

Hotel chambermaids raise the alarm

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Toilet cloths for toothbrush glasses

ZÜRICH / RAPPERSWIL-JONA, canton of St. Gallen – Large cleaning companies no longer dare to touch hotels. The reason? Too many uncertainties for business. This has left smaller companies fighting a cutthroat price war. And the victims are the defenseless housekeepers.

It's dirty work keeping hotels clean. In the room: clear away piles of rubbish. Check to make sure there are no used condoms lying around in the corner. Put new sheets on the beds. Vacuum. Clean the windows. In the bathroom: clean the toilet, the shower, the floor, the basin and the mirror. Put out new toothbrush glasses and toiletries.

"We used to have 20 minutes to do all of this in teams of two. But that's changed. Now it's only 10", says Nora K.* (37). "And the bosses want us to be even quicker. We housekeepers are being pushed to our limits."

Sixty-five thousand people, predominantly women, work in Switzerland's cleaning industry – many thousands of them in the hotel sector, where the situation is particularly problematic. BLICK spoke to four young women who all cleaned rooms at major Zurich hotels until just a few weeks ago. They weren't employed by the hotels, but by subcontractors.

"Clean at a quick glance only"

Three of the women were employed by Burkhard & Partner from Rapperswil-Jona in the canton of St Gallen. The company has cleaning contracts with hotels in the Marriott Group, the world's largest hotel group, which is also a market leader in Switzerland. Two of the women employed by Burkhard & Partner worked at the five-star Renaissance hotel by the Hardbrücke bridge, while another worked five minutes' walk away at the four-star Sheraton.

Nora K. was one of them. Another, Jennifer S.* (33) says that "because we were so stressed, we were only able to clean the rooms so that they looked decent at a quick glance."

Mila D.* (33) cites some examples: "We sometimes had to clean the glasses with the same material we had used to clean the toilet." And: "We had to clean everything with the same harsh cleaning agent. It's only supposed to be used in the bath and then rinsed off with lots of water. But we also use it on the furniture and wooden floors – and we can't rinse it off there. I wouldn't walk around barefoot in those rooms."

Marriott addresses the issue

The cleaning company rejects all the accusations: "We are surprised and shocked by these false, indefensible claims", it says through its lawyer, adding that the cleaning times comply with industry

standards. “The company is well managed – and this is evidenced by its many long-time, satisfied staff.”

While the affected hotels do not dispute the accusations, they are surprised, asserting that cleanliness takes top priority. “We will work together with the subcontractor concerned in order to clarify the problem and ensure a pleasant working environment for staff and subcontractors alike”, writes a spokesperson for the Marriott Group.

Cleaners’ association raises the alarm

Allpura, the association of Swiss cleaning companies, has known about the problem for some time and is now raising the alarm. It will be sending guidelines to all its members this week, and BLICK has already obtained a copy. The guidelines stipulate a code of conduct for the sensitive business of hotel cleaning, and describe the problem as follows: “Cleaners’ workloads are rarely constant. This is due to the nature of hotels’ business models – bookings are not steady, can often only be planned at the last minute, and ultimately guests have great freedom in terms of when they have their rooms cleaned.”

In addition, some guests leave their room in perfect condition, while others leave behind a perfect mess. All this makes the whole business very difficult for cleaning companies to calculate and plan costs in advance. “This means the cleaning company bears the risk posed by guests”, says the circular letter.

Allpura CEO Karin Funk told BLICK that “most large, professionally run cleaning companies pulled out of hotel cleaning some time ago for these very reasons.” One example involves VebeGO AG from Dietikon in the canton of Zurich. In 2011, SRF’s *Kassensturz* programme revealed that the company paid its workers a pittance of nine francs an hour. In response to our query, a spokesperson now writes that “hotel cleaning is not one of VebeGO’s specialised areas.”

A tenth fall by the wayside every year

The ones left picking up the pieces are small companies who struggle and founder in the highly competitive hotel cleaning industry, despite playing hardball with employees. When Alexandra L.* (45) meets with BLICK, she is still highly critical of her former employer, the subcontractor Fabulous Clean Company from Cham in the canton of Zug. The company is now bankrupt. And it’s not alone; 300 of Switzerland’s 3000 cleaning companies fold every year.

The trade union Unia holds the hotels, rather than the cleaning companies, responsible – particularly the industry giants like the Marriott Group, which sets standards with its “pricing pressure”. The Marriott hotels reject claims they are driving down prices. Accor and Best Western, two other large hotel chains, did not respond to our questions.

In a new report, Unia writes that “the business model of many cleaning companies is based on a price war, which leads to impossible, unrealistic schedules for cleaning rooms and staff are spread too thinly.” Instead hotels should guarantee women better working conditions by employing them directly.

* Names changed