

Union announces deals to prevent strike by Las Vegas casino workers

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After defying a 99 percent strike vote by rank-and-file casino workers in Las Vegas and keeping workers on the job after the expiration of their labor agreements, the Culinary Workers Union has reached separate tentative agreements with Caesars Enterprises and MGM Resorts International, the two largest casino owners.

The union, an affiliate of UNITE-HERE hotel and restaurant employees union, has not released any details of the agreements. The union continues to keep workers in the dark about negotiations and it is possible a full contract may not even exist. Workers should immediately demand the full contract and all secret letters of understanding. They must have sufficient time to study and discuss it before any vote.

In any case, the two deals cover around 36,000 of the union's workers at more than half of the casinos and resorts up for a contract. Another 14,000 workers are now without contracts and if they were to strike the union would order Caesars and MGM workers to continue working.

More than 50,000 workers were set to walk out and strike at 12:01 am on Friday, when the contracts expired at 34 casinos on the Las Vegas Strip and downtown. Rather than mobilizing this massive workforce in opposition to poor working conditions and the intransigence of the multi-billion-dollar casino industry, the union has done everything to weaken and divide workers and block any work stoppages and mass demonstrations.

When the union called off the midnight strike on June 1, workers were left confused as to the status of the negotiations and whether a strike would take place the next day. Now that the deals have been reached, the rank-and-file is left without crucial information about the contracts that will determine their working and

living conditions for the next five years.

Though they have not released the exact numbers and details, the union's statements make clear that the "historic" agreements do not meet the urgent demands of the workers themselves. Workers wish to protect their wages and benefits against the rising cost of living and company efforts to reduce them even further. Union executives, however, have declared that wages are a lower priority since wages and benefits are already good. One shop steward admitted to WSWS reporters the union's demand for a 4% increase in wages and benefits, which amounts to a de facto freeze in real wages, was not met in the tentative agreement.

Workers raised opposition to the elimination of jobs due to technology, but the union supports advance notices of new technology and more training to simply reduce the number and severity of layoffs. There is also no mention of temporary contracted workers, upon whom the casinos are relying to cut labor costs. Workers raised opposition to unsafe work conditions, anti-immigration policies and sexual harassment, but the union praises "new language" that promises improvements with no concrete or legal plans of action. The other "victories" include the defense of contract terms even if corporate ownership changes hands, and formal positions for the union leaders in the policy-making and cost-cutting operations of the casinos, such as research into housekeeping workloads and the implementation of new technology.

Reporters from the WSWS spoke with a number of casino workers and MGM and Caesars resorts about the conditions they confront. Osmary, a food service worker who works at Caesars Palace, said, "They take advantage of us. Sometimes I feel like they don't see you as a human being, they just see you as another number. Like okay you mess up, but it's okay because

we have someone to replace you. They don't care here...

"People don't realize we have the power. There's more of us than them. You can't beat 50,000 workers against a hundred or so managers of all these properties. They would lose a lot of money, people wouldn't want to stay here, [guests] would have to go to the off-station casinos off the strip. My mom, she works at the Venetian, they're not union. And Trump [Hotel]... A couple others aren't union. They would get all the business [if we went on strike]."

A dealer at the MGM Grand who wished to remain anonymous said, "What we have here is an oligarchy. A small number of companies are buying up all of downtown, which means they can set prices and wages at whatever they want. They used to treat us well, but now they're taking away more and more. I am about to go to Target to pick up a prescription that my insurance stopped covering, and it's really expensive now but I need it. I believe in socialized medicine, and I agree with fighting for it. My partner makes more than I do, so we're not too bad off together. But if I was alone, it would be much harder."

Dean, a non-union Starbucks worker in the Mandalay Bay Hotel, spoke about workloads, saying, "We get these conferences with twenty thousand people, and they all come to get coffee at once during their breaks. There's only two or three of us in the back so it gets really busy." Speaking about union workers, he said, "I don't really know what it's like for the union workers, but we all do a lot of talking bad or complaining about our jobs and the companies."

The private hospitality and casino corporations have fully recovered from the downturn during the 2008 recession, with executives raking in millions every year. Seven of the eight billionaires living in Nevada made their fortunes as owners of major casino chains in Las Vegas and Reno. These seven individuals have a collective net worth of about \$34 billion.

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At the other end, the working class lives in the misery created by exploitation and attacks to social services and democratic rights at the hands of Democrats, Republicans and the corporate oligarchy. In 2011, unemployment in Las Vegas was among the worst in the United States, reaching 13.4%. Unemployment has

lowered to 5% today, but the majority of workers live in poverty or near-poverty conditions, unable to keep up with rising costs of rent, gas and health care.

The bottom quarter of the Las Vegas population earns an average of \$10.86 per hour. The rate of homelessness in the city is extremely high, with hundreds living in tunnels, under bridges or in alleys hidden from the center of downtown tourism. In 2016, more than 30,000 renters were evicted from their homes in Clark County (Las Vegas), an average of 82 evictions per day.

In addition, nearly one-fifth of the total population is immigrant, with the majority from Mexico and the Philippines. Immigrant workers face higher rates of wage theft, along with the imminent threat of ICE raids and the revocation of their Temporary Protected Status and DACA.

The dire conditions that workers face will not be resolved by the unions and their Democratic Party allies, which defend the capitalist system and the exploitation of the working class for profit.

The betrayal of the casino workers raises the necessity of the formation of new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, to take the conduct of this fight out of the hands of the unions. Committees of casino workers should link up with teachers, UPS, Amazon and other workers to wage a common fight for decent wages, health care and retirement benefits.

Every struggle—against the assault on basic democratic rights, the attack on immigrant workers, social inequality and war—must be fused together in a political struggle by the working class against both corporate controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend.



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