

# Organizing for Our Fair Share

## A worker talks about the struggle to bring a union to a hotel in Boston

Nestor Garcia

### Work Hard and Organize

In my life, I've been a janitor, an airport worker, a welder, and a hotel worker. Now I am a union organizer. I fight for working-class people to have a good job with decent pay and dignity.

I believe everyone should be empowered to have their fair share. Everyone should be able to support their family and realize their dreams. If you are willing to work hard, you should be able

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to make it here in the U.S. But working hard doesn't mean keeping your mouth shut and doing your job. Part of the hard work is fighting for what is right.

Sometimes you might feel disappointed, but don't give up. When the economy goes bad, businesses lay people off. They get more aggressive with discipline. A union gets the workers together to educate them. We join together and say to the owners, "No, you're not going to take our jobs away. You are not going to lower our wages."

### Collective Bargaining

**If you are not in a union, you negotiate one-on-one with your boss for your pay and benefits. If you are in a union, you unite with other workers and negotiate collectively.**

We also reach out to the politicians, churches, and the general public – to let them know about our

struggle. How workers are treated is not just a workplace issue; it is also a community issue.

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Nestor Garcia (front) on a UNITE HERE picket line.

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The real estate developers come to our city to make money in the big hotels. They are just thinking about how much profit they can make on each room. We say to them, "This is not just a place to

make money. This is a community. We live here and shop here, and our children go to school here. The wages you pay us circulate through the whole community and make this a better place." United, we can make sure they see us as a community, not just a way for them to get rich.

### Bringing the Union to the "W" Hotel

Before I started working in hotels, I was a welder. I helped build the "W" Hotel. But the economy crashed and there were no welding jobs. I trained to become a prep cook and got a job working for \$15 per hour at the "W" Hotel. As a welder, I had been making \$36 per hour.

When I started working at the "W," it was not a union hotel. Working conditions were not good.

They didn't pay overtime. They fired people for no reason. The cocktail waitresses had to wear very short skirts and high heels. They worked 10-hour shifts. They had to put up with a lot of disrespect and harassment.

The housekeepers had to clean 18-20 rooms per day. It is very strenuous work.

We had no set schedule, so we could never make plans because

we never knew when we were working from one week to the next. I was paying \$116 per week for

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## Training, Better Pay, and Benefits at Local 26

The most important thing about my job is the feeling that I belong to an organization that cares about my family and me, and puts me at the top of their agenda. Before getting a union job, I had worked as a supervisor in a hotel, and the benefits were almost nonexistent. The medical insurance was expensive, and I had a co-payment every time I visited the doctor.

At that time, my wife who was a union member (Local 26) told me about the opportunity to attend the Basic Culinary Skills class at the BEST Corp. Hotel Training Center. The class was taught by a skilled instructor, and BEST Corp. provided us with a professional mentor who assisted us in making our resumes and applying for jobs.

After this class, I decided to transfer to a union position and I immediately started to benefit from the opportunities the union offers its members. Being a union member opened many doors for me.

Most importantly, Local 26 provided us with excellent medical insurance. With

help from the union's homebuyers assistance program, and legal advice provided through the union benefits, my wife and I were able to buy a home in the fall of 2012.

The Hotel Training Center offers many free classes to union members and their families, such as technology classes, On-Call Banquet Server classes, Food Safety training, Room Attendant training, and the GED. The computer lab gives us the opportunity to study and do research. Being a union member gives us the security that we are backed by qualified professionals who will help us fulfill our dreams and push us to be the best that we can be.



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*Khalid Jaouahir is the Food and Beverage Supervisor at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Boston, and he is a member of Local 26.*

my family’s health and dental insurance. Even with health insurance, when my wife had a baby, we had to pay a \$2700 deductible.

Five of us started talking. We held meetings with other workers. We met off the premises – secretly – at the McDonald’s or the food court across the street. We didn’t want management to know because we knew they wouldn’t like it and they’d find a way to punish the leaders. We brought housekeepers and cocktail waitresses together – people who had never had any reason to talk to

each other before. But now we found out what we had in common – low wages and no respect. And we found we could connect around the idea of making the “W” a better place.

