



# **Cleaning Up After Globalization: An Ergonomic Analysis of Work Activity of Hotel Cleaners**

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Hotels and hotel chains are responding to globalization and increased competition through new marketing initiatives, employment practices, and restructuring decisions that are intensifying the work of cleaners. In this paper, we report on how such work intensification at two hotels in Montréal, Canada, is changing the nature of cleaners' jobs. Specifically, we found that the numbers of operations to be completed, the numbers and weights of items to be cleaned, and the effort involved have all increased. "Flexible" employment relationships and outsourcing have also worsened cleaners' workloads. In response to our research, the labour union representing cleaners has negotiated a lower number of room assignments per cleaner, as well as an improved way of taking into account the variability of work when determining the quota of rooms to be cleaned. Despite this, new marketing strategies continue to intensify work. We conclude that standards and regulation on a governmental level are a necessary complement to union actions.

## **Introduction**

In the hospitality industry, neoliberalism and increasing industrial concentration have recently become ever more visible. As competition in the industry has deepened, hotel chains have felt pressure to become large enough both to satisfy the travel needs of their increasingly wide-ranging clients and to develop the economies of scale that will improve their bottom lines and so satisfy their shareholders. This growth requires cash from global capital markets, so that the majority of hotel chains now issue stock publicly (Bernhardt, Dresser and Hatton 2003). However, publicly owned corporations are required to report to stockholders at frequent intervals in order to demonstrate good returns to investors (Cline nd). This leads to significantly increased pressure for short-term performance rather than long-term sustainability, resulting in organizational restructuring to cut costs and to increase revenue flows (Bernhardt, Dresser and Hatton 2003). To improve their immediate bottom line, then, hotels and hotel chains have sought to introduce more "flexibility" into their operations in the form of part-time, casual, and seasonal work, a strategy which has significantly diminished the attraction of investing in the long-term health or job satisfaction of workers. At the same time, hotel managers

have outsourced functions such as laundry and catering services. Moreover, they have increased efforts to woo and render faithful a fickle, sophisticated global clientele by offering more amenities in their guest rooms (coffee pots, hair dryers, irons and ironing boards, bathrobes, extra sheets and pillows, and even printers and fax machines; Bernhardt, Dresser and Hatton 2003; Seifert 2001). As the hospitality industry has responded to globalization and increased competition through new marketing initiatives, employment practices, and restructuring decisions, the work of cleaners has both dramatically intensified and their employment has become significantly less stable (Scherzer, Rugulies and Krause 2005; Seifert 2001).

The research presented here will explore how hotel cleaners' work is being reshaped by these new work regimes. We report on two ergonomic case studies of cleaning in hotels in Montréal, Canada, initiated to identify determinants of the difficulties in cleaners' work in order to suggest improvements to their working conditions. These studies included observations, interviews, and documentary research. Based on this research, we first present a general description of Montréal hotel workers and their work, and we identify a number of factors that are intensifying this work and leading to conflicts among cleaners within the workplace. We also describe strategies used by workers to deal with these new constraints. Finally, we explain how the union has used the results of these studies in an effort to improve working conditions. In conducting the research we draw upon a tradition of ergonomic analysis as developed in the French-speaking world which has been used to reveal relatively invisible constraints and requirements in the work environment, as well as the strategies used by workers to deal with them (Guérin et al 1997; Teiger and Bernier 1982). We have previously been involved in efforts to apply this type of analysis to women's work in the service sector (for example, Seifert, Messing and Dumais 1997). For us, cleaning is a particularly interesting type of work for such analysis for several reasons: it is subject to a fairly strict sexual division of labour (Gaucher 1981; Messing, Haëntjens and Doniol-Show 1993; Messing, Chatigny and Courville 1998); it is considered to be a traditional task for women; and even though cleaning is associated with significant risks for musculoskeletal problems (Milburn and Barret 1999; Torgen, Nygard and Kilbom 1995) and with health problems derived from exposure to cleaning products (Karjalainen et al 2002; Rosenman et al 2003), many employers and even some union activists believe that cleaning rooms is a natural and undemanding activity, done without problems by many women.

Despite its importance for human health promotion (cleanliness is, after all, an important aspect of a healthy environment), cleaning has

often been seen as peripheral to the “real” goals of production or client services and therefore cleaners have often been excluded from ergonomic studies and interventions in the institutions, factories, and retail establishments where they work. This study, then, is intended to help fill that gap.

### **An Overview of Hotel Cleaning Work**

The economic dimension of globalization is manifested in the hospitality industry in Canada in at least two significant ways: first, as in many parts of the world, mergers and acquisitions have brought about a concentration of ownership in the hands of a small number of highly competitive transnational corporations; second, international migration has brought many workers from the global South to metropolitan centres to fill jobs that are too poorly paid to attract many local workers. These developments are having consequences both for the nature of cleaners’ work and for the emerging work relationships amongst cleaners. As a result, unions are scrambling to develop strategies that will allow them to respond to cleaners’ worsening working conditions and to encourage solidarity amongst ethnically diverse workers despite organizational practices that have often pitted one ethnic or cultural group against another.

