

The AHA and the Chicago Hotel Strike

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On Sept. 7 UNITE HERE began a strike against 25 hotels in Chicago. The demands focused on year round health insurance and other benefits. Six thousand workers were involved and it was reportedly the first in Chicago to involve all hotel service workers, from housekeepers to bellmen, doormen, dishwashers, and others.

The strike raised complex challenges for the American Historical Association, which had contracted with two of the targeted hotels, the Palmer House Hilton and the Chicago Hilton and Towers, for its January 2019 convention. As James Grossman, AHA's executive director, reported after the strike had settled, the AHA had to decide what to action to take in the face of this strike. James Grossman was in touch with LAWCHA officers while monitoring negotiations and the AHA delayed opening registration until there was a settlement. The AHA also halted negotiations for a possible future meeting in Chicago, on the grounds that its staff would not conduct any negotiations during a strike. In the middle of September, the AHA informed Hilton management that its staff would begin exploring alternative venues for the convention if a settlement did not soon arrive. Finally, on Sept. 29 the AHA received word that UNITE HERE members had voted to ratify an agreement with the

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conference hotels. At that point the AHA opened registration for the 2019 convention.

On the AHA's website, James Grossman reports on how the AHA dealt with the Chicago hotel strike. I commend the AHA and Executive Director James Grossman for working through the issues in such a careful and communicative way.

Currently, Marriott workers remain on strike in cities around the country. The Organization of American Historians is meeting in a Marriott hotel in Philadelphia in the spring in a hotel that is not currently struck or listed by UNITE HERE as at risk of a strike. LAWCHA and its officers are monitoring the situation in Philadelphia.

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  Julie Greene is a historian of United States, transnational, and global labor and immigration. Most recently, she is the author of Box 25: Archival Secrets, Caribbean Workers, and the Panama Canal (UNC Press, 2025), which explores a set of remarkable memoirs written by canal workers (and held in Box 25 at the Library of Congress). Greene has also authored The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal (2009), and Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917 (1998). She has co-edited two books with Eric Arnesen and Bruce Laurie, Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Diversity of the Working-Class Experience (1998); and with Eileen Boris, Joo Cheong Tham, and Heidi Gottfried, Global Labor Migration: New Directions (2022). Greene has also published numerous articles and book chapters.

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