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MAKING THE GOOD TIMES ROLL: NEW ORLEANS TOURISM-ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX

Introduction

How has the revitalization of New Orleans impacted service workers in the tourism-entertainment complex?

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, 1 in 7 residents were employed in some aspect of the tourism industry. As the city has been remade since the 2005 disaster, that economy has rebounded to account for 13.7% of the local workforce. New Orleans's tourism industry and its rapidly growing film and television industry now comprise a tourism-entertainment complex that valorizes the city's unique social heritage, indigenous foodways and cultural practices, and quaint architecture. Between 2002 and 2013, this combined cultural sector experienced 13.3% job growth. While the resurgence of the tourist economy has meant the return of good times for millions of visitors and business owners, the experiences of workers within this booming economy are less rosy, defined by low wages, precarious employment, and few benefits. On average, for example, restaurant workers in New Orleans made only \$16,870.79 in 2008. Meanwhile, since 2000, the poverty rate in Orleans Parish has decreased from 28 percent in 1999 to 23 percent 2015, but still surpasses the national rate of 15 percent. During the same period, poverty in adjacent Jefferson Parish has increased from 14 percent to 16 percent, and child poverty has grown from 20 percent to 27 percent.

This project examines the working conditions and unionization struggles within New Orleans's resurgent, post-Katrina tourism-entertainment complex. It utilizes scholarly literature, official public reports on the tourist economy, and worker's accounts of their experiences, particularly those of local union organizers, to outline the plight of the city's large, low-wage service economy workforce, which is too often rendered invisible in triumphant narratives of recovery.

Preliminary Findings

- The demolition of public housing and the influx of more affluent residents have altered the housing market radically and to the disadvantage of renters. About 56% of New Orleans renters now pay more than 30% of their monthly income on rent and utilities.
- Inner city neighborhoods like Bywater, Marigny, and Tremé have experienced well-publicized gentrification. Many working-class residents have been displaced to the outer reaches of the city and beyond Orleans Parish altogether.
- Mobilizing by local union organizers demanding better wages and working conditions has produced important and inspiring victories. UNITE HERE 2262 and the Teamsters Local succeeded in unionizing 900 workers at Harrah's Hotel and Casino in 2014 and UNITE HERE is now in the midst of a union drive at the Hilton Riverside hotel.
- Advocacy organizations like Women with a Vision and the Sex Workers Outreach Project abolished a draconian policy placing convicted sex workers on the sex offenders' registry, which further stigmatized working-class, minority, and trans persons.

Recommendations

The neoliberal remaking of New Orleans after the disasters of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the Great Recession of 2008 demonstrate how communities in the United States are devastated not just by disinvestment, but also by periods of intense investment that bring gentrification and displacement. There is a critical need, therefore, to create policies incentivizing and supporting the rights of low-wage workers to organize for better wages and working conditions. In areas of rapid gentrification, moreover, local governments need to do more to support those struggling to keep up with rising rents and stagnant wages, for example through rent controls and the investment of the increased taxes generated by the booming tourism industry into new public housing. Local action is especially important given that the Trump administration has unleashed an unapologetically pro-capital and anti-union agenda.