

Labor peace comes, finally, to Vancouver Hilton Hotel

VANCOUVER — Hilton Vancouver Washington workers have a second union contract, 10 months after their first one expired.

The new two-year deal, concluded by Portland-based UNITE HERE Local 9 in mid-May, covers 116 employees, including housekeeping, laundry, banquet, and restaurant workers, though not front desk. The agreement contains five 20-cent raises totaling \$1 an hour for non-tipped employees, who previously earned Washington's \$9.04-an-hour minimum wage. It also reduces housekeeper workload to no more than 10 "checkouts" per shift within a daily quota of 15 rooms.

Also, starting January 2014, working 24 hours a week will make workers eligible for employer-provided health insurance; the previous requirement was 32 hours. Workers pay \$40 a month for employee-only coverage.

The contract also increases the amount banquet servers get to keep out of the automatic "service charge" paid by convention center customers. Event schedulers may believe that a "service charge" is a gratuity that goes to workers providing the service, but it's common in the catering industry for the employer to keep all or part of it.

Hilton manages the 226-room hotel and adjacent convention center under a

15-year contract with the facility's owner, the City of Vancouver's Downtown Redevelopment Authority. Previously, Hilton Vancouver banquet servers received 53 percent of the service charge; now they'll get 57 percent. With their share of the charge, banquet servers can earn in the range of \$19 an hour, said server Jillian Province.

The new contract runs through June 30, 2014. It comes after the union waged a long-running public campaign of rallies and demonstrations.

"It was really hard for us to get what we got," says Province, who's been active in the campaign for a contract.

In December, the union filed a multi-part unfair labor practice charge with the National Labor Relations Board, accusing management of interfering with a worker vote over whether to boycott the hotel. Among other things, workers were told the hotel would close if it was boycotted, and were given donuts if they voted no. Workers rejected the boycott 57-49. Then on Dec. 21, pro-union telephone operator Lucas Fielder was fired.

But Fielder was returned to work in early January, thanks to public pressure, says UNITE HERE Local 9 deputy trustee Karly Edwards. [Portland-headquartered Local 9 has been administered by the national union since 2007, when it was placed in trusteeship.] Edwards said the Hilton settled the charge without admitting guilt, and promised in a bulletin board posting that it would respect workers' union rights.

Hilton Vancouver workers have been union-represented since June 2006, when the company recognized that a majority had signed union authorization cards. But they didn't get a first contract until June 2008, and pro-union workers haven't had an easy time of it: They twice had to beat back decertification efforts by anti-union workers.

Hilton Vancouver Washington is the first hotel in the Northwest region to settle during this round of negotiations; Local 9 members in Portland at the Hilton, Benson and Paramount hotels remain without a new contract.



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