

Black Hotel Workers Replaced by Immigrants

March 27, Heard on News &Notes,ROBIN UREVITCH, ED GORDON, host:

Unionized hotel workers accuse big name hotels like Hilton, Hyatt and Westin of discrimination in hiring African American workers who were once a mainstay of the industry. As Robin Urevich reports, the Hotel Worker's Union unites here, plans to press the issue this year in contract talks from New York to Honolulu.

ROBIN UREVICH reporting:

Former banquet chef Donald Wilson first came to LA's posh Century Plaza Hotel 27 years ago to work as a fry cook. There were a lot of African Americans in the kitchen then. But...

Mr. DONALD WILSON (Fry Cook, Century Plaza Hotel): The last 20 years they have locked out the African American race and working in these hotels.

UREVICH: Look at the numbers, he says. Of more than 400 workers at his hotel, just 30 are African American. Most of the rest of them are immigrants. But Wilson, who has left the kitchen to work full-time for the Union says black workers need the jobs. Consider, he said, what happened last year when he and his mostly Latino co-workers were nearly locked out in a labor dispute at his hotel.

Mr. WILSON: We were getting our picket lines ready to start at 5:00. I started seeing African American chefs coming from out of nowhere in uniform ready to work. Where in the hell did they get these people? They know that those blacks would have come to work and would have pitched the Latino community against the African American community.

UREVICH: Civil rights leader Rev. James Lawson, now president of the LA Chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, says hotels haven't hired African Americans for one reason.

Rev. JAMES LAWSON (President, Los Angeles Chapter Southern Christian Leadership Conference): Basically, the issue is racism. One of the reasons Los Angeles has a 42 percent unemployment level among black men between the ages of 15 and 50 is because of the numbers of big corporations that are refusing to hire black men.

UREVICH: Lawson says that applies to hotel corporations. Not so, says Joe McInerney of the American Hotel and Lodging Association.

Mr. JOE MCINERNEY(American Hotel and Lodging Association): There is no discrimination in our industry whatsoever. Our problem is we're trying to find people and people don't want to work in our industry.