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Bargaining continues for first contract at Vancouver Hilton

VANCOUVER — Portland-based UNITE HERE Local 9 may be near to obtaining a first union contract for about 150 workers at the Hilton Vancouver Washington hotel.

Workers there joined the union in June 2006 under a neutrality agreement with the hotel's builders, but nearly two years later, most are still earning at or near Washington's minimum wage and are without a union contract. The hotel is owned by the City of Vancouver and was built to serve Vancouver's convention center. Hilton Hotels Corporation has the contract to manage it.

Bargaining sessions are scheduled for June 23-24, and Rick Sawyer, secretary-treasurer of Seattle-based UNITE HERE Local 8, is hopeful for a breakthrough. Sawyer is UNITE HERE's area vice president and is in charge of bargaining for the Vancouver unit.

In the last month, the company reached tentative agreements on generous terms with units in Portland and Seattle, and Sawyer thinks hotel management is ready for labor peace after bruising boycotts in those two cities. The union didn't boycott the Vancouver location because the hotel is not yet well-established, Sawyer said.

At bargaining sessions in early June, the company agreed to contract features for the Vancouver unit that are standard in other UNITE HERE contracts, and all that remains is for the two sides to come to agreement on wages and benefits. The hotel has said the Vancouver location is unprofitable, and made financial records available to the union

to back that up.

UNITE HERE is trying to build regional solidarity among hotel workers. The new Portland and Seattle contracts were bargained to expire on the same date in 2011, and the union wants the Vancouver contract to have the same expiration date. Seattle workers have ratified their contract, and a vote is pending in Portland to do that, but Sawyer said the union may hold off on formally signing the contracts and ending the boycotts until all three units have reached a deal.

The Washington State Labor Council has scheduled its 2008 constitutional convention at the Hilton Vancouver on Aug. 4-7.



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