laboratories for change."¹⁴ As a non-union advocacy group, LAANE shows the power of looking outside typical labor structures to work for human rights of women and the dramatic increase in standard of living over the past 20 years.

LAANE's RAISE L.A. campaign focused on hotel workers, as one of the most impoverished industries for low-wage workers, and one of the fastest growing and profitable industries for corporate entities. Based on LAANE's estimates, the wage increase from an average hourly wage for L.A. maids and housekeepers at \$9.03 to \$15.37 results in "improved wages or benefits for 121,000 workers and yielded them \$2 billion in economic benefits."¹⁵ The state-wide California minimum wage is \$9. Before the wage increase, the Economic Policy Institute estimated that 40% of hotel workers in Los Angeles lived below the poverty line; the highest percentage of all industries measured, and higher than the average across all industries of 26%.¹⁶ Hotels with over 300 rooms will have to meet the \$15.37 minimum wage in July 2015, while hotels with over 125 rooms will have to reach the minimum wage by 2016.¹⁷ The landmark legislation also includes five paid sick days and tip protection policies; LAANE reported that previously 70% L.A. hospitality workers had no paid sick time.¹⁸ UNITE HERE reported that the raise will increase hotel workers' salaries by an average of \$9,000--above a previous average of just \$18,000, in one of the most expensive cities in

¹⁴ Greenhouse, Steven. "The Fight for 15.37 an Hour." *The New York Times*. November 22, 2014.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/23/business/how-a-coalition-pushed-for-a-hotel-workers-minimum-wage.html>

¹⁵ Greenhouse, Steven. "The Fight for 15.37 an Hour." *The New York Times*. November 22, 2014.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/23/business/how-a-coalition-pushed-for-a-hotel-workers-minimum-wage.html>

¹⁶ Murray, Bobbi. "Historic Wage Vote Tomorrow." *Capital and Main*. September 23, 2014.

<http://capitalandmain.com/historic-wage-vote-tomorrow/>

¹⁷ Murray, Bobbi. "Historic Wage Vote Tomorrow." *Capital and Main*. September 23, 2014.

<http://capitalandmain.com/historic-wage-vote-tomorrow/>

¹⁸ "How Good Hotel Jobs Will Boost Local Businesses, Strengthen Neighborhoods and Renew Our Economy." RAISE LA. July 2013. <http://www.laane.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Raise-LA-Report-FINAL-SMALL.pdf>



America--adding millions of dollars in consumer spending to the Los Angeles economy.¹⁹

Furthermore, an estimated 75% of the cost of the raise will fall on tourists to the city, rather than locals or small businesses.²⁰

Women and minorities overwhelmingly work in Los Angeles's hospitality sector, and greatly benefit from the new minimum wage ordinance. In interviews, women detailed what they can now accomplish: buying a house, sending a daughter to graduate school and simply being able to pay their bills and take their kids to eat at Chuck E. Cheese.²¹ Following the success of the hotel worker campaign, LAANE has set their sights on raising the minimum wage for the entire city of Los Angeles to \$13.25, which would be the third highest minimum wage in the country (after Seattle and San Francisco). Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti publicly supports the city-wide minimum wage increase as LAANE continues to build coalitions and lobby for City Council support.²² RAISE L.A.'s success is paving the way for increased pay and standard of living for workers of all kinds, but the beginning focus on hospitality work represents the importance of the hospitality industry. A majority minority and female populace, greater pay and labor standards for hotel maids and housekeepers decreases job turnover rate, and often allows for increased efficiency.²³

¹⁹ "Hotel Workers Win \$15.37 Hotel Minimum Wage in Los Angeles." UNITE HERE. October 14, 2014. <http://unitehere.org/unite-here-helps-win-15-37-hotel-minimum-wage-in-los-angeles/>

²⁰ Murray, Bobbi. "Historic Wage Vote Tomorrow." *Capital and Main*. September 23, 2014. <http://capitalandmain.com/historic-wage-vote-tomorrow/>

²¹ Greenhouse, Steven. "The Fight for 15.37 an Hour." *The New York Times*. November 22, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/23/business/how-a-coalition-pushed-for-a-hotel-workers-minimum-wage.html?_r=0, Rosenberg, Tina. "An L.A. Story: Unions Show Sign of Life." *The New York Times*. November 5, 2014. http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/11/06/in-los-angeles-unions-show-signs-of-life/?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&version=Moth-Visible&module=inside-nyt-region®ion=inside-nyt-region&WT.nav=inside-nyt-region&_r=1

