

Kempinski and Waldorf Astoria should be ashamed

Urs P. Gasche/ They humble and humiliate cleaning staff and permit illegal working conditions, as uncovered by a Wallraff Team on RTL

Grossly underpaid, exploited, humiliated and intimidated – that is how the majority of foreign chambermaids do the dirtiest jobs in luxury hotels. An undercover investigation by RTL with hidden camera led by Günter Wallraff made this dramatic disclosure.

In fact such reports might more likely be expected from public service television channels. However, Günter Wallraff went to RTL. Because he wanted to “make a younger audience aware of social abuses”. And RTL agreed to allow a young woman reporter to spend eight months working as a chambermaid in several luxury hotels. The shocking evidence was broadcast by the private television channel on Monday.

Half the minimum wage

Wallraff’s suspicions proved to be well-founded. The more distinguished the hotel, the worse the forms of exploitation. The guests indulge themselves in suites as big as apartments, while behind the scenes, social dramas play out: backbreaking work under enormous time pressure, payment below the minimum wage, deliberate intimidation. Officially, chambermaids are often hired as stipulated at a minimum hourly wage of 9 euros. However, at the same time they have to sign another contract which requires them to clean at least two or three rooms in an hour. If they do not manage this, and no one could, they simply have to work several hours unpaid overtime. The actual pay in all the cases observed comes out at around half the minimum wage. For the tiniest “mistakes”, for example a rag left in the wrong place, there was a “room deduction” or a “20 euro deduction”, arbitrarily decided by a manager.

An employment lawyer, who also represents employers, pointed out several blatant illegal procedures in the programme. However, the chambermaids, most of whom do not speak German very well and are dependent on every euro, cannot defend themselves.

Luxury hotels shirk their responsibilities

The Berlin luxury hotels Kempinski and Astoria Waldorf, part of the Hilton Chain, do not want to come clean about this dirty business, especially on camera. Cleaning staff are the responsibility of the contractors, RTL was told, and they were the ones who should have ensured compliance with the legal requirements. “Outsourcing” means “what I don’t know does not bother me”. In the cases investigated, the cleaning companies had partly further outsourced to subcontractors. The whole chain relies on the chambermaids, yet the latter are treated like third class beings and subjected to the worst forms of exploitation

Wallraff hopes for a crackdown

Already last year, a tell-it-all journalist was slipped into a package delivery firm for a one-hour report 'Günter Wallraff exposes'. With a hidden camera, he documented the disgraceful conditions in which employees in this industry work. This exposure led to powerful debates and forced the package delivery industry to the bargaining table. A result like this, promises Günter Wallraff, will come from the broadcast of the new undercover investigation: "This lengthy investigation will be a wake-up call and cannot fail to have consequences, since it names those responsible and the profiteers. Politicians must no longer turn a blind eye to this form of cheating helpless workers of their rights. Stronger controls must be introduced and those responsible must be brought to account. In the debate on the long overdue introduction of minimum wages, we are providing further arguments through the results of our research".