

Windsor, Ontario casino workers strike after voting down sellout deal

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Two thousand three hundred workers at the Caesars Hotel and Casino in Windsor, Ontario struck Friday after voting by 59 percent to reject a contract that had been “strongly” recommended to them by the leadership of Unifor Local 444. It is the first strike at the facility since a bitter 41-day walkout against concessions in 2004. In addition to casino workers, Local 444 organizes over 6,000 auto assembly workers at the Fiat Chrysler minivan plant in Windsor and thousands more in the auto parts, energy and service sectors.

The rejection of the deal follows closely on the heels of a short strike by 300 auto parts workers in March at ZF-TRW that began after workers there resoundingly rejected another contract recommended by the Local 444 leadership. The powerful action temporarily halted production at the Windsor minivan plant before being shut down by Unifor.

The rejection votes show the ever-widening gulf that exists between rank-and-file workers and the Unifor apparatus. Local 444 President James Stewart told reporters early Thursday morning that he believed casino workers would be “pleased” with the contents of the proposed contract after union officials had “resolved most of the outstanding issues” that concerned the membership. Eighteen hours later, workers had decisively rebuffed the offer.

Most workers at Caesars currently earn \$17 per hour. Some skilled workers earn above \$20 per hour. Up to one-third of the staff work part-time hours. The minimum wage in Ontario stands at \$14 and is scheduled to increase to \$15 next January.

The provisions of the tentative agreement were truly derisory. There would be a 75 cents per hour wage increase for 2018, 50 cents more the following year and another 50 cents in 2020. Average annual inflation in

the province currently sits at 2.2 percent and is expected to rise further. A one percent additional contribution to the inferior defined-contributions pension scheme was also proposed. In the hopes of bribing the poorly paid workforce to ratify the deal, signing bonuses of \$1,150 for full-time workers, \$900 for part-timers and \$500 for casual employees were offered.

Workers leaving the failed ratification meeting bitterly denounced the deal, telling reporters that they had stomached five concessions contracts in a row. In the last contract, workers received a miserly 60 cent per hour increase spread out over the life of the four-year deal. Contracts previous to that one were even worse.

Joanna, a former worker at the Windsor casino with four years’ experience said, “Some of the major issues at the casino are insecure employment caused by frequent layoffs and reshuffling of staff into various roles that resulted from layoffs.

“In my opinion union support for the average worker was not strong. Concessions were often made by the union to the ownership without the workers benefit in mind.

“Often when contracts were renegotiated the unions conceded to demands by the ownership to cut wages for non-union workers and union workers who had to choose between being laid off or agree to a lower wage in a contract position.

“Sexual harassment complaints about non-union management were often not followed up. It often felt like union stewards were not responsive to employee complaints and grievances regarding work conditions.”

Caesars Windsor is owned by the government of Ontario through its Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation. OLG generates over \$2 billion for the province annually. The Windsor casino generates up to

\$270 million in annual revenues. Last year, it paid over \$10 million to the City of Windsor in annual “hosting fees” alone.

The rejection of the sellout deal that Unifor was attempting to foist on Windsor Caesars workers is a reflection of the simmering anger in the working class over decades of concessions and attacks on living standards. It coincides with a growing rebellion by teachers expressed by walkouts by university lecturers in Ontario and strikes across the border in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky and other US states.

For this struggle to be successful it must serve as the starting point for a broader mobilization of workers. This requires a repudiation of Unifor, which today acts as a junior partner to the corporations it serves. In auto, services, fisheries, energy and the forestry sectors it has developed a miserable record of isolating the struggle of its members for decent wages and conditions. In order to press their legitimate demands Windsor Caesars workers need to organize the election of an independent strike committee to assert and win the legitimate demands of the workforce.



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