

Casino Dealers Petition For Union

UAW Files On Behalf Of 3,000 Workers; Foxwoods Maintains Strong Opposition

By [Patricia Daddona](#) , Published on 9/29/2007

Norwich — Dealers from Foxwoods Resort Casino petitioned the federal government to form a union Friday, setting the stage for a battle over the right to organize at Connecticut's largest tribally owned gaming resort.

The United Auto Workers submitted cards to the National Labor Relations Board in Hartford. The cards are signed by a majority of Foxwoods workers and could authorize a bargaining unit for about 3,000 poker and table-game dealers.

"This is a partnership," said Robert Madore, director of the union's Northeast district. "You will win. You got to stand strong."



By [Dana Jensen](#)

• *Surrounded by union supporters and Foxwoods employees, Robert Madore, UAW Region 9 director, addresses the media at a press conference Friday at the UAW headquarters in Norwich.*

The Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, which owns and operates Foxwoods, said it believes federal labor laws do not apply to the tribe, which is recognized as a sovereign nation by the federal government.

“Our position remains that a union is not in the best interests of our employees,” the tribe stated. “The tribe has always promoted and maintained a pro-employee environment because it is the right thing to do.”

Foxwoods workers benefit from labor protections that have evolved over the last 15 years through tribal relations law, the tribal civil rights code, and laws that ensure workers cannot be terminated without just cause, the tribe said in a written statement.

In February, a federal appeals court ruled labor laws apply to the nation's Indian tribes — a decision that helped open the door for the UAW and other unions looking to organize thousands of Foxwoods workers.

Brian Petronella, vice president of the Local 371 United Food & Commercial Workers International Union, said he would soon join the UAW in its union bid by starting to organize food workers at Foxwoods.

A New Year's Eve sickout drew attention to the unrest. Dealers also complained this year that many did not get publicized companywide raises of 5 percent.

Madore told a packed room of more than 50 employees and labor supporters in the union's Norwich office Friday that a union representative filed the petition at 8:30 a.m. in Hartford.

A relieved Jacqueline Little of Coventry, R.I., a poker dealer at Foxwoods for 15 years, said unionizing is “the best thing we can do” because “pay — everything — was better” 15 years ago.

“I've seen it decline, while our commitment to the company has not declined,” she said.

Other workers described concerns about health care and fellow employees whose livelihoods were threatened because such coverage is more costly to the worker today.

Noting that some dealers' wages are as low as \$4.50 an hour, not including tips (known in the gaming industry as “tokens”), Madore said this unionizing effort at a tribal casino is historic for the state and country. Other commercial casinos in Atlantic City and Detroit also have recently organized with the UAW, he said.

“From Atlantic City to Detroit and now Connecticut and beyond,” Madore said, “we will be successful and we will win. If it weren't for tokens, these folks could not survive, and we're not going to put up with it in the labor movement in the state of Connecticut.”

John Cotter, the assistant regional director at the NLRB in Hartford, confirmed that this is the largest bid for a union that he's seen in Connecticut in a decade.

The tribe stated it intends to review the petition and take appropriate steps to address it.

“The tribe believes that its employees should have the right to say yes and the freedom to say no to a union, free from pressure from a union, management or fellow employees,” the statement reads. “We believe employees should make any decision based on the facts. Moving forward, we intend to communicate the facts to our employees so an informed decision can be made.”

In the late 1990s, unions tried unsuccessfully to organize workers at Foxwoods, one of the state's largest employers.

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal said a union at Foxwoods could be a precursor to “huge shifts in the legal and labor landscape at tribal casinos around the country.”

“Today's petition is a ringing call for fairness — in wages, benefits and working conditions. Unionization is a right ... no matter who or where the employer,” Blumenthal said in a statement.

Cotter already has set a hearing date of Oct. 9, in the event Foxwoods raises issues of federal jurisdiction or otherwise challenges the NLRB's efforts to create an agreement about a time and place for an election. Otherwise, if the parties agree, an election could be held in as soon as six weeks, he said.

A minimum of 30 percent of the workers' names for a potential bargaining unit had to be submitted to make the petition legitimate. The UAW, formally known as the United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, made that claim in its formal filing and submitted signed authorization cards from workers, Cotter said.

In an election, petitioners would need one vote more than the majority to support the union bid, Cotter said, in order to be certified and negotiate a contract with the employer.

The company will be asked for a list of employees, and the NLRB will verify the names on the authorization cards. The actual number of names submitted, workers' identities, even the percentage of workers filing the petition is confidential, he said.

“You're all one,” said Lori Pelletier, secretary treasurer for the Connecticut AFL-CIO. “An injury to one is an injury to all, and we take what Foxwoods has been doing to you as an injury to all.”

The UAW has filed charges with the NLRB against Foxwoods alleging threatening and harassment of workers as they tried to organize, charges which Foxwoods vehemently denies. Those charges are still pending.

Madore said he expects the Jackson Lewis law firm representing Foxwoods to try to delay the union's bid to organize and warned more charges against the casino would be filed if what it alleges as intimidation of workers continues.

“If certified,” Madore said, the fledgling union “would immediately sit down and bargain for a contract.”

Mary Johnson of Norwich, a 14-year table-games dealer at Foxwoods, said too many of her co-workers have trouble affording health care, and morale is low.

“We need a say and a voice,” she said, “and this is going to get us there.”

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