

“Make Up My Workplace!”

A trade union perspective on a living wage in the tourism industry in Asia

Excerpted from a presentation by IUF Asia/Pacific Regional Secretary to “One way ticket out of poverty?” A seminar on sustainable tourism, community development and living wages in the global tourism sector, Stockholm, 25 September 2014

Working in the hotel industry can be a good, decent job, and for some it is. But the ‘some’ are either in managerial or supervisory positions, are temporarily benefitting from high wages due to a labour shortage or tourism boom, or are members of a genuine trade union that ensures decent working conditions and a living wage through collective bargaining.

For the vast majority of tourism workers this is not the case. Across the spectrum from locally-owned budget hotels to five star luxury resorts operated by international hotels and their supply chains we find poor working conditions and rampant human rights abuses. These abuses include forced and trafficked labour, child labour, discrimination, hazardous and dangerous work, denial of the right to organize and of course poverty wages.

To understand poverty wages and the need for a living wage we should understand something about value in the tourism industry in Asia today, especially the value of certain kinds of labour.

As part of the IUF’s global initiative “*Make Up My Workplace!*” on the dignity and rights of housekeepers we convened a hotel workers’ conference in Penang, Malaysia, on 12-13 September with 47 participants from 13 unions in 10 countries in Asia. The participants included housekeepers who described the severe physical exertion and stress of their work as well as low wages.

Housekeeping in hotels and cleaning more generally is often described as “unskilled”. This apparently justifies relatively lower wages. Yet housekeepers work lifting heavy loads (regularly lifting king-sized and larger mattresses on their own); work within strict time limits (15 minutes to clean a room and in some cases 12 minutes); meeting quotas of the number of rooms cleaned each shift (on average 15 and as high as 30); using toxic chemicals and cleaning solvents; operating commercial sized vacuum cleaners; while carrying out 10 to 15 different cleaning tasks in one shift.

Studies have compared the physical exertion and physical endurance of housekeepers with athletes. If the physical exertion, physical impact and endurance compares to that of an athlete is an athlete unskilled? An athlete is certainly paid more.

As many housekeepers have said the problem is not a lack of skills or training but the time to clean in the manner best suited to reduce back pain and other physical injuries. It is simply not possible when forced to clean a room in 17 minutes alone or to clean 30 rooms in one shift. All safe work practices assume time management.

The failure to recognize the value of work performed by housekeepers reflects the value of housekeeping in the hotel business itself and its treatment as an auxiliary or non-essential service. Employers will commonly claim they are “not in the business of cleaning” and that justifies the precarious employment of housekeepers (just as they are apparently “not in the business of” security, laundry, food and beverage, food services, room bookings, banquets and conferences, transport of guests, etc)

In all of the five star international hotel chains in Manila in the Philippines permanent housekeepers are less than 20% of the total number of housekeepers. In one major international hotel there is only one permanent housekeeper and in most there are none. It is all done by workers hired through labour contractors that claim to specialize in cleaning but in practice they only provide cheap, casual labour that is not directly employed by the hotel.

This disregard for the value of the work of housekeepers, combined with the lower wages of precarious workers, leads to increased workloads and reduced staffing. Increasingly housekeepers work alone with excessive workloads and unsafe conditions. Many housekeepers report sexual harassment and intimidation increased as a result of working alone. One major international hotel chain even abolished carts for housekeepers in Manila. They must carry all of the cleaning materials and tools in a bag on their backs.

If housekeeping is non-essential then what makes up the value of the business? Are clean rooms integral to the hotel business or not? Can a hotel operate with unclean rooms? Clearly not. Show us a hotel with unclean rooms and we'll show you a 15% occupancy rate and falling!

Housekeepers are apparently necessary but not essential. That is the hotel industry logic that poses a challenge to a living wage. And this is also where the abuse of precarious employment arrangements lies. The myth of 'unskilled' work justifies outsourcing and low wages.

This categorization as unskilled/low wage work reinforces and is reinforced by systematic discrimination. Housekeepers are increasingly denied access to the same benefits as other workers including medical benefits. Added to this is gender discrimination and discrimination against migrant workers (both internal migrant workers and foreign migrant workers).

The demand for a living wage draws attention to these poverty wages or what we might call survival wages - where the vast majority of tourism workers in Asia are simply surviving rather than living. In other words wages are lower than what is needed for workers and their families to enjoy their *human* right to food, the right to health care, the right to education, the right to adequate housing, and the right to a dignified life.

Direct permanent employment and access to rights is integral to sustainable employment which in turn is essential to sustainable tourism. Pervasive precarious employment, for example among housekeepers, and the human rights risks stemming from this form of employment means that the hotel and or/tourist resort operations in question are *unsustainable*.

While a living wage can be debated, calculated and negotiated human rights cannot. Human rights are non-negotiable. When a precarious housekeeper employed on a casual basis or through a labour hire agency is paid only 60% of the wages of a permanent housekeeper then is she 60% human? The right to equal pay for work of equal value is a human right. It is non-negotiable.

Where insecurity and fear exists living wages cannot become a reality. No amount of auditing, communication channels, complaint mechanisms or hotlines overcomes this fear. Only confidence overcomes this fear - a confidence that comes with being together with other workers and speaking out collectively. This confidence grows and the fear fades with the protection that genuine, democratic trade unions can provide.