²² Greenhouse, Steven. "The Fight for 15.37 an Hour." *The New York Times*. November 22, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/23/business/how-a-coalition-pushed-for-a-hotel-workers-minimum-wage.html>

²³ Murray, Bobbi. "Historic Wage Vote Tomorrow." *Capital and Main*. September 23, 2014. <http://capitalandmain.com/historic-wage-vote-tomorrow/>



Through LAANE's efforts, the benefits to both employees and employers for better pay and worker treatment becomes clear, as well as benefits to larger communities. If successful, a city-wide minimum wage increase would also demonstrate the leadership role that improving hospitality work can provide; a focus on improving the lives of working women and minorities can reverberate to improve the lives of thousands and even millions, if other U.S. cities follow the lead of Los Angeles.

Global

The worldwide process of globalization has resulted in more women than ever entering the workforce, especially in low-income service jobs like hotel housekeeping work. As service and tourism jobs grow throughout the developed and developing world, many women migrate to secure better jobs and send remittances to their home countries—a large economic benefit to lower-income countries, so much so that many countries encourage emigration and remittances as official economic policy. Within this global context, the International Labor Organization (ILO) works through their Solidarity Center to provide resources to low-income service workers around the globe. Furthermore, the worldwide Ritz-Carlton hotel system demonstrates the power of employers in promoting good working environments for women. In an industry as widespread and potentially exploitative as hotel work, human rights can play an important role in informing international agreements and setting standards for all countries, rather than relying solely on national law, which is often slower to enact change. The role of human rights activists and treaties like the Beijing Platform for Action is clear; to hold national governments and the international community to higher standards, create accountability for prior agreements and advocate on behalf of and elevate the voices of women around the world often toiling without recognition.



IUF

The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), founded in 1920, connects workers worldwide to a trade union federation in order to organize across the globe. Based in Geneva, Switzerland, IUF is “composed of 395 trade unions in 125 countries representing a combined representational membership of over 12 million workers.”²⁴ As part of their efforts, IUF includes a focus on human rights and gender across all industries, and especially in hotel work.

Recent reports from Africa, Asia and Latin America enumerate the IUF’s role in promoting hotel worker safe working conditions. IUF’s 2012 report entitled “From Lusaka to Accra: More women, doing more, building our unions” shows the important progress throughout 16 African nations for promoting women’s status in labor. In Zambia, for example, IUF affiliates secured breastfeeding breaks and sexual harassment protections for hotel workers, while South African leaders won improved maternity leave and HIV/AIDs policies throughout hotel chains.²⁵ In 2014, IUF organized surrounding the living wage in the tourism industry in Asia as part of the global initiative “Make Up My Workplace!” From Malaysia to the Philippines, women hotel housekeepers face human rights of labor violations in the form of sexual harassment, discrimination, forced and child labor, and wage theft. IUF reported that the “physical exertion and physical endurance of housekeepers”--including lifting heavy mattresses, cleaning rooms in under 15 minutes, and exposure to toxic chemicals--is comparable to that of athletes.²⁶ Housekeepers, however, are consistently undervalued--IUF found that in Manila, Philippines, only 20% of housekeepers are

²⁴ “Building Global Solidarity.” The IUF. 2009. <http://www.iuf.org/w/?q=node/149>

²⁵ Mather, Celia. “From Lusaka to Accra: More women, doing more, building our unions.” *The IUF*. May 2012. <http://www.iuf.org/w/sites/default/files/2012%20From%20Lusaka%20to%20Accra%20-%20More%20Women%2C%20doing%20more%2C%20building%20our%20unions.pdf>

²⁶ “Make Up My Workplace!” The IUF. September 2014. <http://www.iuf.org/w/sites/default/files/HG%20Stockholm%2C%2025%20September%202014.pdf>



permanent employees in international hotel chains. This means that 80% are contracted out to private companies, which normally pay workers less and provide few workplace protections, making these workers more vulnerable to exploitation. Finally, IUF partners in Argentina achieved great gains in the form of a national wage agreement of a 35% pay raise for workers in 4 and 5 star hotels, allowing salaries to keep up with country-wide inflation.²⁷

IUF's work connects hotel workers around the globe, amplifies the voices of working women and sheds light on human rights abuses. On Dec. 3-10 IUF marked the Global Week of Action for hotel housekeepers' rights with worldwide marches and protests.²⁸ The wide scope of the organization demonstrates the power of global networks in addressing the common challenges faced by women in hotel work.