### *Cleaner Demographics and the Low Status of Cleaning*

In Montréal, the politics of work, class, and race/ethnicity have intersected in important ways as globalization and neoliberalism have impacted the hotel industry through the introduction of new labour regimes and a growing reliance upon new groups of (immigrant) workers. Today hotel cleaners are primarily immigrant women, with a majority being either black or Latin American. Such demographics in the industry have become increasingly common as workers from developing countries have migrated to the US, to Canada, and to Western Europe. Hence, in studies of hotel cleaners in San Francisco and Las Vegas, Lee and Krause (2002), and Scherzer, Rugulies and Krause (2005) found that almost all cleaners were immigrant women, as did Muqa et al (1996) in Paris, France, where a majority of hotel cleaners were immigrants. According to Glenn (2001:73), this growth in reliance upon immigrant workers has been “concomitant with globalization” as economic restructuring has forced “women from the periphery to migrate to metropolitan centers to fill demands for both private and public reproductive services”. The result, she suggests, has been that in countries such as the United States, black and Latina women have been “disproportionately employed as service workers to carry out low-level public reproductive labor”.

Given that cleaning is generally acknowledged to be low in status, cleaners are poorly paid, their workload is generally not recognized, and their work is usually seen as peripheral to the main activity of the employer (Messing 1998). Cleaners often complain of a lack of respect shown them, a lack which seems to be the result of a number of factors, one of which appears to be cultural associations between cleaners and the dirt they must remove (Glenn 1992; Brody this collection). Such disdainful behaviour on the part of other staff and of hotel guests is not just unpleasant, but it also has considerable impacts upon cleaners' health—it can, for example, undermine their mental health and lead to anxiety and low self-confidence, both of which are linked to psychological damage (Cortina et al 2001; Dejours 1993; Leary and Kowalski 1995:137). At the same time, cleaners' low status can result directly or indirectly in damage to their physical health, the result, usually, of their not being consulted by administrators with regard to the design of the spaces and furnishings they clean (Messing, Chatigny and Courville 1998). Hence, even when equipment is ordered specifically for their use, cleaners are usually not involved in its choice and do not pre-test it. For instance, in the research recounted here, a supply cart was too heavy and the push bar was too high for most of the hotel cleaners we observed working. Such poor ergonomic design can have considerable implications for physical injuries to the body, over both the short and long term, yet these and other physical challenges of cleaning are generally underestimated.

Perceiving oneself as part of a low-status group can also lead to tensions and aggression among those who experience contemptuous treatment (Wilkinson 1999). Indeed, in the Montréal hotels we studied, the women cleaners were perceived by managers as a jealous and conflict-ridden group. Such behaviour has been aggravated by the fact that cleaners' work is usually done under significant time pressure, a time pressure which has been exacerbated (as we will show here) by the amplified physical, mental, and emotional workload linked to procedures introduced recently by employers wishing to show increased short-term profits.

### *Race and Class Solidarity and Conflicts*

Whereas historically hotel cleaning in Montréal was dominated by white, Canadian-born workers who enjoyed relatively long-term employment relationships with hotels, as globalization has impacted migration and working patterns, the population of hotel cleaners in Montréal has become a complex mosaic composed of working-class white women, working-class immigrant women, and educated immigrant women, many of whom now work on a contingent (ie part-time,

temporary, and/or sub-contracted) basis. This composition involves cleaners in dynamics of race and class solidarity, as well as conflict. For example, we have observed that racial/ethnic alliances are used both to regulate workload and to defend group members against perceived injustice. Equally, class consciousness also contributes to solidarity against perceived injustice to a cleaner and feeds into daily and long-term struggles for better working conditions. However, our analyses of the industry show that there are also multidimensional cleavages between “Canadians” and “immigrants”, between “regular cleaners” and “students”, and between more senior and less senior cleaners. These cleavages cause rivalries and conflicts that can diminish solidarity and greatly shift the power balance in favour of administrators.

Certainly, such cleavages of race and class are not unique to hotel cleaning, and Glenn (1992:34) and Scherzer (2003) have shown how they shape conflicts between registered nurses (usually white and middle class) and nurses’ aides (more often minorities) in the United States over such matters as work assignments. In the Montréal hotels we have studied, though, conflicts amongst nationalities are quite common and can be partly attributed to class conflict between the more educated, Canadian-born students and immigrants, and the other workers. Thus, white Canadian-born students who take up cleaning as a part-time or summer job whilst they are studying tend to speak readily with administrative personnel, an attitude that is perceived by many non-student cleaners as a betrayal of cleaners’ class interests. Likewise, educated immigrants sometimes try to gain some recognition by bringing up their previous educational experiences and by expressing opinions in an articulate fashion, behaviour which is experienced as contemptuous by many of those with less education, both working-class, white, Canadian-born cleaners and immigrants.

