

**HARD LABOR:
SCARED WORKERS, EXHAUSTED
EMPLOYEES, AND DECLINING STANDARDS
AT A HAWAI‘I HOTEL**

**Report of the Commission to Investigate
Labor and Management Practices
at the Pacific Beach Hotel**

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Pacific Beach Hotel, on Waikīkī Beach in Honolulu, has been a site of labor conflict for much of the past decade. In recent years, the hotel has attracted regular protests, demonstrations and picket lines, and has become the focus of an international boycott, with the hotel's labor practices targeted for protests in the U.S., Canada, Japan and the Philippines.

Hotel management has maintained that the protests are politically motivated and baseless and that their employees are happy and well-treated. Many in the local community have heard both sides of this dispute and wondered: What is the Truth? The task of our Commission is to answer to that question.

The Commission to Investigate Labor and Management Practices at the Pacific Beach Hotel is an independent, non-partisan commission composed of religious, community and academic leaders. We have no financial relationship to the hotel, the employees' union, or any interested party. During the past year, we conducted an investigation into conditions at the Pacific Beach Hotel. We solicited testimony from all hotel employees, as well the employees' union (ILWU Local 142) and the hotel's management. We conducted interviews with or received statements from thirty-eight employees—both pro- and anti-union, from every major department in the hotel, and with an average of 15 years' experience working in the hotel. Our interviews were conducted under conditions of strict confidentiality so that employees would be free to talk without fear of reprisal.

What we found disturbed all of us. For a state that relies, above all, on the ability of working- and middle-class families to support themselves in the tourism industry, the developments at Pacific Beach Hotel are very troubling. We offer our findings in the hope that they will spur our community as a whole to forge a quick and just solution to this crisis.

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A CLIMATE OF FEAR

An incredible 88 percent of all workers testifying to the Commission described intimidation, fear, threats, surveillance, or reprisals taken against union supporters—a pattern of intimidation going back to employees’ first attempts to organize a union in 2002, and continuing to the present day. Indeed, many of those interviewed insisted that their identity be kept secret—for fear that they would be fired if hotel managers knew they provided testimony to this Commission. “*Nakaam-amak ti agsarsarita*” (it is scary to be talking), explained one employee.

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Many employees reported that they would like to participate in union rallies and other activities, but do not do so out of fear that their jobs would be at risk. This fear has been greatly heightened since December 1, 2007, when 32 workers were terminated—including most of the employees’ elected negotiating committee. “I am a supporter of the union and the workers in the fight for better pay and working conditions,” explained one long-time employee. “But we are afraid of what can happen to us—like those who lost their jobs because they were active in the union. So I stopped joining the rallies.” Even inside the hotel, many employees stated that they and their coworkers are afraid to speak openly. At the Pacific Beach, one explained, “if you complain, you’re out.”

Numerous employees testified that, in the summer of 2008, they were told to sign an anti-union petition “if you want to keep your job.” More than one employee reported that they were asked to sign blank sheets of paper—and did so, too scared to refuse any management demand. Simply put, it is hard to believe that, in a democratic country, our fellow citizens toil under such conditions.

DISCRIMINATION ON THE JOB

It appears that workers’ fears are well-founded. Nearly 80 percent of those testifying reported widescale discrimination, with employees known or suspected of supporting the union having their hours cut, being given worse assignments, or being

punished for infractions that are otherwise ignored. Those who refused to sign the anti-union petition report having their work schedule cut, with hours given to newer employees with less seniority but with political views more to management's liking.

