

Angry dealers know their jobs teeter on casinos' bottom lines

It's a long way from Fremont Street to the heart of Las Vegas Boulevard.

It's just a few miles by cab, perhaps, but a million miles when it comes to comparing the quality of casino dealers' jobs. Typically, most dealers made that journey in a few months, even a year or more, depending on the available jobs and their own juice.

Even today at many downtown joints, a USD 100-toke day is a rarity to be prized. At megaresorts such as the MGM Grand, Mirage and Wynn Las Vegas, individual players have been known to leave that much and far, far more. It's unlikely that memories of their chump-change early days on Fremont Street ever leave the minds of the veteran dealers who win millions from players and take home upward of USD 100,000 a year in the best places.

One of the casino industry's great deceptions is the commonly held belief that dealers are white-collar employees. Although their uniform collars might be dry-cleaned, in many ways they are not so different from the silver miners of the Comstock or the gold ore muckers from Goldfield and Tonopah. Their efforts produce vast fortunes for a handful of obscenely wealthy men.

They are essential, yet almost anonymous, and most certainly replaceable, in the great casino mines.

A lot has been written this past week about Steve Wynn's decision to share dealers' tokes with floor personnel, including whether the move is legal under state law. (It very probably is, the lawyers I've spoken with have admitted.)

I suspect it's not the Nevada Revised Statutes, but the reality that good jobs are hard to come by that eventually will persuade Wynn Las Vegas dealers to shrug their shoulders and shuffle the cards.

With so few major companies controlling so many properties, dealers live with the perception of easily making themselves locally unemployable if they are labeled malcontents. And in the casino racket, the definition of malcontent can range from talking about unionizing to complaining about the company's fingernail policy.

In my mind, there's something wrong with a boss redistributing the token pool instead of reaching into the company's gaudy bottom line for raises for the hired help, but it's hardly surprising that Wynn or any of his contemporaries would do such a thing. After all, despite Gaming Inc.'s gargantuan profits and unprecedented proliferation from here to Macau, most dealers still make minimum wage and rely on the tradition of tipping to make ends meet.

The only real question is how long it will take before Wynn's move becomes the industry standard and this tepid controversy is replaced by ringing endorsement.

Another problem with criticizing Wynn is that the decision isn't new but has been tried at several casinos over the years.

In recent days, I've heard from dozens of dealers and floor employees, most of whom are angry and outspoken (as long as they can keep their comments anonymous) about the changes at Wynn Las Vegas. Not that they actually plan to organize their co-workers or that they have faith in ever seeing a time when dealers will have stable work rules and reliable schedules. Most know better than that.

When you can be replaced in a finger snap for any reason or none at all, it's wise to keep your opinions to yourself. Like

dressed-up Oakies from a green-felt version of „The Grapes of Wrath,“ there’s an endless line of hungry dealers on the casino’s „extra board“ ready to take their jobs.

But despite the incredible control the bosses have over the dealers, the future of forced tip-sharing might not be as easy as a corporate PR team would have you believe.

„Dealers are the ones who work hard to get tipped,“ one Strip veteran dealer laments. „They’re the front-line people who have to deal with all kinds of customers from all walks of life, from the pleasant ones to the rough and obnoxious ones, most notably the smokers.“

Tip hustling is another possibility, some say.

Floor personnel „are the first line of defense in maintaining the integrity of the game,“ a longtime dealer observes. „If they have a vested interest in the outcome of the game, the house loses a great deal of control. And don’t tell me surveillance is going to catch it all.“

Most, however, will dummy up and deal. They know it’s a long way from Fremont Street to the Strip, but the return trip can take only minutes.