Class, race/ethnicity, geographic origin, and seniority, however, do not act alone. Rather, it is the flexibilization of work, the economic insecurity, and the exacerbation of differences in employment status (such as between more and less senior cleaners) caused by it that has encouraged rivalry and suspicion among cleaners. For instance, in our analysis of the industry we have seen that less senior cleaners are particularly worried about their number of work hours because their hours are quite variable and they therefore try especially hard to be perceived by housekeeping supervisors as “good cleaners”. However, in doing so they then run the risk of being perceived by more senior cleaners as subservient and lacking class solidarity.

### *The Intensification of Hotel Cleaning Work*

The intensification of hotel cleaning has been manifested in work content in three principal ways: a modified working environment

due to increased efforts to secure market segment; changed employment contracts so as to bring about greater flexibility; and outsourcing of work previously done in-house. Each of these is having important impacts upon the cleaners.

### *Marketing Efforts*

As competition for guests—particularly those on business trips who are perceived to have more money to spend—has deepened due to the pressures placed on hotels by stockholders and potential stock purchasers for ever greater profit margins, hotels have provided increasingly lavish amenities to entice travellers to stay with them rather than with their rivals. Such efforts at marketing have shown up in hotel rooms in the form of larger numbers of gadgets to check, clean, replace, and tidy up, including coffeemakers, trays of cosmetics or food products, and ironing boards. These amenities are often featured at hotels' websites and are promoted heavily in their marketing campaigns. For example, in a study of eight large hotels in the United States, administrators told researchers they had added amenities specifically to compete for clients (Bernhardt, Dresser and Hatton 2003). Other marketing strategies are also having an impact on cleaning—the provision of bigger beds, heavier mattresses, and a third bed sheet (see study results below) have also dramatically increased the physical effort involved in cleaning rooms.

### *Employment Flexibility and Non-standard Work*

Employment flexibility is not created by globalization, but globalization favours its development by increasing competitive pressures. This is having important consequences for workers. Thus, flexible employment practices have decreased the numbers of full-time workers and varied the number of working hours per week in the hotel industry in both Canada and the United States (Bernhardt, Dresser and Hatton 2003). In the hotels where this study was conducted, these practices have meant that workers' room assignments often change from day to day and week to week, so that cleaners are less able to regulate their workloads by postponing operations from one day to the next or to anticipate heavy workloads by doing some operations the day before. Although the effects of these employment policies are most evident for casual and part-time workers who do not have an assigned group of rooms, they also affect more senior workers who have an assigned group of rooms because all cleaners have seen their workloads increase and have had to integrate into their usual workday those jobs previously done out of season. By requiring employees, especially less senior employees, to work on irregular schedules, only occasionally, or to be constantly on call, such employment practices can not

only have negative health effects (Quinlan, Mayhew and Bohle 2001) but also greatly increase the difficulties related to balancing work and family responsibilities. Hence, Prévost and Messing (2001), for example, have shown that telephone operators working on irregular and unpredictable schedules are constantly required to rearrange child care, day care for elderly parents or sick relatives, and children's activities. Furthermore, the need to be constantly "on call" actually exacerbates cleaners' poverty levels—workers who are "on call" cannot use their non-work time for alternate employment yet they do not get paid if they are not actually called into work at the hotel.

Significantly, though, whereas employment flexibilization is often presented as a way for employers to use labour more efficiently, the lack of predictability in cleaners' work schedules also appears to have hidden detriments for the hotels themselves, as cleaners' inability to plan ahead often means that they actually take longer to complete certain tasks. This is a finding which replicates that of other industries such as healthcare, where studies show that nurses who are scheduled on an unpredictable and/or occasional basis are generally rendered much less efficient in caring for patients, since they are obliged to gather information on patients *de novo* every time they enter a new ward (see Seifert and Messing 2004).

### *Outsourcing*

The outsourcing of work previously conducted in-house can have significant impacts upon cleaners' work, even if their own jobs are not outsourced. Thus, as Quinlan, Mayhew and Bohle (2001) have argued, outsourcing often leads to considerable changes in the ways tasks are carried out because the contracts with outside providers may not make explicit all of the necessary—yet often invisible and informal—aspects of the tasks as they were conducted in-house (cf Messing, Chatigny and Courville 1998). At the same time, however, the hotel typically assumes that all parts of the newly outsourced tasks have, in fact, been addressed as before. The result is that many problems start to fall between the cracks.

