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## Protecting the AAG and Supporting Hotel Unions

With a great sigh of relief, I am pleased to report a settlement of the long-standing labor dispute at the San Francisco Hilton Hotel, a dispute which threatened the very existence of the AAG's 2007 Annual Meeting.

As many of you know, the Hilton hotel and the hotel workers union have been locked in a contract renewal battle for over two years. Throughout this period the hotel has been under the cloud of a general boycott and the imminent prospect of a strike by the workers at the hotel.

After talking with hundreds of AAG members about this issue, it was my assessment that the occurrence of a strike at the hotel during or leading up to our Annual Meeting would result in the cancellation of our meeting as a majority of our members would not cross the striking workers' picket lines. The cancellation of our annual meeting would have meant very significant financial losses for the AAG, as we have contractual obligations to the hotel, and undoubtedly a great deal of internal dissension and acrimony would be generated over how to best to handle the situation.

Trying to figure out ways to both protect the AAG's financial and institutional foundations and still support the hotel workers has been one of the most intractable issues I have had to deal with as executive director of the AAG. It also is an issue which for me brings into tension personal and professional responsibilities.

I grew up in Flint, Michigan, in an extended family of auto workers and industrial workers. My grandfather played a key role in the seminal 1937 CIO sit-down strike at General Motors. Most of my relatives were and still are members of unions. I made my way through college on scholarships and by working, primarily as a journeyman construction lineman and member

of the IBEW union. Simply put, my experience has taught me the importance of supporting working people and their unions.

I also greatly value the AAG as an institution and am charged with and committed to protecting, sustaining, and building this organization. I have put enormous personal energy and time over the past five years

into helping to build the AAG to a state of financial health, strong infrastructure, dynamic programs and new initiatives, and growing membership and annual meeting attendance. Thus, I have been trying very hard to develop ways to meaningfully support the hotel worker unions without jeopardizing the AAG's financial and

institutional underpinnings.

We took several steps at the AAG to try to protect our association without compromising our values. Among them, we put pressure on the hotel to settle; we coordinated with the union workers; and in the best Washington tradition, we hired good lawyers.

First, we let the hotel know directly, as well as through our meeting planners, that this issue is one we take seriously and that if unresolved would likely have negative repercussions for the hotel (as well as for us) if a settlement were not reached soon. I believe this had an impact.

More recently, the AAG also took the lead among our peer associations in developing a supportive relationship with a new organization, INMEX (Informed Meetings Exchange), which works closely with the hotel unions to gather and analyze information regarding hotel labor issues nationally, and to provide access to the most up-to-date information available on the status of labor disputes at major hotels. Without compromising the independence of the AAG or our options for independent action



Richardson

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or policy, we have supported INMEX and its principles. This organization has been useful to me in assessing our options in the most informed way possible, and in sending clear messages to hotels of our positions on the dignity and rights of hotel workers.

In this respect, I would like to personally thank AAG member Chris Neidt and INMEX staff member Jason Ortiz who, while remaining effective advocates for the UniteHere hotel workers union, also provided thoughtful and accurate information to me during the past year and were sensitive to the needs and motivations of the AAG leadership as we struggled to deal with the complexities of our situation.

Finally, the AAG also hired very capable new attorneys with experience in labor disputes and meeting contracts, and worked

closely with them to analyze our legal options as well as the language in our current and future hotel meeting contracts. While it is a myth that hotels will agree to contract language that would allow organizations such as the AAG to simply walk away from a meeting at our own discretion without financial penalty, there are a few mechanisms to limit the extent of potential damages in the event of a decision to cancel a meeting. I should also note that moving a meeting of our size and complexity on short notice is really not a viable option logistically, and it still would require abrogating a contract for the original meeting venue.

We were successful this year both in supporting the hotel workers and in protecting the AAG treasury. However, protecting the AAG's financial underpinnings

in the face of hotel labor disputes is a challenge the AAG will continue to face in the future. Some of my colleagues at other progressive associations have likened entering into contracts for large annual meetings in today's labor climate to a form of Russian roulette. But we've dodged the bullet for the time being, and we are better prepared for future uncertainties.

So, let's congratulate the union hotel workers and the hotel on a good contract when we see them in April, and move full speed ahead on the planning of our sessions and special events for our 2007 AAG Annual Meeting in San Francisco, where we did not leave our heart. ■

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