

Unifor isolates workers as Windsor casino strike enters fourth week

By Shannon Jones
30 April 2018

Workers at Caesar's Windsor casino are entering their fourth week on strike against poverty wages and onerous working conditions after decisively rejecting a contract recommended by Unifor that contained no serious improvements.

The 2,300 casino workers have been left isolated by Unifor. With contract negotiations at five other casinos in Ontario set to take place soon, management is taking a hard line in order to set a concessionary pattern. Meanwhile, contracts for some 40,000 gaming workers in Las Vegas, including at Caesar's Entertainment and MGM Grand casinos, are set to expire in May.

For its part Unifor has done nothing to unite Caesar's Windsor workers with other casino workers in the US and across the province, let alone thousands of auto assembly and auto parts workers, including 6,000 Unifor members at the Windsor minivan plant.

Workers voted by a 59 percent margin to reject the deal, which included a \$1.75 an hour wage increase over three years and a minuscule one percent additional contribution to the inferior defined contribution pension plan. This after five concessions contracts in a row that have left most workers making little more than the provincial minimum wage, which is set to rise to \$15 an hour in January.

"For years we went along with this concessions crap," one worker told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters who visited the picket line on Saturday. "Our wages are horrible. I am a dealer and I make \$15 an hour. I work my butt off. I sweat. I have been here 24 years, since they opened."

A number of workers told WSWs reporters they were disgusted by what they saw as the collaboration between Unifor and casino management, but indicated they were fearful to speak openly because of fear of retaliation by Unifor. Indeed, several Unifor officials

soon appeared and attempted to prevent workers from speaking to the reporters.

The WSWs reporters defended their presence and, in opposition to the isolation being imposed on the casino strike, stressed the need for workers to link their struggles with the growing movement of workers against cutbacks and concessions, such as the strikes by American teachers and the recent provincewide walkout by Ontario college professors and support staff. In response one Unifor official attacked the Ontario college instructors, accusing them of depriving students of their education by striking.

Despite this attempted intimidation, workers were eager to tell of the terrible conditions they are forced to work under. "They are monitoring our Facebook pages," one worker explained. "They are disciplining you if you have anything derogatory about them so I deleted my account."

He continued, "This place is doing better than ever. It is making plenty of money. The president of Caesar's Windsor make \$6½ million a year and drives a \$300,000 car."

Another worker added, "It is an awful place and most people are fed up. We are making just barely above minimum wage at a place that is very profitable. They are trying to bring in as many part timers as they can. They are trying to replace all the full timers and they are trying to create a rift between the different groups of workers."

A veteran worker noted, "The big issue is discipline. We're timed on our breaks. If you get seven occurrences in a year you are fired."

Ray, a casino worker nearing retirement age, said the interest rate on the retirement savings money "isn't worth crap." He added, "There are no benefits, zero. You have to take care of yourself in this industry."

Engineering has been drastically cut, every department.”

He said that workers had to undergo a rigorous background screening. “If you have a speeding ticket, it’s considered a criminal offense and you have to report it. It is one way the Gaming Commission controls you.”

A number of workers noted that Windsor, which had once been considered the automotive capital of Canada, was now increasingly dependent on the casino and other low-wage service employers.

A veteran worker noted, “The New Democratic Party brought this place in as a job center. It hasn’t turned into that. It has been bad for the workers and bad for the city. Management’s mentality is ‘keep the workers down.’ To me it is amazing that our government got involved in this. I went from making \$12 an hour to making \$19 an hour in 24 years. Meanwhile, the cost of living has quadrupled or possibly more. They are playing hard ball and they want to starve us out.”

The last talks between Unifor and casino management broke off April 18 and have not been resumed. Meanwhile, management is intransigent. Caesar’s Windsor has cancelled all shows and hotel bookings through May 19.

Unifor is attempting to divert workers’ anger into impotent appeals to the Ontario legislative assembly in Toronto, currently administered by the Unifor-backed Liberal Party. The casino is owned by the Ontario provincial government and operated by Caesars Entertainment. It is a significant source of revenue for the province. The Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation generates some \$2 billion in revenues for the province from its operations, \$270 million from the Windsor casino alone. The money is in effect a massive regressive tax, largely extracted from poorer sections of the working class.

At a strike support rally held April 22 outside the casino, Unifor President Jerry Dias offered workers no way forward. In a damning admission of bankruptcy, Dias noted that most casino workers are making minimum wage or slightly above in an industry that is raking in vast profits. In addition, there are hundreds of casual workers and some 700 part-time workers who do not get full benefits.

Casino workers must break the isolation of their fight and forge links with teachers, auto workers and service

workers across the province. This requires a break with Unifor and the election of a rank-and-file strike committee to take the struggle into their own hands. Workers must reject as well the perspective of pressuring the big business politicians in Toronto, and base their strategy on mobilizing the independent strength of the working class to advance their struggle.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>