

Hotel staff need help: Study

Majority of lowest earners in sector are immigrants, women, visible minorities with little chance of job advancement

April 16, 2007

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IMMIGRATION/DIVERSITY REPORTER

When Linette Brown began working as a housekeeper at a Toronto hotel in 1973, she earned 95 cents an hour, rent for her two-bedroom apartment in North York was \$250 a month and a TTC token cost a quarter.

Now, in her early 60s, she makes \$15 an hour as a maintenance worker at the same hotel.

But while her income's gone up, so has the cost of living, and Brown says she considers herself just as impoverished now as back then, paying more for her apartment, transportation and other expenses.

After three decades in the industry, Brown laments "I'm still 'working poor,' like most other hotel workers."

And despite the improvements in pay, "People - especially women of colour - are still stuck in the backroom, living paycheque to paycheque," added Brown, a single mother of three who came to Canada from Jamaica in 1970.

According to a report to be released today by the union-led Task Force on the Toronto Hotel Industry, Brown has lots of company. Of the 30,000 people who work in Greater Toronto hotels, 70 per cent are immigrants.

To a large degree, poverty in the industry is segmented along race and gender lines. Among its lowest earners, room attendants and laundry workers, 93 per cent are immigrants; 82 per cent are visible minorities; and 80 per cent are women.

Cost-driven competition has helped eliminate many full-time jobs in favour of part-time, casual and subcontracted work; has decreased real wages and benefits; and has cut training budgets.

The task force wants employers, unions and governments to work toward a "high

road economic vision" - investing in this workforce to improve competitiveness through better service instead of merely looking to cut costs.

"High road means higher training, higher skills, higher wages and higher productivity," explains the co-chair of the task force, Anil Verma, a University of Toronto professor of industrial relations and human resource management. "High road doesn't mean higher cost," he adds.

The report recommends:

- Setting up a city-wide training centre using negotiated contributions from hotel chains and governments.
- Measures that provide flexible working hours, personal days, workplace child care and extended parental leave and benefits.
- Affordable housing, child care and transit initiatives, and subsidized transit passes like those offered at the Fairmont Royal York, Starwood and Hilton hotels.
- Equity programs to eliminate "job ghettos" based on race and gender, to give marginalized groups more advancement opportunities.
- Extending the right to union representation for hotel workers.

The last is likely to be the thorniest for the industry, which encompasses 183 hotels and 35,865 rooms across the GTA and rings in about \$682 million in tax revenues each year (\$332 million to Ottawa, \$252 million to Ontario and \$98 million to municipalities).

A seasoned former hotel manager says globalization has driven many chains into "bottom-line, short-sighted" operations.

"The high road initiative is something that I'd personally endorse, but the union and management, along with the governments, have to work together closely to achieve that," he added, fearing employer repercussions and speaking only on condition of anonymity.

"It's not unreasonable, what they're asking for," says the former vice president of a major international chain, who now runs a hotel management and development company.

The report leaves no doubt that unionized workers are better off. A unionized hotel maid, for example, earned about \$14 an hour in 2004, compared with the \$10.48 average - though still well below the GTA's average rate of \$19.69.

"I'm lucky that I belong to a union. There are people around me who work two, three part-time jobs, a few hours here and a few hours there, just to put food on the table and a roof over their heads," says Brown, who was promoted to the hotel's maintenance department in 1981.

The aim of the task force - funded by the local chapter of the union Unite Here, as well as Service Canada - was to explore ways to improve the work prospects of people while building a stronger.

Dismissing criticisms that the recommendations simply favour unions, the U of T's Verma says feedback from hotel chains was positive.

"People can reject this vision as self-serving for the union.

We're not leaving things for the unions and employers, because they tend to fight against each other and do not see the forest for the trees. We need government leadership to make the partnership work."