

Windsor casino workers continue strike following contract rejection

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Workers at the Caesars Windsor casino are continuing a walkout, which began April 6, after voting down a proposed four-year contract that had been recommended by the Unifor union. The 2,300 workers—including dealers, cooks, housekeepers, cashiers and janitors—have been on strike for seven weeks at the casino, which is located in Windsor, Ontario, across the river from Detroit, Michigan.

Last week workers voted by 53 percent to reject the union-backed deal, which was virtually identical to the tentative deal they rejected before the strike began. Workers told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters they were incensed by the union-management effort to add another year to the contract in exchange for an additional 50 cent per hour raise and a \$500 increase in the signing bonus. The no vote was particularly courageous given that Unifor is forcing workers to survive on CA\$250 weekly strike pay.

For its part, management has remained intransigent, cancelling hotel reservations through June 16.

“A lot of workers were not interested in a four-year deal,” one striker told the WSW. “The bargaining committee knew that, but they brought it anyway.”

Another worker agreed, “The contract length was the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

Workers told the WSW that the majority of workers walked out before the end of the meeting last Friday once Unifor officials proposed to extend the contract to four years. The original company offer, rejected by a 59 percent margin by workers, contained a \$1.75 raise over three years and a miniscule one percent raise to the inferior defined contribution pension plan.

From day one of the strike, Unifor has sought to isolate the walkout, hoping to wear down strikers and starve them back to work. No attempt has been made to mobilize support throughout the province or reach out

to casino workers across the border in Detroit or in Las Vegas. Nor has any appeal been made to 6,000 Unifor members at the nearby Fiat Chrysler minivan plant or in area auto parts plants.

The vote by Windsor casino workers against the sellout follows a series of contract rejections by workers across Ontario, including recent strikes by auto parts workers in Ajax and Windsor who voted down sellout agreements brought to them by Unifor. Last October, Unifor sold out the month-long strike by 2,800 workers at GM’s CAMI plant in Ingersoll, Ontario.

Several workers noted that Unifor had put a gag order on pickets, asking them not to speak to reporters. “So much for freedom of speech,” one worker remarked. “It is very undemocratic.”

Despite this, workers were eager to share their experiences with the WSW. Workers at the casino make poverty level wages for the most part. A large portion of them earn barely more than the new Ontario minimum wage of \$14 an hour that will rise to \$15 an hour January 1, 2019.

“For 14 years we only had a \$4 an hour raise,” said one striker. “One striker told me he had worked here for 24 years and his wage was close to the minimum.”

The vote by Caesars Windsor workers to reject the sellout deal and continue their strike takes place as 50,000 food service and hospitality workers at 34 casino-resorts in Las Vegas voted by 99 percent to authorize a walkout when their current five-year contract expires June 1. If the Las Vegas casino workers strike it would be the first simultaneous strike at major casinos since a 67-day strike in 1984. Like the workers in Windsor, the Las Vegas workers are struggling with low pay, job insecurity as well as sexual harassment by guests.

Strikers at the Windsor casino said they were aware of the vote by the Las Vegas casino workers and supported their struggle. “The Las Vegas workers are suffering just like us,” one veteran casino employee told the WWS.

Another worker noted that the struggles of all casino workers were connected, pointing out, “If we end up settling for less they will tell the other people ‘look, how can you ask for more?’”

The strike by Caesars Windsor workers now exceeds in length a 42-day strike at the casino in 2004.

A large portion of the workers are temporary and part time, with no set guarantee of hours. Strikers told the WWS that in addition to subsisting on low pay, workers were subjected to constant threats and abuse by management.

A cashier said, “They are constantly adding jobs to the job you are doing. They keep pushing us. They treat us horribly. Sometimes they have four supervisors for five cashiers.

“They have been cutting people. There used to be 4,000, now there are less than 2,300. They came in one morning and closed the Artist Café that was 79 people. There is no job security. We need respect.”

Another cashier told the WWS, “Ninety percent of the people come in with anxiety. They write you up for no reason. If there is a little mistake, you get written up. They don’t respect you.”

Workers explained that work on major holidays was mandatory. They described workers lining up outside the casino for as long as 24 hours to be the first in line to put in for a special day off.

“We are fed up,” said the cashier. “You can’t celebrate Christmas, New Year or Easter with your families. If you call in sick for a holiday, they deny you and write you up.”

Caesars Windsor is the most profitable gaming establishment run by the province of Ontario, generating some CA\$270 million in revenue annually for the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation. Caesars Entertainment, which operates the casino, is a multinational and the fourth largest gaming corporation in the world. It generates \$8.6 billion in annual revenues and operates 50 different casinos and hotels and seven golf courses. Caesars CEO Mark Frisorra took in \$9.5 million in executive compensation in 2016, according to Securities and Exchange Commission

filings.

The Unifor backed Ontario Liberal Party government, which faces almost certain defeat in provincial elections next month, has attempted to maintain a posture of neutrality in the strike, despite overseeing the operation of the casino. In a flagrantly undemocratic move, the Ontario Liberals recently attempted to impose strikebreaking legislation on 3,000 workers at Toronto’s York University. If they have not attempted a similar move in relation to the Windsor casino workers, it is because they are relying on Unifor to betray the strike.

One veteran worker said he was interested in learning more about the WWS and in particular its outlook on socialism. “It is the whole system. These big companies only want to make money. It is back to the 1920s.”

A fellow striker added, “They are making more money than they can ever use and there are others who are starving. I was recently in Fort Lauderdale [Florida] and I went on a tour where they pointed out boat docks where it cost \$40,000 a month to park your boat. Then there are people who don’t have food.”

Workers said that based on the wages they received, life was growing increasingly difficult. “When the provincial minimum wage went up, all the prices went up. When you are making \$19 or \$20 an hour that is just not good enough. I am hanging by a thread.

“A casual worker told me she is making more by picketing than she earned at the casino.”

The courageous struggle by casino workers is being sabotaged by Unifor. The success of the fight depends on breaking the isolation of the strike and forging links with broader sections of the working class against the austerity measures of big business across Canada and the US, including in Las Vegas.

To initiate this fight workers must break with Unifor and elect a rank-and-file strike committee to lead their struggle. At the same time, workers must reject the perspective peddled by Unifor of pressuring the big business politicians in Toronto and Ottawa.



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