### **Methods for Work Analysis at Two Montréal Hotels**

In this section we turn to an analysis of how the kinds of work intensification associated with neoliberalism are impacting cleaners in two Montréal hotels. In researching the impact of job transformation upon these cleaners, we used methods derived from those developed at the Conservatoire national des arts et métiers in France (Guérin et al 1997). These methods are based on close observation of cleaners' work and interviews with them about their work, as a means of examining workplace dynamics and gaining a deeper

understanding of the factors shaping the redesign of work. Our method has several stages: (i) defining and understanding workplace needs and forming a study committee; (ii) observing cleaners work and asking them questions about what they are doing; (iii) systematic analysis of these data; (iv) giving feedback to the cleaners; and (v) the production of a final report (Messing et al 2005).

### *Study Setting*

Since 1993, our research centre has been engaged in a formal partnership with Québec's three major trade unions to study health and safety issues related to women's work (Messing and Seifert 2001). The unions use the results of our studies to improve working conditions and to help them in their political work. The studies presented here were supported by this collaborative effort. They were carried out in two large hotels, both of which are owned by multinational corporations. The first study was initiated in 1998 in a 400-room hotel (Hotel East) at the request of a Workers' Compensation Board rehabilitation officer. The second was implemented under contract to the hotel administration but was begun in response to pressures brought to bear by the local union after completion of the first study. It was conducted in 2000 at an even larger, 600-room hotel (Hotel South).<sup>1</sup> Some funds for the research were negotiated by the union and came from the employer. Employers were aware of our collaboration with the unions and accepted union participation in the definition and conduct of the study. They also discussed solutions with the unions and allowed public disclosure of the final report, as long as the hotel's name was not mentioned. In both hotels the project started with a meeting with an employer representative. We asked for their views on the need for a study and whether they felt there were any problems with regard to working conditions. At our request, joint labour-management committees were set up and were composed of both employer and union representatives, as well as the heads of the housekeeping and maintenance services. The role of these committees was to comment on the study objectives, its conduct, and, eventually, the solutions proposed.

The employers at both hotels first requested that we train room cleaners in proper work methods as a way to prevent musculoskeletal problems. Whilst considering this request, we first analysed the needs and perceptions of the various actors by interviewing them and through engaging in preliminary observations of work activity. We also conducted one-hour individual interviews with the director of human resources and with the head of housekeeping. These interviews allowed us to understand managers' perceptions of problems in housekeeping, as well as the criteria they used when assigning rooms

to housekeepers. Twenty-minute individual interviews with room cleaners allowed them to identify difficult tasks and causes of pain, as well as the working conditions they wanted to change. We interviewed all the room cleaners who were at the workplace during two consecutive days: 20 room cleaners of the 46 in Hotel East and 32 of the 80 in Hotel South. At this stage, we also directly observed ten room cleaners working for a total period of 56 hours. We obtained information concerning national origin either from the cleaners themselves or from their friends, whilst information on sex, age, and seniority was drawn from employers' lists. Upon completion of this preliminary data gathering, we met with the study committee and outlined the many demanding tasks identified through this process. The study committee then agreed to change the orientation of the study from "training cleaners in good work methods" to "identifying determinants of some problems in housekeeping".

Through a constant back-and-forth process of observation, interpretation, and feedback between ourselves and the cleaners we were able to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of their work. We then observed eight room cleaners during an additional 40 hours in Hotel East and ten room cleaners during an additional 50 hours in Hotel South. We also analysed 60 inspection reports on room cleaning in Hotel East. These observations and interviews were conducted between September 2000 and May 2001, since workers and managers were too overloaded to participate during the summer season.<sup>2</sup> To study the effects of the outsourcing of laundry services, we interviewed the hotel manager and the head of housekeeping and observed room cleaners' manipulation of defective linen. Moreover, we asked 18 day-shift room cleaners to put aside for us the unusable bed linen found during the course of a single day in Hotel South, which we then examined for tears, spots, and signs of wear.

We periodically presented our results, first to those cleaners whom we had observed, then to the entire group of cleaners at the hotel concerned, and finally to the study committee. At each presentation, we incorporated into the report feedback and suggestions for further research, together with proposals for changing how cleaning work is done. We gave the final reports to the participating hotels and to the cleaners and the central labour federations to which the unions were affiliated. Based upon these studies, the unions representing workers in this sector were able to negotiate improvements in working conditions and, more broadly, to gain recognition for the value and difficulty of these women's work. The results of the first intervention at Hotel East were widely publicized. The Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), a major union federation, organized a colloquium to use the results to inform and mobilize workers for their upcoming contract negotiations. One hundred and fifty cleaners from 80 hotels

came to the colloquium. The presentations, as well as the discussions among cleaners from different hotels, favoured negotiating changes in workload and organization. Subsequently, the union developed contract language concerning cleaners' workloads, whilst the cleaners themselves were delighted at being involved and having their situation well understood.

