

Organizing for Our Fair Share

A Worker Talks about the Struggle to Bring a Union to a Hotel in Boston

Nestor Garcia

BEFORE YOU READ: Read the title. What is “organizing”? What does “fair share” mean?

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 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 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.

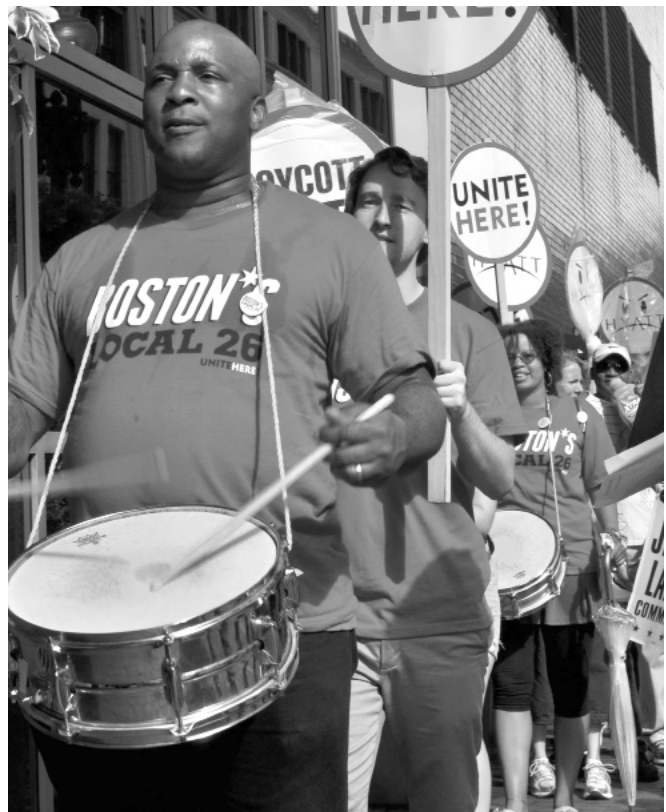
For example, the real estate developers come to our city to make money in the big hotels. They are just thinking about how much profit they can make on each room. As a union, we say to them, “This is not just a place to make

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.” We want them to know we are 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



Nestor Garcia leading a march of his union.

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 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 my family’s health and

Part of the hard work is fighting for what is right.

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.

Many Challenges...then Victory

The hardest thing about organizing a union is convincing people that they have 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. 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 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.



Hotel workers on strike in Boston.

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.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. How did the union organizers accomplish their goals? Be specific.
2. Why does Nestor say at the end that he felt “pretty good”?
3. What is a *grievance*? Why would it matter to have a *grievance procedure*? Why might it make a difference to you as a worker if you had a union backing you during a grievance procedure?

Nestor Garcia was from the Dominican Republic. When he wrote this, he had been in the U.S. for 21 years. He held a number of jobs, including organizer with UNITE/HERE Local 26 in Boston. He has since passed away. A longer version of this article was published in Issue #36, “Good Jobs, Not Just Any Jobs,” p. 48.