

Some dealers from casinos seek to join union

Atlantic City – Harrah's Entertainment may be making record profits in Atlantic City, but several dealers at one property say they aren't getting a fair share.

So some dealers are starting to use the U-word again – "union."

John J. Cisternino, vice president and director of Strategic Affairs for Local 152 of the United Food & Commercial Workers, was in town Tuesday talking to dealers in the preliminary steps of an organizing campaign.

Previous efforts to unionize casino dealers in Atlantic City have been unsuccessful.

Most of the workers at Tuesday's meeting were from Caesars Atlantic City, one of four local properties owned by Harrah's. But Cisternino said he is talking to dealers at several different casinos.

"The main thing I'm gathering from the dealers is, from the time Atlantic City opened, dealing was a good job, but it's getting progressively worse," Cisternino said. "There are workers who are concerned their voice isn't being heard" and they want professional representation, he said.

The main issues are dealers paying an increasing portion of their health-care costs, casinos hiring more part-time and fewer full-time dealers, and reductions in contributions to the employees' 401(k) retirement plans, Cisternino said.

So far, the meetings are preliminary and discussions are about workplace issues, Cisternino said. He is telling workers the benefits of being in a union as opposed to going it alone

against the casino.

One Caesars dealer, who declined to give his name for fear of losing his job, said he used to pay USD 68 per week for health benefits for him and his family. Now, the casino wants him to contribute USD 104 per week.

The health plan would pay the first USD 1,000 in medical expenses each year, and he would be responsible for the next USD 1,000 he spends on health care, the dealer said. After that, insurance would pay 90 percent of costs.

“It’s a ton more out of my pocket,” he said.

Dealers used to get a 25-cent hourly raise every year, the man said. Now the top raise is 18 cents if a dealer has a perfect performance review.

All while the casino boasts about making more and more money, he added.

Another dealer, who asked that her name not be used, said the company is freezing the 401(k) accounts, and will make employees invest their retirement savings in a plan controlled by Harrah’s. As it stands, employees have a choice where to invest the funds.

“The company is going to have full control of the 401(k),” the woman said. “We won’t have a say anymore.”

Caesars is hiring new dual-rate employees, who serve as both supervisor and dealer, who get paid USD 50 per day more than people who have been with the company for years, she said.

Alyce Parker, spokeswoman for Harrah’s Entertainment Inc., declined to comment about the union drive Tuesday.

If history is any indicator, the deck is stacked against the dealers being able to successfully join a union.

Efforts to unionize casino dealers have failed in the past, including a 2004 campaign by Teamsters Local 331 of Pleasantville targeting Caesars, Bally's and the Atlantic City Hilton Casino Resort.

In 2000, the UFCW abandoned an attempt to unionize dealers at Harrah's.

The most serious union drive in recent years came in 1996, when the Teamsters fell two votes short of representing dealers at Tropicana Casino and Resort.

In 1982, dealers at Bally's voted for representation by Local 137 of the Sports Arena Employees, but a strike the following year failed and they never signed a union contract.