

Las Vegas taxi drivers continue strike

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Tension is high in Las Vegas as hundreds of cab drivers on indefinite strike picket the headquarters of the city's second-biggest taxi company, Yellow-Checker-Star Transportation (YCS). The company employs 1,700 drivers, a quarter of the city's fleet of more than 2,000 taxis.

Some 1,400 YCS drivers are members of the Industrial Technical Professional Employees Union (ITPU) Local 4873, and more than 1,000 have joined the strike over pay, conditions and the provocative actions of the company. At the end of January, YCS broke off contract negotiations and unilaterally imposed new working conditions on the drivers.

The strike, which began at midnight Sunday morning, is the industry's first in nearly two decades in Las Vegas. The workers are contesting the pay structure in the previous contract, which expired five months ago, on September 30. Under the terms of that contract, the drivers received from 39 to 43.5 percent of the fares, minus certain expenses. On the picket line on Sunday night, one worker told ABC TV Las Vegas that many of the drivers who were picketing with him qualified for food stamps. "We barely make the minimum wage," he said. "We want to change this system."

The issue of working hours is also at the heart of the strike. Workers complained that they felt intimidated if they objected to having to work for 60 or even 72 hours in a week. According to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, under the old contract, if drivers opted to work 12-hour days they had to work only four days a week. One of the conditions the company has imposed is that workers choosing 12-hour shifts qualify for flexible work schedules only after they have been with the company six years.

The union's chief negotiator, Paul Bohelski, told the *Review-Journal* drivers hadn't received a pay raise since 2008. He added that Yellow-Checker-Star reported \$102.5 million in gross earnings in 2012,

which didn't include credit card fees and advertising revenue.

The YCS drivers are spearheading the struggle for taxi drivers throughout Las Vegas. Drivers at Frias Transportation Management, which manages five cab companies and has the city's largest fleet, are also without a contract and have worked under short-term contract extensions since September 11 last year. The workers, members of United Steelworkers Local 711-A, rejected a proposed contract almost unanimously in October. Negotiations with Frias were scheduled to resume on Monday March 4.

The anger and determination of the YCS workers contrast sharply with the attitude of their union leadership. The ITPU continued negotiations with the company despite a strike vote by the drivers back in December, which was carried by an "overwhelming margin," according to the union. At the time, a representative of the union, T. "Ruthie" Jones, told the *Review-Journal*: "I would hope we can settle this. A strike does not benefit anybody."

The union made clear its willingness to concede after a rejection of the company's latest offer of a five-year contract by 70 percent of the union membership in late January and a decision by YCS to terminate negotiations and impose some of the provisions of the rejected contract.

As late as last Saturday, the union's chief negotiator, Paul Bohelski, was still looking for a way to head off the strike. "We are prepared to meet with [the company] at any time," he said, adding that chances were dimming for a last-minute settlement.

The drivers also have more to contend with than just the ITPU bureaucracy. The union is affiliated with the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), a white-collar union with members in the insurance and health care industries. When the YCS drivers' decision to strike was finally ratified by the

ITPU leadership, it was blocked by the OPEIU, whose president, Michael Goodwin, withheld consent. This meant that the strike would be unauthorized and the workers would be deprived of strike pay.

According to *CDC Gaming Reports*, a newsletter sent to gaming executives, the parent union agreed to the strike only in the face of the growing anger of the workers. The newsletter reported that at a drivers meeting in late February, union officials had to field “numerous complaints from drivers about paying dues and receiving little or no action.”

YCS drivers are pushing ahead with their industrial action. “We’ll be out here for as long as it takes,” one picketer said on Sunday night.

The strike is being watched closely by the whole entertainment industry in Las Vegas. March is one of the busiest times in the city, since Nevada is the only state that allows betting on all major sporting events, and this month the national college men’s basketball tournament is conducted. The casinos make a good portion of their annual revenue from this type of betting, and last year in March the number of visitors to Las Vegas topped 3.5 million, the highest of any month for the year.

The Nevada Taxicab Authority, part of the state Department of Business and Industry, on Monday authorized 20 additional operating permits, or “medallions,” to each of the 13 other cab companies in Las Vegas.



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