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Beverly Hilton, Union in Deal

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October 5, 2006

The three-year contract includes higher wages and pledges to hire more African Americans.

The Beverly Hilton is expected to announce today that it has signed a three-year contract with a hotel workers' union under which the hotel will increase wages, maintain the current health insurance plan and promise to hire more African Americans.

The two sides portrayed the agreement as a positive sign for upcoming negotiations with other Los Angeles hotels. Labor contracts at 25 Los Angeles hotels, including the Westin Bonaventure and the Century Plaza hotels, are set to expire Nov. 30.

"It sets an example for a way we can approach negotiations and not be confrontational," said Paulina Gonzalez, spokeswoman for Unite Here, which represents about 400 employees at the Beverly Hilton and 5,000 workers in the Los Angeles area.

The hotel, owned by technology magnate Beny Alagem, will be the first in the country to roll out a Unite Here initiative that encourages the hiring of more African Americans in the hotel industry to counter what advocates say is preferential hiring of immigrants.

Stuart Korshak, a labor lawyer who represented the Beverly Hilton in the negotiations, acknowledged that declining African American representation had been an issue in the hotel industry for some time, but said it hadn't been a problem at the Beverly Hilton. Korshak declined to say how many African Americans worked at the hotel.

Korshak said that the hotel was happy to avoid a labor dispute, especially after seeing recent adversarial negotiations in several cities.

"The owners and the union leaders wanted to try something different," he said.

The initiative establishes a task force of hotel representatives, community activists and union officials to review hiring practices and reach out to the African American community, said Donald Wilson, an organizer for Unite Here Local 11.

Wilson, 50, said that when he started as a chef in the Century Plaza Hotel in 1978, the majority of workers in the culinary department were African American. Last year, when he left to work full time for the union, two out of 60 culinary workers were African American. Wilson blamed racism on the part of some hotel managements.

Out of 2,164 employees at six major downtown Los Angeles hotels, only 139, or 6.4%, are African American, said William D. Smart Jr., the director of the Los Angeles Alliance for the

New Economy, a labor-backed community group. Citywide, about 11% of the population is African American.

The number of African Americans in the hotel industry has been shrinking significantly for 30 years, said Steven Pitts, an economist at the UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education. But the quality of the jobs has been improving as the industry becomes unionized, making them more desirable.

Pitts said that African Americans have trouble competing for these jobs because several national surveys of managers in many different industries have found that they perceive African American workers as undesirable.

The American Hotel & Lodging Assn. didn't return a call seeking comment.

The competition over jobs can create tensions between the African American and immigrant communities, Pitts said.

"It's not possible to reduce the tensions between the two groups until you increase the quality of jobs that African Americans have," he said. "It's good that one industry is taking baby steps in that direction."

The contract, among other things, increased hourly wages by \$2.30 over three years for workers who don't receive tips. A typical room attendant wage would increase to \$13.72 an hour at the end of the contract from \$11.42 an hour now. The contract also created a labor-management partnership allowing both sides to communicate during the term of the contract.