

Boycott of downtown Portland Hilton Hotel picks up steam

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

The union boycott of the Portland Hilton Hotel & Executive Tower has picked up a good deal of momentum in recent months. UNITE HERE Local 9, which represents 275 workers there, says the hotel has lost hundreds of thousands of dollars of revenue since Oct. 26, 2007, when workers voted to approve the boycott.

With political season heating up, those losses will likely continue to mount.

The Democratic Party of Oregon told the Hilton it won't schedule events or hotel stays this year if the hotel doesn't reach agreement with the union by April 15. Based on previous campaign years, that could cost the Hilton \$600,000 in lost business. True to that promise, when presidential candidate Barack Obama and his entourage visited Portland March 20-21, they stayed at the Benson Hotel, a different union hotel, on the recommendation of the state party.

And a growing number of politicians are signing the boycott pledge — promising not to eat, sleep or meet at the Portland Hilton until workers have

a decent contract.

Precisely because it is a unionized hotel with sizable meeting space, the Portland Hilton is normally a favored location for Democratic events and hotel stays. But workers there have been without a contract since September. They voted overwhelmingly to call a boycott, and in December their boycott got the endorsement of the Oregon AFL-CIO.

The biggest sticking point in bargaining is a union push to lower the housekeeper cleaning quota to 15 rooms per eight-hour shift from the current quota of 16 rooms. UNITE HERE is also proposing paid time off, reduced-cost bus passes, and annual hourly wage increases of 40 cents for tipped workers (currently at minimum wage) and 80 cents for non-tipped workers like housekeepers (currently at \$10.10 an hour).

Five months in, the boycott campaign is beginning to shine a light on who labor's friends are. Boycott coordinator Eryn Slack has been working non-stop pushing the pledge. Some politicians have gone out of their way to sign; others won't return her calls.

Oregon House Speaker (and U.S.

Senate candidate) Jeff Merkley is honoring the boycott, despite getting heat for it. After he signed a letter calling on groups to schedule events elsewhere, he got flack from members of the business community, including the Oregon Lodging Association. His chief opponent in the Democratic primary, Steve Novick, has also signed the boycott pledge. Incumbent U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, a Republican, has not; nor has U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden.

Congressman David Wu was on his way to a Feb. 19 Volunteers of America event at the Hilton, at which he was an invited speaker, when he saw a union picket and turned around.

Congressman Peter DeFazio cancelled an event planned at the Hilton after his office learned of the boycott.

John Kroger, candidate for Oregon attorney general, has signed the boycott pledge.

Oregon Senate Majority Leader Kate Brown, a candidate for Oregon secretary of state, returned a \$500 campaign contribution from the Hilton after it was reported on www.politicker.com, and later signed the boycott pledge.

Portland Commissioner Erik Sten



has signed the pledge, but commissioner Randy Leonard has not. Mayor Tom Potter says he won't take sides in the labor dispute. Two Portland city council candidates have also signed the pledge: Jim Middaugh and Jeff Bissonette.

It took some persistence on Slack's part, but Portland Commissioner Sam Adams, candidate for Portland mayor, is now on board; he came in person to the UNITE HERE office to sign the pledge and get a union T-shirt. His chief opponent in the mayor's race, Sho Dozono, has not signed the pledge. Dozono campaign manager Amie Abbott said the campaign hasn't heard from the union, but that Dozono is honoring the boycott. Slack flatly contradicted that, saying she's spoken and exchanged e-mails with Abbott and Dozono. And a UNITE HERE member spotted Dozono at the Hilton attending a Feb. 25 fundraiser for Cascade Aids Project.

Besides Cascade Aids Project, other non-profit groups have refused to pull their events, including the League of Women Voters, which has its national convention scheduled at the Hilton June 10-18. Volunteers of America held its Depriest Award Dinner at the Hilton, the event Wu balked at attending. Portland City Council candidate Nick Fish, a VOA board member, also refused to attend.

One Hilton event caused UNITE HERE some consternation — a long-planned Martin Luther King Day celebration organized by The Skanner newspaper. Many politicians, including Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski, felt they could not refuse to attend. Others, like Merkley, still declined to attend, in solidarity with workers.

Still, Slack has tallied at least 10 outright cancellations, and 15 other events that have been or will be scheduled elsewhere. Groups pay a substantial cancellation fee if they pull out after committing to reserve space, so

that kind of solidarity doesn't come cheaply. Among the groups that have cancelled: ACLU of Oregon, Planned Parenthood, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, Jewish Federation of Portland, and the Portland Community College Foundation.

Unionists too have sacrificed for the sake of the boycott. Tualatin Valley Fire Fighters pulled an event and paid a cancellation fee. And the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters was due to have a major event at the Hilton in May; canceling cost \$25,000.

When Gov. Kulongoski hosted a regional meeting on responses to climate change at the Hilton Jan. 10, Oregon AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Barbara Byrd found herself unable to attend, even though she'd been advocating for months that the union movement be a part of global warming discussions. But the principle of not crossing a picket line is one that staunch unionists take seriously. And even when there aren't picketers outside, UNITE HERE says its boycott serves as an invisible picket line.

Under a nationwide agreement with the Hilton corporation, the company is neutral toward unionizing campaigns, and both parties agree not to trash each other in public. True to that agreement, UNITE HERE isn't disparaging the hotel or its management. But the union is serious about the boycott, even going so far as to recommend going to the nonunion Portland Marriott if the unionized Benson or Paramount hotels can't accommodate an event.

The two sides haven't had a negotiating session since Jan. 23, but in mid-March, the Hilton called to set up another session, set for April 4.

Thus far, management has met the union half way on its wage proposal for non-tipped workers, but hasn't agreed to lower the room cleaning quota or agreed to the other employee proposals.

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