

Hyatt has a huge moral challenge to overcome in treatment of employees

Clete Kiley | Jul. 31, 2012

COMMENTARY

Every day, guests check into Hyatt hotels, unaware that the multibillion-dollar company has a shameful record of exploiting low-wage workers and firing employees. A largely immigrant work force that scrubs toilets, lifts heavy mattresses and toils in the shadows has few resources to fight a powerful corporation with deep pockets. But some heavy-hitters, including the NFL Players Association, are now standing together with these workers as part of an international boycott of Hyatt that is taking place in Chicago and 19 other U.S. cities.

As a Catholic priest in the Archdiocese of Chicago, I'm proud to be a part of this effort to speak up for human dignity and basic fairness. For centuries, the Catholic church and leaders of diverse faith traditions have advocated for workers' rights, called for living wages and defended the vital role of unions. The Chicago-based Interfaith Worker Justice and other religious organizations across the country are empowering workers and holding corporations like Hyatt accountable for abuses that fundamentally betray our nation's core values and highest ideals. A coalition of rabbis has even declared Hyatt hotels to be not kosher because of unsafe working conditions and poverty wages for employees.

Hyatt has earned the dubious distinction of being the worst hotel employer in the country. The company frequently uses subcontracting to pay lower wages and evade liability for dangerous working conditions. Hyatt's housekeepers had the highest rate of injuries out of the chains included in a study of 50 hotels in the *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*. In a first for the hotel industry, the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration has warned the corporation of hazards that housekeepers face in the course of their daily work. Workers at some Hyatt hotels clean as many as 30 rooms a day -- almost double what is typically required at union hotels. Hyatt threatened to fire a woman who would not return to work three days after a C-section, and has fired other women after they spoke out about abusive treatment. Despite facing health and safety citations, Hyatt played a leading role in lobbying against legislation in California that would make housekeeping work safer. The company has aggressively interfered with workers' efforts to organize a union.

As part of the Hyatt boycott led by the AFL-CIO, the NFL Players Association and the union UNITE HERE, concerned citizens are pledging not to eat, meet or sleep at Hyatt until conditions for workers improve. We hope this sends a powerful message that inhumane conditions will not be tolerated and encourage Hyatt executives to reform immoral business practices.

The struggle for labor justice must not be relegated to the dusty pages of history. Today, many low-wage workers in service industries are part of an exploited underclass. Anti-union laws are rolling back basic labor protections that brave men and women suffered and even died for a generation ago. Many of these workers are immigrants who simply want to provide a better life for their children and contribute to our culture. They should not be treated as second-class citizens.

Hyatt now faces a stark moral challenge. Will it continue to put profits before human dignity or meet its responsibility to be an ethical corporation?

[Fr. Clete Kiley is director of immigration policy at UNITE HERE and a priest in the Archdiocese of Chicago. He served as grand marshal of the 2012 St. Patrick's Day Parade in Chicago.]

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