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Without respect for property rights, it's a heartbreak hotel

By Walter Olson

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The Los Angeles City Council has [voted unanimously to place on the March 2024 ballot](#) a measure that would require hotels to accept the placement of homeless persons in vacant rooms. The measure would “require hotels to report the number of vacant rooms” to the city each afternoon for this purpose. In addition, it would impose a complicated permitting process on new hotel developments of more than 100 units, and require hotel developments of 15 or more rooms to include development of nearby affordable housing to replace any displaced by the project.

Members of the hotel-worker union UNITE HERE Local 11 drew up the proposal and collected the 126,000 signatures. It's part of a pattern in which unions have drawn up far-reaching regulatory schemes aimed at employers which they have then [presented to the L.A. city council for enactment](#) by a signature process. Earlier, UNITE HERE had gotten the council to require hotels to adopt a variety of management practices favorable toward its interests, including providing daily room maintenance unless customers affirmatively opt out.

While the measure compelling hotels to house the homeless might temporarily bump up the demand for room cleaner jobs, it's not clear that it would serve the best interests of hotel employees in other ways. Heather Rozman, executive director of the Hotel Association of Los Angeles, told a council meeting packed with opponents of the measure that the proposal has already begun to chill conference business, as well as threatening increases in insurance premiums and other costs.

If business and leisure travelers are scared off by the prospect of confronting the disorders of a homeless shelter amid their stay, it's not hard to imagine that many workers who currently thrive in the sector would lose both salary and tip income associated with amenity provision: valet parking, room and concierge service, and so forth. Councilman Joe Buscaino, urging voters to defeat the measure, said “Placing paying hotel guests next to an unhoused person shows a complete misunderstanding of the causes of homelessness, which often stem from mental illness and drug abuse.” Rozman said hotels are not public safety providers and “should not be forced to clean up behind the city's humanitarian crisis.”

Elsewhere, too, labor unions have [sought to obtain](#) gains through state and city action that they could not obtain, or might never even try to obtain, at the bargaining table. The *Washington Post* [recently reported](#) that the same hotel union demanded of the Alexandria, Va. city council that it block approval for new hotels unless they guarantee unionization. (City lawmakers responded that they aren't legally entitled to do that.)

Going back a few years, you can see why the union's leadership might have assumed official arm-twisting of this sort was fair play: then-Boston mayor Marty Walsh [easily survived a scandal](#) after City Hall operators told concert organizers they wouldn't get permits unless they signed up with a Walsh-allied union, and Walsh himself, outrageously, [vowed to deny permits](#) for a Trump hotel based on his opposition to the opinions expressed by the real estate magnate, who had not at that point been elected president. Walsh now serves as labor secretary in the Biden administration.

Hotels make a target because they can't go anywhere. They need, and we need, a legal system that respects property rights.

Walter Olson is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute's [Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies](#) and is known for his writing on law, public policy, and regulation.