

1-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Olson, Janet (2013) "Hotels, Unions, and MAC Values," *MAC Newsletter*: Vol. 40 : No. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/macnewsletter/vol40/iss3/3>

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Hotels, Unions, and MAC Values

By Janet Olson, Northwestern University

As many MAC members will recall, in 2011, SAA was forced to make a difficult decision when the conference hotel for the Annual Meeting in Chicago, the Hyatt Regency Riverwalk, became involved in a labor dispute with members of the hotel workers' union UNITE HERE. Union members announced plans for a strike during the meeting. Representatives of UNITE HERE contacted SAA leadership and local archivists to state their case and to recommend that SAA pull out of its contract with Hyatt, even though it had been signed long before the dispute began between the hotel and the union. After much discussion and input from members, SAA Council concluded that although SAA supported the efforts of workers to seek fairness in the workplace, "given the significant cost of cancelling the current hotel contract, as well as concerns associated with finding an appropriate alternative venue, it is prudent for the Society to proceed as contracted for the 2011 Annual Meeting."

Now MAC Council is facing a similar scenario with the conference hotels it has chosen for the 2013 Annual Meeting in Indianapolis and Fall Symposium in Green Bay. UNITE HERE is asking MAC to pull out of its signed contracts with the Indianapolis and Green Bay Hyatts. As with SAA's conference in Chicago, MAC's contracts had been signed before the labor issues arose. As SAA Council did, MAC Council has considered and discussed the issue from all angles. And, like SAA Council in 2011, MAC has decided to go ahead with the contracted hotels, for the same reasons: the cost of canceling the contract and the uncertainty (and increased cost) of finding an alternative venue at this late date.

Since many MAC members are familiar with the SAA case, which became quite controversial, it seems worthwhile to examine MAC's decision, and to point out differences as well as similarities between the two situations.

In 2011, SAA faced the unwelcome prospect of asking meeting attendees to cross picket lines at a hotel where the unionized workers were on strike, protesting poor working conditions and benefit cuts. In MAC's case, the Indianapolis and Green Bay Hyatts are non-union hotels, which UNITE HERE is asking MAC to boycott in support of union organizers. UNITE HERE's action is part

of its global boycott of Hyatt, with the goal of establishing unions as well as improving working conditions in unionized properties. The boycott was initiated in 2012—long after MAC signed both contracts.

Both UNITE HERE and Hyatt Properties have stated their positions in communications with MAC Council and committee members. However, it is not MAC's intention or its mission to arbitrate between the two parties. MAC Council's first responsibility is to the MAC membership, and its decision does not reflect support or disrespect for either party.

To understand MAC's decision, it helps to know how the hotel contract with an organization like MAC is set up (anyone who has worked the hotel end of an LAC gets an unexpected education in the hospitality industry). Contracts are negotiated and signed one to three years in advance of the meeting, and terms include a steep financial penalty for cancelling a contract, based on a percentage of the hotel's potential loss of room and food/beverage income. Thus the cancellation penalty for a typical MAC annual meeting—contracting for 300+ room-nights and over \$10,000 in food/beverage services (for breaks, etc.)—would be close to \$40,000. In addition to the penalty for pulling out of a signed contract, MAC would incur additional expenses in trying to find another hotel that meets our criteria of location, affordable room rates, and reasonable charges for meeting rooms and food/beverage services. MAC cannot afford the financial loss, especially at a time when the organization is working to stabilize its finances.

As a result of these recent experiences, both SAA and MAC are changing the way they approach meeting planning and related decisions. To underline the role that responsible values and attitudes play in the organizations' decision-making, SAA Council has established a Social Responsibility Task Force, and MAC Council is working on a Statement of Values that will express MAC's commitment to social justice. These actions will help guide future meeting planning, ensuring that venues and vendors meet MAC's defined standards for social responsibility.