

MGM Grand Detroit casino workers continue strike, as unions prepare new sellout

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Around 1,600 workers at MGM Grand Detroit casino continue to man picket lines following their rejection of a sellout contract at the highly profitable casino. Workers reported that a new management contract offer is expected to be announced later this week for the MGM workers, including cooks, servers, cleaners, dealers and skilled tradesmen.

While the unions called the previous contract offer the best in the 23-year history of the Detroit casino industry, that is a very low bar to cross. These are the first contract negotiations since 2015. The five casino unions making up the Detroit Casino Council, including the United Auto Workers, UNITE HERE, Teamsters, the Operating Engineers and the Carpenters unions, agreed to a contract extension during the pandemic. They accepted pitiful wage increases amounting to less than 25 cents per hour even as workers got sick and died, keeping the gaming tables operating during COVID-19.

The deal rejected by MGM Grand workers included an average \$3 per hour raise upfront and total raises of \$5 an hour over the life of a five-year contract. With no cost-of-living clause, the pay increases would leave workers farther behind than ever. Official vote totals have not been released.

The contract rejection at MGM Grand follows the near-rejection of the contract by workers at General Motors, following the phony “stand up strike” conducted by UAW President Shawn Fain. Workers at Ford and Stellantis also registered strong opposition, with workers at several large assembly plants voting down the agreement that abandoned all the major demands of workers, including the abolition of temp work and tiers.

Workers at Motor City Casino and Hollywood Casino in Greektown narrowly approved a deal similar to the one voted down at MGM Grand earlier this month. The unions sent them back to work, leaving workers at Motor City Casino isolated, along with 1,000 Blue Cross Blue

Shield of Michigan workers striking in Detroit and other cities across the state.

Meanwhile, the Culinary Workers Union announced this week that it had pushed through contracts at MGM Resorts, Caesars Entertainment, & Wynn Resorts in Las Vegas, Nevada. Negotiations are continuing with 24 other Las Vegas resorts. At no point have the various unions made any effort to forge a common struggle against the multibillion-dollar gaming corporations.

By voting down the sellout offer foisted by the Detroit Casino Council, MGM Grand workers have shown great determination and resolve. However, experience shows that this is not enough. To win a decent contract, workers need to take the conduct of the fight into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees independent of the union bureaucracies.

These committees, run by workers themselves, can provide a democratic forum for workers to discuss and organize the fight needed to win.

A WSWs reporting team spoke to MGM workers on the picket line Tuesday. Despite the bitterly cold weather, dozens of strikers manned the pickets.

A UAW member with 15 years in the casino told the WSWs he expected the union to announce a new offer on Thursday.

He said many workers were angry over the lack of information from the unions. “We had meetings Saturday. It was crazy, mayhem. There were three meetings. The one in the morning was nuts. There were so many questions.

“We had a five-year contract in 2015, and they gave us a three-year extension we didn’t want during COVID. They forced us to come in to work. We had members dying. It was not fun. Many, many got deathly sick. It was a breeding ground; I had COVID three times.

“They gave us 23 cents and 24 cents. Inflation was 8 percent last year, and I only make \$12 an hour. It should

have been a dollar raise; they gave us 23 cents. We are so far behind; inflation has been 20 percent during those three years.

“A guy working at McDonalds makes \$15. It’s all corporate greed; they set the tone. They try to fabricate numbers saying we get tips, but that money is not coming out of their pockets. They have people coming in at \$9 an hour. How can you keep afloat at that kind of pay?”

“Our ratification bonus is something we’ve earned through our service. They are trying to hold it back and pay it in the second year. That only comes to \$1 an hour. In 2015 we had a \$4,500 bonus. Why wouldn’t they do that today, considering inflation and that they are making more money than they have ever made?”

Another worker, who has been with MGM for nearly five years, said, “Every single time when the contract comes up, they threaten to [reduce] our healthcare all the way up until Christmas time. Sometimes, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, the employer knows that we’d be willing to accept a bonus and do without a raise because we need that upfront money, and the union knows it too.”

He said workers were getting little information from the unions. “We get bullet points sometimes, but there’s never anything substantial there. They just tell us things like ‘stand strong up there on the picket line.’ I see things like that and think, ‘Why? What am I even fighting for right now? What would a win even look like?’”

A member of the Operating Engineers union remarked, “A union official told me recently that they’d have an easier time getting us back to work if we weren’t so damn greedy. That’s literally what he said to me when I haven’t gotten a raise since I started working here.”

Detroit casino revenues are now exceeding pre-pandemic highs. The three Detroit casinos took in more than \$2.27 billion in revenues in 2022 and are expected to surpass that in 2023. MGM Resorts reported \$4 billion in revenue in the third quarter of 2023 alone, a 16 percent increase from 2022.

Dave said, “They are now pulling in \$1.7 million a day from this casino. That’s profit after everyone has been paid. If we got a \$5 hourly raise, there are 1,700 of us out here, that is \$17 million a year; that’s only 10 calendar days’ profits.

“We feel we are entitled to more. We deserve to be paid according to today’s standards.”

Many workers at MGM Grand and other casinos earn pay on par or lower than nonunion workers in the fast food industry. When the cost of union dues is subtracted,

the differential grows even wider.

One worker explained, “They told me that I wasn’t going to be eligible for benefits from the strike fund unless I’m up to date on my union dues. The funny thing about that is we don’t see our dues getting deducted from our paycheck because of how our paystubs are set up. So I have no way to tell if they’ve actually been taking too much money from me.”

A culinary worker with 16 years at the casino said that pay for pastry chefs ranged from \$15-\$16 an hour. “We can’t hire enough new cooks because they keep going to fast food restaurants. We have gone through 14 in the last year.”

“I am only making \$8 an hour more than I made 16 years ago. We do a lot of heavy, hard work. We have to lift 50-pound bags and pour them into mixing bowls. We typically make 100 pounds of cheesecake a day.”

A server in the casino, a member of UNITE HERE, said, “We get our pay on Friday, and by Monday it is gone. You have to have another job to survive.”

He said that while a big issue for many workers had been to maintain good healthcare benefits, pay raises were greatly needed. “We deserve more money. We only got 48 cents over the last three years. I am still at \$14 an hour. They could have at least given a few dollars an hour more during COVID, they didn’t need to wait until the contract was up.

“I was the first one they brought back during COVID. I have probably had it five times and didn’t know it. We risked our lives. People deserve a bonus and raises.

“If they took care of their workers, we wouldn’t be out here.”

Asked what he thought about the fact that governments were spending billions on wars, such as the assault on Gaza, and not on the needs of workers, he said, “If we could get justice for all workers, it would be a better world.”



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