Ritz-Carlton: Worker Satisfaction

The Ritz-Carlton luxury hotel chain operates 87 hotels in 29 countries around the globe, employing 35,000 people.²⁹ The world-renowned customer service is belied by a positive work environment for employees from managers to housekeepers. Unlike comparable luxury hotels, where non-management employee turnover is an average of 44%, Ritz-Carlton's employee turnover is 25%.³⁰ This is in part thanks to a company culture that focuses on good management practices, but mostly thanks to the investment Ritz-Carlton places in each employee. Rather than contracting work out to third-party companies, the hotel chain manages their own staff and spends an average

²⁷ "Argentinian UTHGRA signs national wage agreement for HRCT workers." The IUF. July 2014. <http://www.iuf.org/w/?q=node/3558>

²⁸ "Global action spotlights campaign for hotel housekeepers' rights." The IUF. December 2014. <http://www.iuf.org/w/?q=node/3862>

²⁹ "Fact Sheet." The Ritz-Carlton. 2015. <http://www.ritzcarlton.com/en/Corporate/Facts/Default.htm>

³⁰ McDonald, Duff. "Roll Out the Blue Carpet." *CNNMoney*. May 1, 2004. http://money.cnn.com/magazines/business2/business2_archive/2004/05/01/368262/



of \$5,000 per new hire, in addition to a 21-day orientation course.³¹ Since 1992, when Ritz-Carlton became the first hotel to win Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, a Congressional award for high-quality management practices, the hotel chain has exemplified good management practices, including fair treatment for housekeeping workers.³² The Ritz-Carlton demonstrates the importance of worker satisfaction through decent working conditions, decent pay and human rights protections in hotels around the globe.

How can we use the Beijing Platform for Action?

Under the “Women and the Economy” diagnosis of the Beijing Platform for Action, many actions already taken by these organizations were recommended. Specifically, Student Action with Workers and their fight against sexual harassment of UNC housekeepers falls under strategic objective F.5, while IUF’s work for laws regarding breastfeeding and maternal leave fall under strategic objective F.1.³³ These best practice organizations exemplify the use of gender-based frameworks in analyzing the hotel industry, through the effect on low-income women and racial minorities. To this end, many objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action are being completed, however, much work remains. As LAANE sets an example in securing wage raises, city governments across the United States and around the world can follow their lead in protecting the rights of hotel workers. Furthermore, citizens and groups must continue to push beyond the municipal level for state and federal action in promoting the human rights of women in the economy, and achieving the as-yet unfulfilled goals of the Beijing Platform for Action.

³¹McDonald, Duff. “Roll Out the Blue Carpet.” *CNNMoney*. May 1, 2004.

http://money.cnn.com/magazines/business2/business2_archive/2004/05/01/368262/

³² McDowell, Edwin. “Ritz-Carlton’s Keys to Good Service.” *The New York Times*. March 31, 1993.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/31/business/ritz-carlton-s-keys-to-good-service.html>

³³ Strategic objective F.5: “Eliminate occupational segregation and all forms of employment discrimination.” Strategic objective F.1: “Promote women’s economic rights and independence, including access to employment, appropriate working conditions and control over economic resources.”



Conclusion

Two decades after the Beijing Platform for Action, important successes have been won for housekeepers at UNC, in the US, and around the globe. In many ways, legal changes have brought improved lives for working women, protecting human rights and dignity. Reflecting on the various organizations dedicated to housekeepers and better working conditions, I believe that the promise of Beijing is getting closer to the lives of many women. As the tourism industry remains prominent across the globe and fellow university students depend on the work of housekeepers, I hope an appreciation for this often-back breaking labor can spread through the world. In the next twenty years, organizations like SAW, LAANE and IUF will undoubtedly witness more success, and perhaps more employers, like Ritz-Carlton, will assume responsibility for safe, fair and humane working conditions for all.



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