

Union Seeks Casino Vote

Foxwoods Dealers Could Be First In Broader Movement

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NORWICH - Table dealers in Connecticut's rapidly growing casino industry have bet for the first time on organized labor, a step that could cascade from the Foxwoods gaming floors to thousands of other workers.

Armed with signatures collected during the summer, the United Auto Workers union petitioned Friday for a federally supervised election to form a 3,000-member bargaining unit of dealers at Foxwoods Resort Casino.

Already, other workers at Foxwoods are following the lead of the dealers - possibly opening up a vast new workforce to a labor movement struggling to hold on to members at private companies.

Quote

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BOB MADORE UNITED AUTO WORKERS

The UAW is also collecting signatures to organize hundreds of slot machine technicians and attendants. The International Union of Operating Engineers started a signature drive last month to unionize an estimated 250 plumbers, electricians and carpenters at the casino. A United Food and Commercial Workers local president said Friday that his group is interested in joining.

"We are going to have a record here of 3,000 dealers. Then we're going to move on to the 4,000 beyond that - and then the 4,000 beyond that," Bob Madore, director of the northeast region and Puerto Rico for the UAW, said at a raucous announcement Friday morning in Norwich. "Certainly we are looking at a long-term, long-protracted fight that they're going to want to exercise. But we are ready - and bring it on, brother."

Although the petition represents a milestone some described as historic, the workers are far from the day when they have a union contract in hand. The Mashantucket Pequot Tribe, which owns and operates Foxwoods, vowed to continue its vigorous campaign against the union and to challenge the legal status of the vote.

"The Tribe is a sovereign nation, as recognized by the federal government," the Mashantucket Pequots said in a prepared statement. "We do not believe that federal labor law applies to our Tribe."

If the vote happens, the dealers would probably be the first employees of a tribal casino in the country to have an election supervised by the National Labor Relations Board, Attorney General Richard Blumenthal said.

But although the dealers and UAW presented what they called a "supermajority" of signatures seeking a vote - far more than the 30 percent required by law - many union elections fail when the secret ballots are counted.

The outcome will shape the future of the workforce not just at Foxwoods, but also at Mohegan Sun, the other tribal casino in southeastern Connecticut. Combined, the two casinos employ more than 20,000 and are in the midst of expansion projects.

By comparison, even a bargaining unit of 3,000 would rank among the largest at Connecticut's private employers. Aircraft engine maker Pratt & Whitney, for example, has about 4,100 union workers in Connecticut.

John Olsen, president of the Connecticut AFL-CIO, described the UAW's organizing campaign as one of the largest in the state in the past 25 years. It represents a long shift from organizing manufacturing workers to organizing service workers.

Nationwide, union leaders view casinos as fertile ground in their efforts to revive flagging numbers.

The union UNITE HERE has about 5,000 members at tribal casinos in California, and most, if not all, of their locals were recognized without a federally supervised vote.

The union also represents workers at several major casinos in Las Vegas. The UAW has organized dealers in Detroit and Atlantic City, although it has not won at every casino it has brought to a vote.

The drive at Foxwoods, which unions have tried to organize on and off for more than a decade, was bolstered by two developments during the past year.

First, relations between workers and management at the casino soured, culminating in the creation of an employee website that called for a sick-out last New Year's Eve. Workers' issues include wages,

benefit cuts and workplace safety.

"The morale at Foxwoods has declined like I've never seen it before," Mary Johnson, a blackjack dealer at the casino for 14 years, said at Friday's announcement.

And second, a federal appeals court ruled in February that Native American casinos are bound by NLRB rules on unionization. That is the ruling the Mashantucket Pequots are likely to challenge in front of the regional NLRB director. If the tribe does not win there, it can appeal to the board in Washington and a federal appeals court.

Blumenthal said the February court decision clearly applies to the Connecticut tribe. He predicted that the NLRB and federal courts would see through - and reject - any effort by the Mashantucket Pequots to say labor law does not apply to Foxwoods.

The tribe has opposed the unionization efforts since the idea started circulating in the casino's pits. It hired a law firm that specializes in stopping organizing efforts and told employers in fliers, among other things, that they could lose benefits and pay high union dues if they organize.

The time between the filing of a petition with the NLRB and the actual vote is critical. Often management will use tactics to stall, sway opinions in the workplace and push workers to the point at which they just want to get the issue behind them, said Kate Bronfenbrenner, director of labor education research at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University.

Other factors can also hurt a union's effort, including turnover among employees. Immigrant workers can be easy targets for management, organizers said.

In the year that ended Oct. 1, 2006, organizers were successful in 60 percent of elections to recognize a new bargaining unit, federal statistics show.

For now, Friday's petition was enough cause for poker dealer Steve Peloso to celebrate.

"We have waited for this day for a long time," he said. "We're fed up, and we're doing something about it."

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