

Food and hospitality workers at Las Vegas casinos vote to strike

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In another sign of the growing militancy of workers in the United States, food service and hospitality workers at the giant casinos in Las Vegas, Nevada have voted by 99 percent to strike when their current five-year contract expires on June 1. A walkout would be the first casino-wide strike by workers on the Strip and downtown Las Vegas since the 67-day strike in 1984.

The 50,000 workers, members of Culinary Union Local 226, include kitchen workers, servers, bellmen, porters and guest room attendants at 34 casinos owned by MGM Resorts International, Caesars Entertainment Corp., Penn National, Golden Entertainment and Boyd Gaming. About 25,000 workers, the vast majority employed by the two largest casino owners—MGM and Caesars—cast ballots in the strike vote this week.

The culinary union has not made its demands public and is working behind the scenes to come to a deal to prevent a strike. The union has only said it is seeking wage hikes, job security in the face of greater automation, and protections for hospitality workers against sexual harassment by guests.

With the Strip's largest casinos seeing a tripling of their profits, 2017 culinary workers, struggling with low pay, are demanding improved wages. Jose Licea, an on-call kitchen worker at Planet Hollywood Resort, has worked on the Strip for 25 years, told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* that workers need to make more money to cover the rising cost of living. "Everything is going up: gas, food, supplies. We need to raise salaries," he said.

The local newspaper noted a growing reliance on automation has many workers worrying that their jobs will be eliminated or outsourced. Employers on the Strip, the *Review-Journal* noted, "have already begun to use delivery robots and self-check-ins—even drone-delivered-drinks are becoming a thing."

Lewis Thomas, a utility porter at the Tropicana Las Vegas who voted in favor of the strike, told the newspaper he wants company-sponsored training to ensure that workers are not made redundant by the technological advances: "We are ready to walk if we don't get the contract. Even if it means striking one month, two months or a year."

The vote by Las Vegas culinary workers takes place as the strike by 2,300 workers at Caesars Windsor in Canada enters its seventh week. Last Friday, the workers, who are members of Unifor, rejected a union-backed sellout deal that would have only increased hourly wages by \$2.25 (US\$1.75) over four years. Workers rejected Unifor's efforts to bribe them by increasing signing bonuses for full-time workers to \$1,600 and \$1,200 for part-time workers.

Like their counterparts in Las Vegas, Caesars Windsor workers say they are fighting low pay, high levels of exploitation and casualization. Many casino workers are designated as part-time with no eligibility for benefits. At the same time, many Windsor workers make minimum wage in an industry that produces millions of dollars of profit annually.

Rank-and-file workers have revolted against both Unifor's efforts to ram through a sellout deal without giving them sufficient time to study the proposals, and the effort by the union and management to add a fourth year to the traditional three-year agreement term.

The struggle by casino workers takes place as the unions seek to block the growing wave of working class struggles. Strike levels since the beginning of the years have already surpassed the number of major work stoppages in 2017, with strikes by hundreds of thousands of teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky, Colorado, and North Carolina, and other struggles.

The Communications Workers of America is trying desperately to prevent a walkout by 14,000 AT&T workers in the midwestern US and other AT&T Legacy T workers across the country. The contract for these workers expired on April 14.

On June 30, the Network Television Code contract covering 132,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) expires. Then on July 31, the contract covering 43,000 members of the International Association of Theatrical Stage Employees expires with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers.

Also on July 31, the contract covering 280,000 United Parcel Service workers, members of the Teamsters union, expires. And on September 20, approximately 200,000 US Postal Service workers, covered by the American Postal Workers Union, will see their labor agreement expire.



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