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Union hopes to organize Long Beach hotel workers

A campaign called Hope for Housekeepers focuses on Hyatt, Hilton and others, locally as well as nationally.

By Patrick J. McDonnell

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After a day's work cleaning one hotel room after another, Maria Valdivia says she's often too fatigued to play with her three children once she gets home.

"It pains me to tell my kids I don't have time for them," said Valdivia, a housekeeper at the Hyatt Regency in Long Beach. "But sometimes I'm so tired and so achy that I'm just worn out."

Valdivia was among the hundreds of hotel workers and labor activists who took to the streets of Long Beach last week to launch a national campaign dubbed Hope for Housekeepers, designed to spotlight what union leaders call substandard working conditions at Hyatt hotels nationwide. It is also part of an ongoing organizing effort at the Hyatt, Hilton and other nonunion hotels in Long Beach and elsewhere.

Hyatt officials rejected union allegations that the hotel abuses its housekeepers and is hostile to organized labor.

"The safety of our employees is always at the forefront of our minds," said Jeff C. Pace, general manager at the 528-room Hyatt Regency Long Beach, which abuts the Convention Center and overlooks the harbor. "We are not anti-union. What we are is pro-employee."

The Hyatt chain has suffered a number of public relations blows lately, notably last month,



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when a firestorm of criticism ensued after Hyatt dismissed 98 nonunion housekeepers at three Boston-area hotels and replaced them with low-wage workers from a subcontractor. The governor of Massachusetts has threatened a boycott unless Hyatt rehires the workers.

Labor representatives voice the hope that the Hyatt Regency and other Long Beach hotels will become another success story in the aggressive recruitment of low-wage, mostly immigrant workers throughout Southern California.

Unite Here Local 11, known for its militant tactics and public relations savvy, has won contracts at hotels near Los Angeles International Airport, in Santa Monica and elsewhere in recent years.

But Long Beach's huge tourism industry remains largely nonunion, posing a challenge to a resurgent organized labor network. Labor leaders say the many public subsidies granted to the hospitality industry in Long Beach mandate more equitable treatment of hotel employees and other tourism workers.

"We will make Long Beach a union town," Maria Elena Durazo, head of the L.A. County Federation of Labor, said at the union rally last week.

Organizers are seeking a so-called neutrality agreement from Hyatt and other hotels in Long Beach. That would facilitate Local 11 representation if a majority of workers sign authorization cards supporting the union. But hotel management is insisting on a vote on unionization, which is the employers' right under law.

"We truly believe that a secret ballot process is the best way to go and give everyone an opportunity to weigh in with their opinions," said Pace at the Hyatt Regency, which has roughly 350 employees, including about 80 housekeepers, and has been a waterfront fixture for more than a quarter of a century.

In Washington, big labor is pushing for federal "card check" legislation that would end the election mandate in union drives. Labor leaders say such ballots are flawed because of company coercion. But business groups vigorously object to the proposed Employee Free Choice Act, contending that card check alone allows union backers to intimidate employees into signing.

Pro-union hotel workers and their supporters marched for a mile in Long Beach last week, hoisting a massive quilt that, the union said, represented the pain and injury that housekeepers suffer on the job.

Room attendants often suffer back, shoulder and hand injuries while bending, lifting beds, cleaning and performing other tasks, labor leaders say.

A union-funded study this year of federal occupational safety data at five top hotel chains found that hotel workers have higher rates of injury than other service employees.

According to Local 11, union housekeepers in Southern California typically earn \$13 to \$16 an hour, with healthcare and pension benefits, compared with \$9 to \$12 an hour for their nonunion counterparts.

Among those protesting was Celia Alvarez, a longtime Hyatt housekeeper who says she has been out of work for more than a year with lower back and shoulder injuries. "There was always a lot of pressure to clean more rooms," said Alvarez, who accompanied the march in a wheelchair.

According to the union, housekeepers at the Hyatt in Long Beach have to clean as many as 30 rooms a day, almost double the rate at union hotels.

But Pace, the Hyatt general manager in Long Beach, said that attendants cleaned a maximum of 24 to 26 rooms a day and that completing 18 to 20 rooms a day is more typical. Many Hyatt housekeepers participate in a bonus program allowing them to earn more if they opt to clean additional rooms, the company said in a statement.

"The safety of our guests and associates is a serious concern for us," Hyatt declared. "Every associate, including housekeeping staff, undergoes extensive training to ensure a safe work environment."

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