A PUNISHING WORK SCHEDULE

Since cutting off negotiations with the employees' union, Pacific Beach Hotel has significantly increased work schedules—particularly for housekeepers, who now are required to clean 17-18 rooms per day, well above the quota at nearby hotels. Housekeepers almost unanimously report that it is simply impossible to clean this number of rooms in an eight-hour shift. Although employees are entitled to a daily 30-minute lunch break, it is common for housekeepers to skip their breaks in an effort to make their room quota. With rooms often spread across several floors, and cart supplies often some distance away from the rooms, employees race through the hotel to finish their work. Indeed, one employee reported that her co-workers even avoided bathroom breaks, calculating that they couldn't afford to urinate if they wanted to finish on time. At least one housekeeper also reported staying after the end of her shift and working for free—after clocking out—in order to complete her assignment. “They treat us like we are just a machine,” said one employee, “like we don't have any feeling at all.” Yet even machines break down: one housekeeper was taken away from the hotel in an ambulance after collapsing in the middle of her shift.

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LOW PAY OR NO PAY?

Pacific Beach Hotel employees started organizing a union because, according to multiple witnesses, they went 10 years without a raise. They received a raise after their union was recognized, but their compensation remains well behind their counterparts at other hotels. Furthermore, witnesses offered accounts of potentially illegal withholding of wages due. In two different departments, employees report that they are expected to finish their jobs even if this means working without pay after

their shift is done. In one department, it is policy to never pay overtime, with the result that on particularly busy days workers have to finish their tasks without pay. Such practices are extremely troubling; but they're not necessarily surprising. The ever-present fear that lays over this hotel is the hand that keeps workers silent; and the engine that motivates them to do whatever is asked of them—legal or not—to keep their jobs. “We are really hard up,” explains one employee, “but we need a job, so we just have to sacrifice.”

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UNDERMINING THE QUALITY OF SERVICE

The problems of low wages, short-staffing and demoralization described by employees have inevitably spilled over to impact the quality of guest service. Although the company has recently undertaken limited renovations, its lack of investment in employees seems to be mirrored in its treatment of the property's physical structure. We obtained a review of guest comments, posted on the internet by visitors to the Pacific Beach Hotel over the years 2004-09. Over half of the nearly 200 comments contained complaints about the hotel. Furthermore, the guests often identified precisely the same problems raised by employees. Employees complain about not having enough time to thoroughly clean the rooms; about short-staffing in the kitchen, maintenance and other departments; and about worn out air conditioners, bathroom fixtures, and kitchen equipment. Guests complain about these exact same issues. “I've stayed at the Pacific Beach Hotel in the past,” commented one 2008 visitor, “but each year the quality and cleanliness of the room seems to deteriorate. This year it appears to have hit rock bottom and I will not be returning... The room itself was filthy. There was rust all over the shower curtain hangers and bathroom mirrors were old and chipped. The extra pillows which were stored in the closet had a distinct mildew smell to them. This was because they were stored up against a wall

which was experiencing moisture bubbles from what appeared to be sourced from the bathroom in the adjoining room. While the staff . . . were all very pleasant . . . this will be the last time I stay at Pacific Beach.”

The employees of Pacific Beach Hotel cannot afford for their property to be run in a manner that drives away guests. And all of us who depend on the tourism industry as the engine of our economy cannot afford for any property to degrade the long-term image of Hawai‘i as a tourist destination.

CONCLUSION

The struggle at Pacific Beach Hotel has been going on for seven years. Yet the overwhelming majority of the workers we interviewed remain committed to winning a fair union contract. “Despite the exhaustion from the long fight,” one longtime employee stated, “the workers still want the union to fight for fair treatment.” Moreover, said another, “If . . . employees can stick together, better working conditions and better pay will come. This will also be good for the owners.”

In the course of our investigation, we were struck by how these employees—despite everything they’ve been through, and despite their anger at mistreatment—remain committed to helping make the Pacific Beach Hotel a top-quality, successful and prosperous business. One might think that these employees would feel only bitterness and have no dedication to their workplace. The opposite is true. We found those interviewed to be warm and positive employees. They appear to be loyal, faithful workers who really want the best for their hotel and the industry. They believe that a fair contract would benefit management, employees, the general public and the state of Hawai‘i as a whole. Over the course of our investigation, we have come to believe the same.

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