### *On the Logistics of Cleaning*

When we conducted our study, cleaners at Hotel East represented 20% of all workers at the hotel. Almost all were women, of whom 69% were immigrants, from ten different countries. Their average age was 50, ranging from 25 to 67, and their average seniority was 15 years (range 1–30 years). In Hotel South, room cleaners were one quarter of all hotel workers (79% were immigrants, from 18 different countries), with their average age being 42 (19–67) and average seniority 10 years (3 months–24 years). In both hotels the largest single group of workers was that composed of white women of European or North American origin, though other substantial groups of cleaners were born in Haiti, Chile, and Jamaica. The majority of cleaners worked in cleaning services permanently, although some of them were students employed only during summer time.

Work in hotels is seasonal, with occupancy at its maximum (about 80%) in summer. During the rest of the year the rate of occupancy ranges from 50% to 77% (Statistics Canada 2000). Typically, employers adjust both the numbers of employees and the hours of work per employee as a function of demand, with 63% of Québec hotel workers employed either part-time or seasonally (Conseil québécois de ressources humaines en tourisme 1999:78). Hours of part-timers fluctuate from 17 to 29 hours per week (Conseil québécois de ressources humaines en tourisme 2001:2). According to employer sources, major hotels in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montréal are 80% unionized (Stokes 1997). In the hotels we studied, one union represented all employees. Cleaners can have regular or casual status and work hours are distributed among all workers by seniority, according to the collective agreement. In Hotel East it takes 15 years' seniority to reach full-time, full-year status (48% of employees) and in Hotel South it takes 17 years (39% of employees).

### *Room Assignments*

In Hotel East, each cleaner was assigned 15 rooms, with a reduction if she had to do more than one "VIP" room (expensive rooms which require cleaning to a higher standard and contain more items to be cleaned). After the results of the first study, the union negotiated a reduction in the number of rooms to be cleaned, such that by the time

we studied Hotel South, cleaners in both hotels were assigned 14 rooms, with reductions for VIP rooms or for rooms located on different floors or sections. The weekly schedules were usually made known on Thursday for the week beginning on the following Sunday. However, if occupancy rose unexpectedly, some workers were solicited for extra hours for the following day or even the same day. Less senior cleaners' assignments could change from day to day, and they were more often allocated rooms spread over several floors or sections.

### *Work Activity*

Cleaners generally work alone. In a typical workday, one hour will be spent getting room assignments, retrieving clean linen, emptying soiled linen, and preparing their supply cart for the next day. The average time allotted for cleaning each room rose from 26 minutes in the first study to 28 minutes in the second. Our observations show that the time to clean a room usually varies from 15 to 49 minutes, but can reach 90 minutes in exceptional situations. Work is interrupted by two 15-minute breaks and a lunch period of 1 hour.

Cleaners' work activity varies significantly with the type of room to be cleaned and according to whether or not the guest is staying on (see Table 1). For example, newly vacated rooms have more stringent standards for dusting, toilet cleaning, and dishwashing. Dusting time varies from 1 minute for a room that will be re-occupied by the same guest to 6 minutes if the guest is leaving. Similarly, dishwashing time typically runs from 2 to 8 minutes.

### *Factors Intensifying the Workload*

Cleaners report that their workload has intensified over the last 10 years as a result of several factors. First, "spring cleaning" has been reassigned to the daily routine. Whereas in the early 1990s cleaners did such major housekeeping tasks as turning mattresses and cleaning fans, electric heaters, and corridors during periods of low occupancy, these tasks are now supposed to be part of the daily routine and no specific time or personnel has been assigned to them. Second, organized tour groups now arrive more frequently—the result of hotel marketing strategies geared towards increasing occupancy rates—and this means that many rooms are vacated at the same time. Third, as mentioned previously, a number of new amenities introduced due to marketing initiatives must be replaced, dusted and/or cleaned, usually daily. Other marketing devices have been introduced from time to time, with dramatic consequences for cleaners. In Hotel East, for example, families with children received a game with tiny pieces, with the result that, on departure, cleaners had to check every

**Table 1:** Description of operations performed to clean an occupied room and a check-out room

<b>Task</b>	<b>Operations in a room where occupants are staying on</b>	<b>Additional operations when occupants are checking out</b>
Stripping the room	Collect trash and empty containers Put away ironing board and iron Take out dirty bed sheets, pillows and towels If dirty, wash dishes, ice and coffee buckets, trays, ashtrays, etc	Wash trash containers  Even if not dirty, wash trays and ice and coffee buckets
Making the bed	Change two sheets, tidy blanket and bedspread Put pillowcases on three pillows	If necessary, change bedspread
Cleaning the bathroom	Dry washed dishes in the bathroom and return them to tray Wash and dry sink, bathtub, toilet bowl and mirrors Check if any cosmetic products (shampoo, conditioner, bath soap, hand soap, shower cap, shoe cleaner) are missing and replace them Replace towels If necessary, replace tissues and toilet paper	Change shower curtains  Wash cosmetic tray
Dusting, vacuuming and finishing the room	Dust bedside table, tables, head of bed, commode surface, television front and upper surface, mirrors Vacuum floors  Inspect closet Close the door Push cart to the next room	Dust bedside table and commode drawers, back of television, lamps, heaters, chairs and footstools, curtains, picture frames Vacuum under the cushions of sofas, behind furniture, under bed

