

## Unions On Casinos' Doorstep

Foxwoods, Mohegan Sun Face Increasing Pressure In Shifting Industry

By [Patricia Daddona](#) Published on 9/3/2007



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•*Above, gaming employees of Foxwoods and United Auto Workers organizers show their support for unions on Route 2 in Norwich, across the street from a Foxwoods employee parking lot on Saturday. The UAW is attempting to organize Foxwoods workers.*

Big labor has set its sights on a big target — the Foxwoods Resort Casino — raising the stakes for workers and management there and possibly at the nearby Mohegan Sun.

As the United Auto Workers union organizers make their push at Foxwoods and the UAW continues to add unions at commercial casinos like the Tropicana Casino & Resort in Atlantic City, industry analysts said the pressure to organize both tribal and commercial casinos appears likely to increase.

The UAW began organizing dealers and other workers at Foxwoods last spring.

“The gaming industry is in a period of rapid change,” said Michael Pollock, managing director of the Spectrum Gaming Group, a consulting company.

“And that includes a combination of expansion and new competition and new technologies as well as consolidations and mergers and acquisitions, all of which creates a sense that the ground is shifting.

“That is likely to be one of the factors behind the apparent increase in success of union organizers. In times of perceived change, a successful union organizing effort can also portray itself as something akin to a life preserver, and these are times of change.”

The UAW already represents more than 6,000 casino dealers and others in Detroit, Rhode Island and Atlantic City, said Robert Madore, director of the UAW for Region 9A.

A group of dealers at a riverboat casino in Evansville, Ind., recently filed for a representation election, he said.

“We're getting calls every week from casino workers who want a voice on the job,” Madore said. “It's a national movement that's growing like wildfire. ... Gaming industry workers definitely have a home in our union.”

The union effort at Foxwoods in Mashantucket, only a few miles from the Mohegan Sun in Uncasville, has the potential to affect Mohegan Sun eventually if the push at Foxwoods is successful, Pollock said. Both casinos have the same attraction for union organizers: large, non-union work forces.

The effort to organize at Foxwoods included requests by union organizers to the state Division of Special Revenue for the names, addresses and job titles of employees. By law, the information can be requested under the Freedom of Information Act, but the move rankled Foxwoods.

At least one Foxwoods union organizer has made a similar FOI request for worker information on behalf of the UAW at the Mohegan Sun. Despite that, Mitchell Etes, Mohegan Sun president and chief executive officer, said he sees no evidence of any union organizing.

But Pollock said pressure at one casino could affect the other.

“The vote (to unionize) is one thing,” Pollock said, “but the contract is what it's going to come down to. Unionizing doesn't get you there all by itself. The terms of that contract and how that compares to what is available to workers at a non-union property is going to be a critical factor that will either increase the likelihood of unionization at the nonunion property — or not.”

••••Foxwoods dealers have not yet submitted union authorization cards to the National Labor Relations Board to form a union, let alone negotiated a contract. But an organizer for the UAW, known formally as the United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, said she and her colleagues are determined to establish a union there.

Reduced benefits and wage issues are only part of the picture, said Mary Johnson of East Hampton, who has worked at Foxwoods for 14 years.

“One of my major concerns is, with Foxwoods, they just act like a big corporation now, and every decision they make, they leave the human element out of it,” Johnson said.

“I think you're going to see a rise in union membership in the U.S., and you definitely will at Foxwoods,” she added. “If you have happy employees, you have happy customers. That's why I've stayed at Foxwoods, because I love Foxwoods. I love my job and I'm staying to fight for change.”

Johnson was the Foxwoods employee who, with another individual, recently signed a letter to state gaming regulators seeking Mohegan employee information on behalf of the UAW. She would not comment on that initiative.

Communication problems between management and workers are usually key in giving unions a foothold, said Pollock and John Olsen, president of the Connecticut AFL-CIO, which has been monitoring union initiatives at casinos around the country.

“Dealers, if you look at the wages, they're probably compensated better than most people, but I think it's about control,” Olsen said. “They're at-will employees and that gets very difficult. Without a union, there's no way to grieve anything. It's not easy to represent yourself.”

An at-will employee can end employment or be terminated at any time because there is no contract between employer and worker.

Pollock believes that fundamental changes at casinos, such as large-scale expansion and coin-less slot machines, contribute to a sense of instability for workers.

A recent court decision involving the San Manuel Band of Indians in California, which found tribal sovereignty does not preclude the organizing of unions, makes for an atmosphere that is ripe for collective bargaining, Pollock said.

“All of these factors can create anxiety,” said Pollock. “Successful union organizing helps to portray an image in the minds of those who vote that it's going to prevent layoffs and preserve stability.”

•••••Foxwoods president and chief executive officer John O'Brien declined to be interviewed for this story, but he has made his views on the union known in letters to employees. Tribal chairman Michael Thomas has distributed a position paper describing the advantages of remaining a non-union workplace.

Informal, direct dealings with the tribe can lead to more cooperation, Thomas wrote, while collective bargaining “formalizes conflict.”

O'Brien has sent workers letters asking them to consider carefully whether a union is the right vehicle to get their concerns addressed. He also has asked state gaming

regulators at the Division of Special Revenue not to release worker information, even though disclosure is allowed by law.

The UAW has filed charges of harassment and threatening against Foxwoods, which O'Brien has vehemently denied. Those charges are still pending, according to a spokesman at the NLRB.

At Mohegan Sun, Etes remains confident that management's treatment of employees is keeping a union at bay.

"We have developed over the whole course of our 10 or 11 years here a terrific environment for our employees where they are treated with respect, and we invest tremendously in them in every way possible," Etes said.

Workers have a "terrific" benefits package, free meals, competitive wages and a multi-million-dollar employee center with a parking garage, gym, bank, dry cleaner, pharmacy, wellness center computer lab and travel agency, he said — "all things designed to make their lives better."

Lavishing such perks on workers is "nothing new," Etes said, and has marked the Mohegan tribe's approach to manager-employee relations for some time.

"We've always invested in our employees and had these programs and we've always worked toward having a great employee experience here," he said.

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