

Economic Crisis and New Social Realities: Bait and Switch and the American Dream— Presidential Address 2010[†]

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Abstract

The ESS was called to act during the fall of 2009. We faced a critical test: to stand beside the housekeepers at the hotel where we were supposed to hold the 2010 conference or to ignore their plight. I use the case study of breaking a contract with the Hyatt Hotel in order to locate the Hyatt layoffs in a broader context. This case is meant to illuminate two related issues. (1) The Hyatt Hotel used a traditional strategy of labor substitution in the context of a new global economy. During this ongoing economic crisis, housekeepers, who were promised good jobs and benefits, had worked hard on a steep climb toward fulfilling the American Dream. The resourcefulness of the unions, who saw the loss of these jobs as a threat to the entire industry, and articulate laid-off workers, who captured the media’s attention, kept this newsworthy. (2) When faced with choices over “whose side are we on,” our strategies for how to act need to be different than academic posturing. I answer the question of how we should act when we become actors in these situations, which is what the ESS was confronted with over the Hyatt’s housekeeper firing.

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