corner of the room, under cushions, and in drawers to make sure the pieces were all accounted for. A fourth intensification concerns bedding. Specifically, mattresses and bed linen have been replaced by bigger and heavier versions. Hotels have introduced more king-sized beds which typically take approximately 1.6 times as long to make as double beds. Cleaners complain particularly about the heavier mattresses because they have to lift them as many as eight times

to introduce the sheets. Furthermore, the bigger sheets which these beds require are harder to introduce under the mattresses and require the mattress to be lifted higher. In addition, as part of an effort to make beds look all white and clean when the bedspread is turned back a third sheet has been added. Although this serves no purpose other than an aesthetic one, this practice has been extended to all beds in both hotels, multiplying the time to make a bed by a factor of 2.4.

Fifth, new decorations have introduced more hard-to-reach mirrors, porous surfaces that pick up stains more readily (such as synthetic marble in bathrooms and coffee tables), and dark furniture that is more exacting to clean. Finally, laundry has been outsourced to cut costs. However, this has produced additional work for the cleaners. Thus, linen being returned from the laundry services was often missing or late—on average, from September to May the cleaners had to wait for linen to arrive from the outside one day per week, with the situation being much worse during the busy summer season. Such delays resulted in cleaners having to make rooms in two steps rather than one. Equally, according to the cleaners there was much more damaged linen after laundering was contracted out and this added to the cleaners' work—a cleaner would start to make a bed with a sheet and then notice it was torn or stained and, whereas she would sometimes be able to conceal the damaged area by putting it toward the bottom of the bed, often she would discover a large spot or tear toward the end of bed-making and so would have to start again from scratch. These problems were compounded by the fact that it was no one's job to inspect the laundry before returning it to the contractor. Thus, damaged items were tossed back into the laundry, washed again, and put back into circulation. The proportion of damaged items thus rose over time, making it harder and harder for the cleaners to find enough good sheets and increasing the time for room cleaning. In the case of 252 beds from 196 rooms we observed, 26% had a damaged sheet and 34% had a damaged pillowcase.

The above changes affected all cleaners, but less senior workers faced even more stringent conditions for three principal reasons: (i) they have to travel longer distances to reach their assigned rooms because contiguous rooms are generally assigned to cleaners with more seniority; (ii) they are more likely to run short of supplies such as clean linen because they more frequently work afternoon shifts, by which time supplies have already been monopolized by day-shift cleaners; and (iii) because they work afternoon shifts they are more likely to spend time looking for a free cart or vacuum cleaner. The magnitude of these problems is highlighted by the fact that on at least one occasion our observations showed that, on the afternoon shift at Hotel South, eight of ten storage areas lacked a

vacuum cleaner and three lacked a cart. We observed one search that lasted over an hour whereas in another case the only cart found was loaded with soiled linen and waste and took 45 minutes to clear and load properly. Significantly, as a way to avoid this situation, some afternoon shift cleaners actually hid favourite carts and vacuum cleaners so as to be sure to find them when they came back to work, which was often several days later. This strategy, of course, may be helpful to an individual cleaner but it has significant drawbacks for her colleagues.

Despite these difficulties, room cleaners generally forced themselves to clean thoroughly all the rooms assigned to them, although this was not required by their contract. In interviews, cleaners explained this by saying that they wanted to be proud of their work but, also, that they were afraid of being criticized by the head of housekeeping, criticism which might result in being allocated fewer hours of work. Less senior workers were particularly worried in this regard. Although the union's contract provided that housekeeping would call cleaners to work in order of seniority and that time would be allowed for call backs, many worried that if they were perceived as poor workers housekeeping would be less patient in waiting for them to call back. They were also afraid of getting poor room assignments in terms of locations or types of rooms.

As a way to finish all their assigned rooms, cleaners regulated their workload in a number of ways. A commonly used strategy was to anticipate some operations. Hence, the day before she anticipated having to clean a large number of rooms belonging to guests who would be checking out, a cleaner would usually replace the toilet paper rolls and the tissue boxes, vacuum behind the furniture, and change bedspreads and shower curtains. Another strategy was to distribute tasks over several workdays. Thus, deep cleaning one room at a time over a long period would enable a cleaner to clean more rapidly on days when the workload was heavy. However, these strategies are only available to the minority of cleaners who are senior enough to have their own regularly assigned territory. Cleaners without an assigned territory, by contrast, could generally save time only by rushing, skipping breaks, or leaving out parts of the job (usually the cleaning of picture frames, lamp bases, under beds, mirrors, dishes, and toilets), a strategy which then left them open to charges of laxity—according to the inspection sheets from 30 rooms in Hotel East, for instance, the cleaning of 23% of rooms was judged to be poor or unacceptable. Another strategy was to access help from friends, usually those from the same national and language group, although such help often had to be kept secret to protect the friend from being fired and was possible only if the helper herself was not overloaded.