**Got a Grievance?**

**Grievance:** a reason for complaining or being unhappy with a situation.

**Workers** in a union have the right to make a complaint when management does something wrong against them.

**The worker** and his or her union steward go through a series of steps to address the problem, finally ending in arbitration, which includes a neutral third party.

**The rules** for your grievance procedure are negotiated in the workers’ contract with the employer, and the employer is legally bound to uphold the terms of the contract.

**Many Challenges... then Victory**

The hardest thing about organizing a union was trying to get people to understand that they have to stand up and fight for their rights. We brought in documents and charts that showed how much money the hotel was making off of us. We showed people that we were only asking for what was fair.

We spent three months having

meetings at all times of the night in order to reach all the shifts. We had 15 committees and many new leaders in all the departments. I remember the day we had our union vote. It was May 11, 2010. We won by a huge majority.

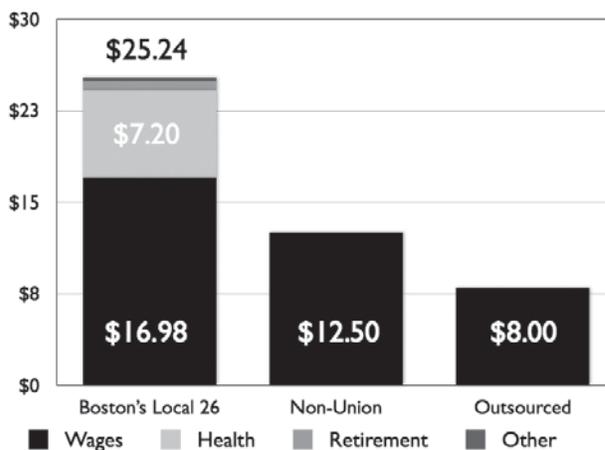
It took about a year, and then we started seeing the benefits of being in a union. Family insurance decreased to \$12

**What is a Strike?**

**When workers** are organized, they are in a better position to negotiate for what they want in the workplace. One way to get an employer’s attention is to go out on strike or to threaten to go out on strike. A strike is when a majority of workers vote to stop working.



**Comparing Hourly Wages: Union, Non-Union, and Outsourced**



**Source:** UNITE HERE, Local 26. Note: Outsourced workers do not work directly for the hotel, but for another company. The hotel subcontracts that company to provide a service.

**Paying Dues**

**Who pays for unions?**

The member do! Every union member is required to pay dues, which are usually subtracted from the member's pay check and given directly to the union. The union uses these dues to pay staff, support political campaigns, and provide supports to members.

Boston's Local 26 members pay dues of about \$735 per year.



per week. The hotel put \$7.20 per hour into a trust fund to pay for our pensions, education, and other benefits. The hourly pay for a prep cook went up to \$18.45. We had job security, seniority, clear work schedules, and other protections. And the cocktail waitresses no longer have to wear high heeled shoes, and they got new uniforms—much more dignified!

Most importantly, we had a grievance procedure. If you feel like you aren't being treated right, you are not alone. As a union, we back each other up.

About three months after we got the union, people started feeling more comfortable. They got more outspoken. They had a clear understanding of their rights and a way to fight for them.

I felt pretty good. I had done something for my fellow human beings. My wife worried that I would get fired. But all those co-workers, they trusted me. I became a shop steward. And now I am an organizer with the union, and I am trying to help other hotel workers get organized to bring in a union so they can fight for their rights.

*Nestor Garcia is from the Dominican Republic. He's been in the U.S. for 21 years. He is currently an organizer with UNITE/HERE Local 26 in Boston.*



**Making Sense of What You've Read**

**Have you ever** been in the position of bargaining one-on-one or collectively? Describe those experiences—whether they happened at work, in the family, or in the community.

**Have you ever been in a union?** What was it like?

**The author says** that when the economy goes bad, workers still have power. What power does he say they have? Do you agree or disagree?

**Study the chart** on the left. Write some true statements based on the information in the chart. Why do you think outsourced workers get paid so much less?

**According to the information** in the chart on p. 50 and the box on union dues above, what is the net benefit annually of being a union hotel worker in Boston as compared to non-union hotel worker?

**At the "W" Hotel,** who decides what working conditions are like?