

# Trump Taj Mahal casino workers strike continues through July Fourth weekend

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Nearly 1,000 casino workers employed at The Trump Taj Mahal continued their struggle for restored health and pension benefits, an increase in pay and better working conditions, as the strike continued through its third day over the Fourth of July weekend, one of the busiest holidays in Atlantic City.

While the strike failed to completely shut down the casino, there are signs that the walkout has had a significant impact on business. The *Associated Press* reported that the front desk was no longer taking reservations, while other sources claim that the pickets have deterred many people from entering the casino.

The striking workers, largely cooks, housekeepers, bellmen and servers, face abysmal working conditions. The average employee makes \$11.80 an hour and has received no more than 80 cents in wage raises since 2004, forcing many to rely on social assistance programs such as food stamps in order to survive.

The Trump Taj Mahal employees have been through many hardships over the past decade, including losing their health and pension benefits during a bankruptcy court proceeding in 2014. At least a third of the workforce has been surviving without access to health insurance.

After failing to reach an agreement late Thursday night, Taj Mahal workers walked off the job at 6 am Friday morning, and have been conducting 24-hour picketing outside the casino ever since. The strike had the potential of including up to four of the other eight casinos in Atlantic City, but the casino workers union, Unite-HERE, was able to push through last minute deals at the other four, isolating workers at the Taj Mahal.

Despite this, the strike at the Taj Mahal has overwhelming support from employees, with 98 percent honoring the picket line. Posts on social media indicate a strong sense of militancy among the workers, who seem to be at the end of their rope.

One worker recently discussed his experiences working

for the company in a post on Facebook.

He wrote, “When we worked at Trump Plaza and room service we made sacrifices they cut our pay we accepted that decision for a better tomorrow. I also recall housekeepers buying their own cleaning supplies because the company refused to put out any money. I also remember that they cut down on the soap that was used in the 6 floor on their dishwasher machine... that’s money that the company saved off our backs. We made huge sacrifices for eight years without a raise... now and turn all the casinos are making money meanwhile the staff salary has become stagnant where the casino making all the profits... I say Amen to the strike... It’s time for likes of Carl Icahn to pay their share to their employees.”

Billionaire owner Carl Icahn has so far remained silent on the situation. His management team did comment early on, saying that the unions seemed “hell bent on trying to close this property,” repeating a closure threat which has been on the table for quite a while now.

In a letter to Taj Mahal employees in March, Icahn wrote, referring to plans for new casinos to be built in the northern part of the State: “Simply put, north Jersey gaming will probably be a death sentence for the Taj and the Atlantic City economy.” The threat of closure is not unfamiliar to Atlantic City casino workers; in 2014 four of the city’s 12 casinos were closed, eliminating over 8,000 jobs in the process.

Republican frontrunner Donald Trump has praised support from billionaires such as Icahn. saying in a recent speech, “We’ve got endorsements from Carl Icahn and the smartest people in business,” and adding that, if elected, “these people are going to be negotiating our deals.” The corporate billionaires like Icahn, who oversee the elimination of thousands of jobs at the drop of a hat, routinely slash workers health benefits and pensions, and continuously seek methods of increasing the rate of exploitation of the working class, all in search of higher

profits, are the “smartest” business minds that Trump hopes to put into positions of power.

However, the enemies of the striking casino workers include not just the corporate heads and leading politicians, but their own union, Unite-Here, which has played a criminal role in defending the interests of the bosses.

Recently, Unite-HERE joined with other unions in promoting a provision granting unionized hotels an exemption from paying their employees the newly passed minimum wage in the city of Los Angeles. In other words, unionized hotel workers, who are paying dues, are now making less than nonunion workers doing the same job at neighboring businesses. The Unite-HERE local 11 president defended this position, saying the loophole was positive because it will cause businesses to “be less resistant to unionization.”

The strike by casino workers takes place as the city of Atlantic City itself faces bankruptcy and a possible state takeover due to the decline of the gaming industry. One of the factors in the financial crisis is some \$240 million in debt, mostly due to tax appeals won by casinos. A state takeover would allow authorities to void union contracts, sell city assets and impose other severe austerity measures.

According to US census figures median income in the city was just \$26,936 in 2015, with 35.8 percent of the population living below the official poverty level.

The struggle by casino workers deserves the broadest possible support. This requires a break with the policies of Unite-Here, which is seeking to strangle the strike before it becomes the catalyst for a broader movement of the working class. Trump Taj Mahal workers should reach out for support from casino workers across Atlantic City, along with youth, the unemployed and other sections of workers under attack, such as city workers and teachers.



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