## Union Resistance

Whereas individualized strategies such as those just mentioned were one way in which cleaners sought to negotiate the new work regime implemented in the two hotels we studied, the involvement of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN) labour federation represented a more collectivized response. Given that the CSN had been involved in developing the study outlined above, it is, perhaps, no surprise that it has been intimately involved in seeking to help hotel cleaners resist some of the efforts at work intensification pursued by management. Consequently, after the results of the Hotel East study were published during the summer of 2000, workers put their case to the public through demonstrations and leafleting. Negotiations with employers were eventually successful in reducing the numbers of rooms that had to be cleaned in a shift (from 15 to 14) and in introducing various mechanisms for lightening cleaners' workload when large numbers of clients arrive or leave at the same time. These provisions were later extended to almost all of the unionized hotels in Montréal. For its part, the study at Hotel South resulted in further recommendations which were presented to the employer and the union in 2002. These results were used to gain more improvements in working conditions, such as taking into account the number of beds and occupants per room when assigning rooms to clean. Additional gains in all hotels in Montréal were attained through a short strike in the summer of 2005.

Clearly, the CSN is not alone in seeking to improve cleaners' lot, as witnessed by the Justice for Janitors campaign in the United States and a recent strike by cleaners in Paris (*L'Humanité* 2005). However, what is important with regard to the CSN's activities in Québec is that the movement for change has been reinforced by a tradition of struggle in the union involved, as well as the university–union collaboration outlined above. Indeed, the fact that the unions partnered with scientists to produce quantitative data on the cleaners' workload was helpful in building support for the cleaners' struggle within the local union and within the union federation.

Although the CSN, then, is certainly aware of the consequences of the kinds of precarious work that have emerged in the hotel industry and has tried to protect less senior workers by, for example, negotiating access to temporary or part-time jobs as waitresses in other unionized areas, it realizes that these individual *ad hoc* solutions do not provide much long-term economic security to cleaners. Consequently, the union has sought to develop contract language that will protect cleaners and has also tried to encourage greater state regulation of the industry. However, there are limits to the powers of provincial and even national unions in a context of

governmental deregulation and the increasingly cut-throat corporate competition which has developed as hotel chains have had to satisfy the short-term demands of global stock markets. Equally, the growing power of the hotel chains which has resulted from acquisitions and mergers means that, even if the state wished to do so, its ability to set and enforce standards has become increasingly difficult. Nevertheless, just because something is difficult does not mean that it should not be attempted, and unions in Canada and elsewhere have pursued ergonomic regulations as part of their struggles to improve workers' conditions of employment.

### *Regulations and Standards*

Those doing business in a globalized marketplace have an interest in setting international standards for products, such that, for example, a television made in India can be plugged into a socket in Cameroon. To facilitate this the International Organization for Standardization ("ISO") has promulgated a wide range of standards for a large number of commodities and processes, from the procedures for testing dental amalgams (ISO 10271 2001) to the dimensions and tolerances of watch glasses (ISO 14368-1 2000). ISO standards also include what are called ergonomic norms (the ISO 9000 series), specifying such things as limits for weights lifted and parameters for office equipment. This is important, because although they do not have the force of law, a company that can boast that it has been certified to conform to ISO standards may enjoy a competitive advantage.

On the face of them, these standards are potentially a good thing for workers since they provide an opportunity to improve working conditions. However, there are several problems with them. First, a company that has been certified may not in fact conform to the standard since there is little inspection following certification (Laperrière 2004; Toulouse 2003). Second, the standards are extremely precise, to the point where they may not apply in real life. For example, the standard for weight-lifting (ISO 11228-1) specifies the distance between the centre of mass of the worker and the centre of mass of the object to be lifted. Yet these standards do not take into account differences among individual workers (eg, the back of a female worker with large breasts has a very different biomechanical relationship to the weight lifted from the back of the average male worker [Tate 2004]). Equally, the specifics of the workers' situation may not have been considered. Thus, lifting a wriggling child does not have the same effect on the human body as does lifting an inert object of the same weight. Thirdly, each standard takes a long time to develop and covers only a tiny proportion of actual risky situations.

It is therefore impossible to describe in detail every working posture that is associated with a health risk, for the number of working postures is nearly infinite—for instance, struggling with the mattress of a king-sized bed involves combinations of postures that vary with the worker and the specifics of the hotel room. In practice, then, it would be very hard for an international organization to promulgate prescriptive standards that are enforceable and which take the whole range of workers' real-life situations into account.

