



People demonstrate in front of InterContinental Hotel as unionized hotel workers in Los Angeles and Orange County, California, go on strike in Los Angeles July 2. (OSV News/Reuters/David Swanson)



Kimberley Heatherington

[View Author Profile](#)



[View Author Profile](#)

## [\*\*Join the Conversation\*\*](#)

July 3, 2023

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

In a move strategically timed to coincide with Fourth of July holiday tourism, hotel workers in Southern California walked off the job July 2, asking for higher wages, affordable family health care, a retirement pension, and manageable workloads.

Contracts between 61 Los Angeles and Orange County hotels and members of Unite Here — a labor union representing 300,000 workers across Canada and the U.S. in the hotel, gaming, food service, manufacturing, textile, distribution, laundry, transportation and airport industries — expired the night of June 30.

Impacted are more than 15,000 cooks, housekeepers, dishwashers, bartenders, front desk agents, food servers, bellmen, hosts, laundry attendants, banquet servers, phone operators, lobby cleaners, concierges, spa workers and bussers at major brands and properties such as Hilton, Hyatt, Marriott and Sheraton — some of which now feature picket lines.

"It's really about making sure that the workers here get what they deserve," Maria Hernandez, a communications representative from the union, said in a statement. "It's a huge weekend this weekend. There's Fourth of July, there's [the] Anime Expo happening here in downtown L.A., and so folks are fed up, and they're ready and they're willing to fight for as long as it takes."

Workers are asking for a \$10-an-hour wage increase to keep pace with the rising cost of housing.

"Our members were devastated first by the pandemic, and now by the greed of their bosses," Kurt Petersen, co-president of Unite Here Local 11, said in a July 2 statement. "The industry got bailouts while we got cuts. Now, the hotel negotiators decided to take a four-day holiday instead of negotiating. Shameful."

Advertisement

On its website, Unite Here Local 11 claimed "during the pandemic, hotels received \$15 billion in federal bailouts and cut jobs and guest services such as daily room cleaning. In 2023, hotel profits in Los Angeles and Orange County surpassed pre-pandemic levels. Yet hospitality workers struggle to afford a place to live in the cities where they work and are forced to move further away because wages are not keeping pace with the cost of housing."

According to Unite Here Local 11, 53% of workers they surveyed said that "they either have moved in the past 5 years or will move in the near future because of soaring housing costs."

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development considers \$66,750 per year for a one-person household as the "low income" threshold in LA County. But in order to afford the average \$2,781-a-month, 788-square-foot Los Angeles apartment — spending no more than the recommended 30% of income — more than \$100,000 in income is required.

Both popes and prelates have spoken directly to the issue of strikes.

The Catholic Church has an extensive history of teaching and actions from past popes — Pope Leo XIII, St. John XXIII, St. Paul VI and St. John Paul II to Pope Benedict XVI, among others — that support the rights of workers.

St. John Paul stated in his encyclical [\*Laborem Exercens\*](#) (1981) that strikes are "recognized by Catholic social teaching as legitimate in the proper conditions and within just limits. ... Workers should be assured the right to strike, without being subjected to personal penal sanctions for taking part in a strike."

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter "[Economic Justice for All](#)" (1986) advises, "Unions may also legitimately resort to strikes where this is the only available means to the justice owed workers."

The affected hotels have indicated they plan to outlast the striking workers. Keith Grossman, spokesperson for the coordinated hotel bargaining group, [told LAist.com](#), "We are aware that some of the associates at several downtown and Westside hotels are engaging in a work stoppage. This activity was expected. We are fully prepared to continue to operate these hotels and to take care of our guests as long as the disruption lasts."

Grossman said, "We also remain available to meet with the union whenever its leaders decide to make themselves available to resume negotiations."