

Union trying to organize casino workers in Black Hawk

A local labor union has launched a campaign to organize workers at casinos in Black Hawk, the hub of Colorado's limited-stakes gaming industry.

United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7, which represents grocery store employees and workers in a variety of industries, said it began its effort in January after some workers expressed interest in union representation.

„These are the kind of employees who make up most of the work force in Colorado, and they are increasingly at the mercy of their employers,“ said John Bowen, general counsel for the UFCW Local.

One of the biggest sticking points for employees: trying to secure regular schedules each week.

„They're moving us around to suit their needs,“ said Kelly Gomez, who has worked as a slot club representative at Central Station Casino for more than a year.

Gomez, who signed on as an organizer, said his shifts change frequently. He'd like a more stable schedule, and he'd also like to see better wages and benefits for fellow employees.

The union campaign focuses on Black Hawk because many of its casinos are owned by large companies, according to Ernie Duran III, a director at UFCW Local 7.

Some of the Black Hawk casinos the union is trying to organize are Ameristar Casino, The Lodge, The Gilpin, Mardi Gras and Central Station.

Collectively, Black Hawk's casinos generate the bulk of the state's gambling revenues. In March alone, Black Hawk gaming

establishments drew a record USD 53.6 million in „adjusted gross proceeds,“ the amount of revenue minus payouts to winners, according to the state’s gaming division.

Black Hawk casinos employed about 4,379 workers as of July, the time of year when the gaming division takes an employment count.

By comparison, Central City accounts for only a small portion of business, and most of the gaming parlors are small outfits. Casinos there employ about 748 people.

„Some of those casinos are struggling,“ Duran said.

The union also stayed away from Cripple Creek, where a Teamsters local invested time in recent years trying to organize casinos.

„We’re going after casinos making huge amounts of money,“ Duran said.

He said union organizers got a „huge response“ from their initial efforts in contacting workers. But he said it’s become an „uphill battle“ getting enough workers to sign cards, an action he essentially likened to signing a petition.

The battle began in earnest once company officials learned of the campaign and began holding meetings with employees and sending out letters about the potential impact of joining a union, Duran said.

In a letter provided to the Rocky Mountain News by the union, the managers of the Lodge and Gilpin casinos cautioned employees about the „propaganda“ sent to some employees’ homes.

„Signing one of their cards is very much like signing a blank check,“ the managers wrote in the letter to employees.

Neither of the managers could be reached for comment. Steve

Roark, president of the company that owns the two casinos, said he was aware of the organizing campaign and noted that unions have tried to organize mountain casinos in the past.

Colorado Gaming Association President Lois Rice said the trade group representing the state's casinos has not been involved in the issue so far.

„I know they've been up there trying to solicit," Rice said. „We've told our member companies that it's best to contact their own legal counsel because all the properties are so diverse. We've stayed out of it.“

A variety of unions have recently organized casino workers in other states.

A Teamsters unit organized dealers in Atlantic City, while the United Auto Workers began representing some workers at casinos in Detroit.

„They're moving more into the service industry because that's where the jobs are," said James Sherk, Bradley fellow in labor policy at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank based in Washington.

„It's an increasing part of the economy.“