Equally, hotels are constantly producing environmental changes that affect posture, generally at a rate far outpacing the ability of regulatory entities to set standards. Moreover, hotels are being concentrated into chains with distant headquarters and are “branded” so that guests might expect the same levels of service and amenities no matter at which of the chain's hotels they actually stay. Accordingly, even if they might wish to be more responsive to the needs of their workers, local managers usually must follow corporate directives that often extend to the details of furniture, decoration, tools, and even which cleaning products to use. Thus, there has been a proliferation of mirrors which require careful daily cleaning but which are positioned according to corporate specifications, often at the limit of cleaners' reach—a situation which forces them to adopt awkward postures. Although the union complains that such insidious changes, over which it has no control, counter the gains they made when using the research outlined above in contract negotiations, at this point there is no venue where parameters that concretely influence workload could be regulated at a supranational level. Consequently, only local negotiations can do this, and only where a strong union movement exists.

Nevertheless, despite such problems we think that it is vital to support the development of ergonomic requirements that are based on the general promotion of health rather than specified, limited operations (Lippel and Caron 2004). This type of regulation is currently in force in British Columbia, and is being developed in Ontario. While waiting for such regulations, local cleaners' unions and associations must be supported in their struggles for recognition of the difficulties and the importance of their work, so that those in the boardroom will become more aware of the costs of their marketing and employment strategies for the performance of cleaning. Concretely, this means that legislation and regulations supporting union organizing should also be supported.

## Discussion

Changes associated with neoliberal globalization, such as cuts in work hours, outsourcing, restructured tasks, added amenities, and the

standardization and upscaling of hotel furnishings, have intensified work and diminished cleaners' ability to regulate their workload. All cleaners suffer the consequences of these changes, but the impact is worst for the least senior. Speed-up and a growing precariousness of work have also caused social problems amongst cleaners, some of whose strategies for self-protection work to the detriment of other cleaners. Thus the growing precariousness of work in the industry encourages workers to vie with each other for the favours of the housekeeping administrators who allocate work and hours, an outcome which increases the power held over them by their employers.

Along with these changes, the transnational migration of cleaners has led to a diversification of the racial/ethnic and class composition of this population, with resulting contradictory effects: solidarity within groups and classes but also, often, conflict between them. Hence, cleavages repeatedly emerged amongst the cleaners we studied, based upon seniority (those who had a designated territory versus those without), on status (casual student cleaner versus regular cleaner), and on nationality (Canadian-born versus immigrant or, to a lesser extent, among immigrant groups). Regularly, less senior cleaners accused regular cleaners of hiding linen and doing a poor job on "their" rooms the day before a day off, leaving more work for their replacements. In turn, the regular cleaners complained that those who replaced them often failed to load the linen carts properly, to roll up the vacuum cleaner cord, or to change vacuum cleaner bags. Significantly, conflicts based on nationality were intermeshed with those based on status, arising both amongst cleaners and between cleaners and administrators. Thus, in Hotel South immigrant groups perceived less senior, white, Canadian-born cleaners, especially (but not only) summer students, as lacking solidarity, as more prone to yield to management demands, and as contemptuous toward immigrants with poorer language skills. By contrast, senior, white, Canadian-born cleaners viewed some educated Latin American immigrants as aloof for insisting on receiving recognition for educational or professional status they had attained in their home country. These situations were exacerbated by the fact that "favours" done by administrators were often interpreted as arising from national or ethnic preference—for example, in Hotel South a housekeeping employee was suspected of assigning the "best" rooms to the cleaners of her ethnic group, and in Hotel East the supervisors were thought to be easier on their compatriots.

As competition intensifies, hotels will undoubtedly continue to change labour practices and add to the amenities they offer as a way both to try to minimize costs and to attract more high-end clients who provide the largest profit margins. Since cleaning is far from the minds of those who devise these work and marketing strategies, any

changes in products and services are likely to have major unforeseen consequences for cleaners' workloads. Moreover, public awareness of the health and safety implications for cleaners of workplace design is even lower than it is for factory workers, because the hotel workplace is perceived primarily as a client-service area. Certainly, then, we would urge that local cleaners' unions and associations be supported in their struggles for recognition of the difficulties and the importance of their work, such that those in the boardroom—and, more importantly, the general public who might bring pressure to bear on hotel management—will become more aware of the costs of marketing and employment practices for the performance of cleaning. At the same time, whereas employers often simply assume that work restructuring through intensification and outsourcing will save them money, our research has shown that when these strategies are applied without understanding the concrete realities of cleaners' work, there may often be, in fact, significant losses for employers, both in terms of economics and of quality. Employers should be made more aware of such costs.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The hotel names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> We should point out, then, that because data were collected during the winter, when work was not always available for them, we were not able to reach many of the less senior cleaners. Consequently, our results may over-represent the experience and perceptions of more senior, regularly employed cleaners. This means that what we report here represents the best face of the industry and that working conditions for cleaners overall may very likely be worse.

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