

Amid coronavirus pandemic Nevada gaming commission announces “no plans” to close casinos

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Demonstrating a criminal disregard for public health, the Nevada Gaming Commission has announced that they have “no plans” to close any of the state’s 440 nonrestricted licensed casino properties even as casino workers have begun to test positive for the novel coronavirus. In a Sunday evening press conference, Nevada’s Democratic Governor Steve Sisolak reiterated that he “strongly supported any decision our properties make on whether to make the difficult decision to close.”

Sisolak proceeded to outline a series of “guidelines” that would allow the casinos to remain open. These measures include limiting table games to three people, banning self-serve buffets and advising that every slot machine be disinfected every two hours; how any of this would be enforced Sisolak failed to elucidate. The governor meekly “urged” the ruthless casino magnates “to do their best to protect the paid benefits of their workforce during this difficult time.”

Many of Vegas’s largest casinos have taken the governor up on his guidelines and have advised they will remain open, including operators such as Boyd Gaming and the Las Vegas Sands Corp. By remaining open these businesses are ensuring the pandemic continues to spread thereby exacerbating the crisis and risking the lives of millions.

However, two of the largest casino operators in Las Vegas, MGM Resorts International and Wynn Resorts, announced that they would be suspending operations beginning today. Wall Street’s response to the closure was to send MGM’s stock plummeting 33.6 percent, to \$10.25 a share, a seven-year low. Wynn stocks were also punished with a 24 percent loss in value.

In a letter announcing the decision to close MGM properties CEO James Murren falsely claimed that the casino was “keeping our employees safe doing the job they love.”

At least two employees of MGM Resorts have already tested positive for COVID-19. This is a vast underestimation

since, as with every other state in the country, there is a chronic shortage of testing kits and capacity in Nevada. As of Friday, only 233 tests had been processed at the Southern Nevada Health District lab, one of two public labs in the state and the only one in populous Clark County.

Prior to announcing the shutdown, MGM issued a layoff notice to hundreds of MGM Resorts International employees, making clear that the casinos will make the workers pay for any disruption to corporate profits caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The layoffs began to take effect Monday and will last at least a month.

Caesars Entertainment Corporation which operates Caesars Palace, as well as Planet Hollywood, has chosen to remain open, but joined MGM in shifting the burden of the pandemic onto the working class.

Las Vegas Review-Journal anonymous interviews with Planet Hollywood employees confirmed that entire “departments” have been eliminated leaving suddenly unemployed workers racked with anxiety. “I’ve been with the company for (many) years, and like a light switch, I’m out...I don’t know how I’m going to pay my bills now. ... I need that job and the benefits.”

MGM Resorts International operates casinos in several US states besides Nevada including Michigan, Mississippi, Maryland, New York and New Jersey, as well as in China. The casino conglomerate recently completed a joint venture with Blackstone Investments which is expected to provide the company with \$8.2 billion in cash proceeds. Caesars Entertainment which operates over 50 properties throughout the US in addition to seven golf courses, posted a fourth quarter 2019 revenue of \$2.12 billion, an 11 percent increase from the prior year.

Those affected by the layoffs include housekeeping, hospitality, spa and restaurant staff as well as front desk and concierge services. Both MGM and Caesars refused to comment on the exact number of workers laid off. A full-time worker at Aria, which is operated by MGM, reported in

an interview with the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* that management informed workers that half of the front desk staff would be laid off.

The layoff notice sent out to workers and local media was signed by current president of MGM Bill Hornbuckle who acknowledged that he expects “more” positive coronavirus tests in the coming days, and advised that all, “corporate employees whose teams are able to do so work from home beginning next week.” As for workers who tested positive, Hornbuckle advised his employees to “keep them and their families in your thoughts and prayers.”

As the coronavirus spread throughout China in January, CEO Murren announced he would be stepping down, but would remain with the company for two years as the board searched for a replacement. As part of his “exit package” Murren will continue to receive a \$2 million salary as well as \$11 million in “bonuses” throughout the year. Murren will also “earn” \$575,000 a month for “consulting services” as well as a \$12 million severance package.

After being told he was laid off, a worker speaking to *Review-Journal* gave voice to the hypocrisy, “When things started breaking apart, he made sure he put his golden parachute together. That’s not fair.”

In a separate interview with the *Review-Journal*, Arturo Tavera, who was a part-time busser at Le Cirque in Bellagio, spoke to the danger thousands of workers have been exposed to, stating that, “...casino employees who are still working right now are subject to a life-threatening illness.”

Another full-time worker at Aria resorts acknowledged it was “nerve-racking” having to show up to work while a pandemic takes hold. When the worker asked if they could take their own safety precautions by wearing a mask they were told, “if you decide to wear masks, we’ll tell you to go home.” The primary concern of the casino was to not “scare the guests.”

Workers have a right to a safe and disease-free workplace; therefore, it is imperative that these vectors of contagion be closed until the pandemic has passed. Workers must demand that they be given full pay in the meantime with full benefits, including healthcare and sick time. All laid off workers must be immediately rehired with full pay and no loss in seniority.

However, similar to conditions facing auto workers at factories throughout North America and Europe, those casino employees who haven’t been laid off are being forced to choose to work and expose themselves to possible infection or remain home with no pay. Many workers’ meager salaries are supplemented by tips from guests. Now that tourists have heeded the call to avoid large public gatherings, those that remain on the job are missing out on as much as half of their regular income. Those who have

been laid off by MGM have been given notice that what meager benefits they do have will expire on June 30.

No different than the corrupt United Auto Workers union, the Culinary Union Local 226, which claims 60,000 dues paying members, has worked with the state and local governments as well as the casino operators to keep operations running as workers become infected. In a statement sent out to the membership on Saturday night the union reiterated its primary concern was not their safety but to “continue to negotiate with casino and hotel employers.”

As of this writing, regulators in just six US states—Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois and Massachusetts—have ordered casinos shut down in a criminally belated attempt to halt the spread of the coronavirus. Regulators for the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation in Canada announced on Sunday that all casinos in the province would be closed within 24 hours. As of this writing, 177 of Canada’s 415 confirmed cases of COVID-19 have been identified in the province of Ontario.

Hundreds of casinos throughout North America continue to remain open despite the repeated warnings from doctors around the world on the necessity of limiting social contact and the moves by multiple states to close restaurants and bars. In Wisconsin, where 47 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed, casinos on tribal land such as the Ho-Chunk Casino outside of the popular Wisconsin Dells tourist town and Potawatomi Casino near Milwaukee have remained open.

Forty-four US states allow the operation of casinos within their borders. The proliferation of gambling throughout North America speaks to overall financialization of the US economy and further blurring of the lines between “legitimate business” and mafia enterprises. Predatory casino operators seeking to stay open through the pandemic are endangering the lives of their employees, guests and the health of the entire population in the interest of maintain corporate profits.



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