

Las Vegas-area hospitality workers vote by 95 percent to strike casinos at mass rally

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Are you a Las Vegas casino worker? Tell us why you voted to strike by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

On Tuesday September 27, thousands of workers in Culinary Local 226, which covers 60,000 hospitality workers in Las Vegas and Reno, Nevada voted by 95 percent to authorize a strike against the casino industry. The vote took place at the Thomas & Mack Center on the University of Las Vegas Nevada college campus, in what was billed as one of the largest union mass meetings in recent memory.

The vote authorizes the Culinary Union, which is an affiliate of Unite Here, to call for a strike against three of the largest resort chains in the world: MGM Resorts International, Caesars Entertainment, and Wynn/Encore, each of which the Culinary Union has been negotiating with on an individual basis since April. The unions' contract had originally expired in June, but the negotiating committee kept extending the deadline until September 15.

According to the union, a potential strike would affect 22 casino resorts on the Las Vegas strip. The vote comes as inflation and years of concessions are forcing workers into struggle for better wages and conditions in one industry after another, from the auto industry, logistics workers, healthcare workers, entertainment workers, and teachers.

The hospitality workers include guest room attendants, cocktail and food servers, porters, bellmen, cooks, bartenders, barbacks, laundry and kitchen workers. Casino and resort workers have been working throughout the pandemic, generating massive profits for the corporations while thousands of workers have been infected and hundreds more have died.

Last year, the American Gaming Association (AGA) reported the casino industry in Las Vegas made record profits. The AGA reported that commercial gaming revenue exceeded \$60 billion for the first time in 2022, with over \$8 billion of that generated by the Las Vegas Strip alone.

In an August 2 press release, MGM Resorts reported a net revenue of \$2.1 billion for the second quarter of 2022. Caesars reported \$2.9 billion in revenue over the same period, while Wynn Resorts reported an operating revenue of \$1.6 billion

over the same period, "an increase of \$687 million from...the second quarter of 2022."

On Tuesday, WSWs reporters interviewed several workers that took part in Tuesday's strike authorization vote.

Fabio, a barback for 16 years, said he had only received \$5 in wage increases since he began working at a major casino resort. Since he began his job, "everything has gone up more than \$5.

"I'm the sole provider of my family and I'm just barely making it. I rent an apartment, it's more than \$1,400 for one room. I have two kids, so it's tough. I get like \$800 per check, so that's \$1,600 a month and I'm kind of living off of my tips."

Joseph, a bartender, also had not received \$5 worth of raises in the past 20 years. "I've been there 19 years. At first I was like, yeah, I remember the raises were pretty solid, but then I think about the raises I've had in 20 years, and it's not even five bucks.

"I still make under \$20 an hour," he added. Joseph explained that the casinos were constantly engaging in cutbacks. He said, "The company seems to trip over dollars to pick up pennies. They do everything they can to make things difficult, you know, from not ordering proper products, not giving you cups to sell the drinks in. Not giving you the tools you need to do your job on a nightly basis and not have to walk in and stress about that."

He continued, "It's just not at my station, it's been property wide. It's this whole mindset that they took on about profit maximizing, as they call it. You can see it everywhere, just in the quality of the napkins at the table. I can go on and on about all the weird stuff that they do to cut their costs."

Joseph said he voted to strike and felt bad for younger workers trying to make it in Las Vegas. "I couldn't imagine starting again at the age I started here. I probably would have left the town because rent was half of what it was. My first apartment here was about \$850 in a nice side of town. Now it's double, almost. It's insane.

The 95 percent strike authorization vote demonstrates

workers' resolve to take on the casinos in a fight for better pay and working conditions. However, the Culinary Union bureaucracy, which is tied by a thousands threads to the Democratic Party, has no interest in carrying this struggle forward. The fact that they delayed the strike authorization vote until 10 days *after* the contract expired following months of extensions, instead of before negotiations began in April, is a stark indication that the union leadership has no intention of organizing any sort of struggle.

Casino workers need to be warned that they cannot leave the bureaucrats at the head of this struggle. They and their families do not have to worry about inflation or being forced to work multiple jobs. They were the ones that brought back and recommended the previous contracts that have just expired, the same contracts that forced workers to hold down two or three jobs to make ends meet. No confidence can be placed in them to carry this fight forward.

Hotel and casino workers need to begin forming democratically controlled rank-and-file committees that are independent of the union bureaucracy and the two parties of big business to take this struggle move it forward while linking up with other workers in the city and across the country.

As a matter of fact, the union has not engaged in any significant strike activity in decades. The last major strike by the union was in 1984 and encompassed more than 17,000 workers affecting 32 resorts. In 1991 the union oversaw a walkout by 500 workers at the Frontier casino that lasted for more than six years.

The leadership of the union would like nothing more than for a contract to be resolved in the next week. Lead Culinary Union negotiator Ted Pappageorge told the *Las Vegas Sun* in a recent interview, "We're moving forward with the strike authorization vote and hoping to show these companies that the workers are serious about demanding and needing a fair contract."

Pappageorge, the current Secretary-Treasurer of the union and president from 2012-2022 stressed that the strike authorization vote does not mean that a strike will be held. He stated that the Culinary Union would only put the authorization to use if there is no progress after further negotiations, after which a strike deadline would be set.

Exactly how long that would be, he has yet to explain. In the meantime, workers will continue to work without a contract leaving them open to harassment and victimization by the casinos.

The claim is made by the union bureaucrats that the threat of a possible strike will bring the casinos to heel, but the casinos have already taken the measure of their negotiating counterparts and know from the history of the last few decades that threats of a strike are just so much bluster, especially a strike that would target the entire strip.

If however, the union is compelled by rank-and-file anger to

call a strike, it would act deliberately to isolate and weaken it, including possibly by calling out only one or two properties. They would be following the example of the United Auto Workers, which has called a meaningless "stand-up" strike involving only three factories and several parts warehouses which have done nothing to impact auto production.

In the negotiations, the union claims to be presenting an historic 5-point proposal, but a review of this show it to be empty posturing. The demands presented are amorphous and commit them to nothing solid that will cost the casinos a dime. It includes what they claim is the largest ever wage increase for the union, however the union tops refuse to publicly reveal what that number is. They also state that they are asking for a reduction in workload, training on new forms of technology, the issuance of safety—or panic—buttons to hospitality staff, and, astonishingly, a no-strike clause be incorporated into the contract.

In other words, their 5-point proposal allows them to literally come back with anything and present it as an "historic victory."

Casino workers are not just in a fight against multinational corporations, but against the union bureaucracy which is determined to protect its wealth and privilege from the rank-and-file. Pappageorge, besides being the union's lead negotiator, holds down multiple paying positions which places his income far above the workers he claims to represent. These include: Vice President and Executive Committee Member of the UNITE HERE International Union, Trustee of the Culinary Academy of Las Vegas, Trustee of the Culinary Pension Fund, Trustee of the Culinary Health Fund, Trustee on the Culinary and Bartenders Housing Partnership Program, and Executive Committee Member of the Nevada State AFL-CIO.

Bureaucrats from unions around the country regularly make pilgrimages to Las Vegas casinos under the guise of "national conventions," "leadership conferences" and other excuses for all-expenses-paid vacations. They fritter away millions in their own members' dues money while discussing how to ram through the latest sellout, while being catered to by Culinary Union members making poverty wages. Therefore, the casino workers' struggle is a symbolic center of the growing fight of workers everywhere against the corrupt trade union bureaucracy.

Their real allies are among the workers across the US and the world, especially those who are seeking to organize, through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, a rebellion against both management and the corporate union apparatus.



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