

Workers strike at Trump Taj Mahal casino in Atlantic City

Genevieve Leigh
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Close to 1,000 workers at The Trump Taj Mahal casino in Atlantic City walked off the job Friday morning after Unite-HERE negotiators failed to reach a contract agreement with casino management.

Despite still bearing his name, Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, has not owned the Taj Mahal since his casino group's bankruptcy in 2009. The casino ownership now rests with fellow billionaire Carl Icahn, the notorious corporate raider, who is among the richest men in the world with a net worth of \$16.9 billion.

The striking staff at Icahn's casino includes cooks, housekeepers, bellmen and servers, but not dealers or security personnel. The leading concern is over reinstating health and pension benefits, which were taken from the workers in 2014 in bankruptcy court proceedings, overseen by Icahn, when a judge deemed these costs unaffordable.

Casino employees have since been working without health insurance. The company reportedly issued union members a cash stipend to purchase health care through the Affordable Care Act, but, unsurprisingly, the actual cost of obtaining insurance far surpassed the amount covered by the stipend, leaving at least a third of the workers and their families without health insurance since 2014.

Casino owner Icahn has repeatedly expressed his hostility to restoring health and pension benefits, saying that if forced to pay for such things he would withdraw financial support in order to force the closing of the casino.

In an open letter to the Taj Mahal workers last year, Icahn claimed that Unite-HERE's demand to reinstate health care is only being pursued because it has been so profitable for the union itself, citing the fact that the Unite-HERE health plan had brought in over \$140

million in net profit in five years.

On top of being stripped of benefits, the majority of the casino workers, according to a union spokesman, earn an average of less than \$12 an hour, a poverty level wage, not enough to support an individual worker at a decent level, let alone enough for employees with families. The union has also reported that most workers have had a salary increase of only 80 cents per hour since 2004, while the cost of living in Atlantic city has increased by 25 percent over the same time period.

While being limited to the Taj Mahal, Friday's strike had the immediate potential of including up to four other casinos in Atlantic City. This would have brought the total number of striking workers to almost 5,000.

However, instead of uniting the struggles of the casino workers who they claim to represent, to wage a real struggle for a livable wage, reinstated health benefits and better working conditions, Unite-HERE negotiators proceeded to push through contracts at Caesars, Harrah's, Bally's and Tropicana late last night. The deals come just in time for the July 4th holiday, one of the busiest weekends of the year for the Atlantic City casinos. The tentative agreements reached at the other four casinos have yet to be ratified by workers and the full details of the contract have not been released.

The impotence of the strike is shown by the fact that the Taj Mahal Casino, far from being crippled or even marginally affected by the walkout, is expected to carry on with business as usual. The casino will stay open through the busy weekend and the concert scheduled for Friday night will go on as planned. Most sources reported that the casino had never considered closing and instead was merely debating whether to place management in service roles or to bring in scabs to replace the striking workers.

In lieu of organizing a fight to improve the living conditions of the casino workers, the union officials have instead dedicated their efforts to isolating the striking workers and controlling their actions on the picket line. To this end, union officials reportedly circulated a list of do's and don'ts for picketers that included a warning against calling scabs by any derogatory name as well as reminders to not, in any way, block access to the casino.

The unrest among casino workers comes as Atlantic City itself teeters on the verge of bankruptcy. The recent \$60 million loan from state taxpayers has not been able to curb the city's long economic decline, which was exacerbated in part due to the closure of four of 12 casinos in 2014, wiping out 8,000 jobs. Additionally the casinos have lost about 50 percent of their revenue since 2006, dropping from \$5.2 billion to \$2.56 billion in 2015.

Republican Mayor Don Guardian recently announced that he expects to cut health care and prescription medication coverage for city workers in addition to cutting costs at the police and fire departments.



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