

# Union's plan: Win dealers' gratitude, then their votes

After winning the right to represent casino dealers at two major Strip resorts last year, the Transport Workers Union of America is taking its organizing effort to the next level.

The union, which is working to bolster a fledgling gaming division here, plans to announce Monday that it is launching a public campaign urging card players to tip their dealers.

The campaign will feature a Web site, billboards, and print and Internet advertising. Models wearing "video vests" featuring blackjack pointers will be posted in front of targeted casinos as well.

On its face, the campaign serves to educate the public and curry favor with dealers, whom the union is trying to organize up and down the Strip.

"People come to Las Vegas and have no idea these dealers work off tips," said Joseph Carbon, director of the international union's gaming division. „People are winning thousands of dollars and just walking away. I think there has to be an avenue for someone to speak for dealers on these issues."

Perhaps more important, though, the campaign turns up the heat on casino operators as the union slogs its way through negotiations at Wynn Las Vegas and prepares to open talks with Caesars Palace management. TWU International President James Little will be on hand for Monday's announcement. Little's chief deputy, Harry Lombardo, is the union's lead negotiator in the Wynn talks.

For the Transport Workers, organizing the dealers is a shot at redemption.

In 2001 the union tried to organize dealers at 11 casinos. It won elections at three properties, but ended up with just one signed contract, widely considered ineffectual, at the New Frontier, which was imploded last year.

When Wynn Las Vegas introduced a controversial tip-sharing program in 2006, the union saw another opening. Dealers contacted TWU International, which sent organizers to Las Vegas. The union, using the Web to organize under management's radar, won an election in May to represent about 650 dealers.

Emboldened dealers at Caesars then gathered majority support for the union and won a representation election in December. Negotiations begin Tuesday.

Upon discovery by casino operators, however, the organizing efforts have met fierce resistance.

Harrah's Entertainment, which owns Caesars, launched its own Web site to counter the Transport Workers campaign in the days before the union election. The site contained several pages of information on the union's troubles, from declining membership to allegations of corruption.

Management at other Harrah's properties, including the Flamingo, Harrah's and Paris Las Vegas, has since held closed-door mandatory meetings for employees urging them not to join the union.

The Transport Workers, organizing under the „Las Vegas Dealers Local 721" label, are targeting MGM Mirage as well, launching two Web sites aimed at dealers working at two of the company's properties, the Mirage and Mandalay Bay. But the company bolstered its standing with its dealers last week when it announced pay raises at its 10 Strip casinos.

MGM Mirage has said the decision was unrelated to the union's organizing efforts. The raises, it says, were needed to level the playing field among dealers at various properties and to

reward longtime employees by lifting a salary cap.

Still, MGM Mirage has made it clear it's not welcoming the union.

"Management prizes a direct relationship with employees, and dealers have a very special place in that system," said Alan Feldman, MGM Mirage spokesman. "If you start putting a third party in the midst of that, especially a third party that has no understanding of this industry, it interferes with that relationship."

Little countered, saying the union has learned its lessons from the last time around and is building a local for Las Vegas dealers, run by Las Vegas dealers.