



## Foxwoods, UAW Agree On Contract For Table-Game Dealers

By ERIC GERSHON The Hartford Courant  
January 27, 2010

Thousands of table-game dealers at [Foxwoods Resort Casino](#) reached their first labor contract with the Indian tribe that owns the casino on Tuesday, positioning them to become the largest group of union-represented dealers at any U.S. casino.

Foxwoods, owned by the [Mashantucket](#) Pequot Tribe, is the nation's largest casino.

The tentative deal, announced Tuesday afternoon, covers 2,500 workers at Foxwoods and the MGM Grand at Foxwoods. Subject to a ratification vote by the union membership, it would provide scheduled pay increases, offer job protections and govern working conditions.

The deal comes more than two years after the Foxwoods dealers first voted to organize through the United Auto Workers, in November 2007, and more than one year after the Pequots and the UAW agreed to negotiate a contract under tribal law rather than under U.S. law.

Foxwoods aggressively resisted the dealers' efforts to bring them to the bargaining table under U.S. law, even after a series of National Labor Relations Board rulings in the union's favor. Tribal law does not allow the union to strike. In the event of an impasse, the parties would seek arbitration.

Casino workers elsewhere are represented by unions, but few, if any on this scale. The UAW itself represents workers, including some dealers, at three small non-tribal casinos in Detroit and others in Atlantic City. The Teamsters represent a small group of workers at a Pennsylvania operation of Mohegan Sun, according to a spokesman for the Mohegan Tribe.

None of Mohegan Sun's Connecticut workers are represented by labor unions, spokesman Chuck Bunnell said.

"In terms of scale, this is definitely a precedent-setting agreement," said Greg Guedel, chairman of the Native American practice group at the Seattle law firm of Foster Pepper.

After delaying a deal for years, Foxwoods has agreed to one as it faces the gravest financial peril of its 18-year history. The Pequots are struggling to restructure debts estimated at about \$2 billion. The tribe even has explored the possibility of bankruptcy — widely considered to be legally impossible for a Native American tribe — according to sources familiar with the Pequots' strategy.

"To some extent, you wonder whether this timing is just coincidence," Guedel said, noting that, at a minimum, "it's one less thing they have to deal with as they're trying to focus on their future business planning."

Foxwoods would not comment.

The agreement is the culmination of years of effort by at least two unions. After a low-key campaign, Local 217 of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union took the first steps toward organizing Foxwoods workers in 1998, when it erected billboards near the casino asking employees concerned about working conditions to call a toll-free number. The UAW much later succeeded in securing support among the dealers.

George Taylor, a blackjack dealer at Foxwoods for the past 15 years, and a member of the union's negotiating committee, said he expects the membership to approve the contract in a vote scheduled for Friday.

The tentative deal would provide a 12 percent wage increase over two years, extend medical leave time for seriously ill workers, codify the dealers' right to control distribution of their tips and establish job protections based on seniority. It also would establish a 24-table smoke-free gambling pit.

Table game dealers at Foxwoods earn about \$35,000 per year on average, most of it from tips.

"I'm very confident that it will [pass]," Taylor said. "We've been waiting for a very long time. We stood together and we haven't broken down."

Speaking for himself, he said the contract would mean knowing that "my job is secure, that I got somebody watching my back if something happens at work."

Only members of UAW Local 2121 will be allowed to vote Friday, the union said; non-members will be allowed to join on Friday.

Elizabeth Bunn, secretary treasurer of the UAW, said she did not know how many of the 2,500 dealers already are members. "It's not a number that we keep track of," she said.

Taylor would not say whether other groups of workers at Foxwoods — which, with MGM Grand, employs between 9,000 and 10,000 in the state — are now planning to push for union representation. Maintenance workers at the casino overwhelmingly rejected union representation in May 2008.

But he left little doubt that he hoped they would.

"I hope we can inspire other gaming workers to stand together," he said. "If they stand together like we have, they can win."

While the UAW's deal with Foxwoods does not permit workers to strike (or the casino to lock workers out), the union said it retained its rights to seek redress under U.S. federal law should it prove necessary.

The tribe has argued consistently that its status as a sovereign nation positions it beyond the reach of U.S. law — a position that led to Tuesday's deal under the tribe's own laws.

Copyright © 2010, [The Hartford Courant](#)