

## California union files charges against Bethel businessman

*Ten-month wrangle over union contract*

By Jon Grover  
Tundra Drums

A California union representing hotel workers at a Travelodge hotel owned by Kilsoo Seo, of Bethel, has filed charges against him with the National Labor Relations Board.

Thirteen union hotel employees have led a boycott of the Monterey Bay Travelodge since July 2004 by encouraging travelers to stay at different hotels. In the 10 months since they began the boycott, they have held 38 rallies in front of the California business. According to Seo, there are about 10 nonunion employees as well.

The charges, filed on April 22 by the UNITE HERE Local 483, allege that Seo threatened hotel workers with closing the hotel and declaring bankruptcy if workers continue their protest.

The union has made an appeal to Bethel people in a letter mailed out last week to private box holders. The letter lists the telephone number to Video World, owned by Seo and his brother, saying: "Please help us. Call on Kilsoo Seo to do right

and give us back our health insurance at 543-4422."

Specifically, the charges mention that Seo threatened to fire Juana Enriquez, the union steward and spokeswoman for the housekeepers. According to a statement from the union, Seo told Enriquez that if she continued to talk to the media about the dispute she would be fired. Seo has denied that he made any such threat.

Enriquez was recently named "California Woman of the Year" for the assembly district 27 for her role in the struggle.

"Juana brings to the fight a unique combination of grit, solidarity and humanity," said assembly member John Laird during the award ceremony honoring her.

Seo's lawyer, Robert Wilger, disputed that he threatened to fire Enriquez.

"As for Ms. Enriquez, Mr. Seo vigorously disputes the Union's contention that he somehow threatened her employment," he said in an e-mail to the Tundra Drums. "Mr. Seo did not do any such thing."

Wilger went on to say that the union's publicity campaign and the continued boycott are inappropriate. Ironically, the hotel loses money through the boycott

that could be used to pay better wages and health insurance.

"Mr. Seo's only response to the Union's publicity campaign will be to undertake his own campaign to inform the public of his efforts to take over a struggling small motel and make it profitable," Wilger said. "His motel is the only small motel in Monterey that is unionized, his employees have better terms and conditions of employment than employees at other comparable motels."

The hotel's general manager, Dana Stewart, also said the boycott is unfair. According to Stewart, the revenue at the hotel has been dropping and there is not enough profit to support paying health insurance.

"You can rest assured we are doing everything we can to bring revenue up to the benefit of all employees," Stewart said. "As has been acknowledged by the Union, Travelodge has consistently informed the Union that our weak financial condition required cuts in benefits."

This is the second time the union has filed unfair labor practices against Seo. The labor board required the hotel to post notices allowing the employees to leaflet without interference in its November 2004 settlement



Photo courtesy of UNITE HERE

A union picket in front of the Travelodge in Monterey Bay, Calif. seeks to appeal to the public to not patronize the business because of alleged unfair labor practices.

with the hotel over the last union charge.

In October of 2004 Seo froze hotel employees hourly wages at \$8.84, extended the unpaid workday by 30 minutes and canceled the health insurance and pension plans. Enriquez has garnered support and public sympathy because she has worked at the Travelodge 13 years, yet only makes \$8.84 an hour.

The union recently stepped up its efforts to get Seo back to the negotiating table by sending letters to Bethel residents asking for their support.

After 10 months of protests, picketing and the boycott, the union workers' struggle caught the attention of Rep. Sam Farr, D-Calif.

"I had hoped by now both sides would have reached a fair resolution so both employees

and the employer could enjoy the stability and guarantees of a fair contract," he said in a written statement last week. "Instead, the employees and their families face continued uncertainty and no healthcare coverage, which the employer stripped from them last October."

Meanwhile, the union points to a nearly \$1 million home Seo purchased in Seaside, Calif., as proof that he could afford to pay employees better.

Seo said Bethel people have not called his Video World or commented on the union situation in California. He said he purchased the Seaside home for an investment and rents it out to a military family.

A letter-to-the editor, written by his hotel manager, is printed on Page 4.