

Hotel workers triumph in six year strike

Las Vegas union big winners

By Jeff Foy

When Margaret Elardi bought the Frontier Hotel and Casino six years ago, she banished the hotel workers' union from the premises and declared all union contracts dissolved. Rather than accept slashed benefits and low wages, the servers, cooks and floor workers of the Frontier walked out and began the longest running labor strike of the century.

Last month, with the peeling paint and gasping neon of the casino bearing witness to the toll the strike years have taken, Elardi sold to an out-of-state investor. The new owner has agreed to rehire striking workers and promised to negotiate a contract with the union.



Photo credit: Culinary Workers Local 226

The capitulation of the Frontier, nearly the last and certainly the most stiff-necked of the non-union casinos on the Las Vegas strip, is the latest in a string of victories by a union that is becoming a model of effective and aggressive organizing.

Culinary Workers Local 226 represents a vast swath of casino and hotel employees. Membership numbers in the tens of thousands and includes most of those who work on the strip.

"Cooks, waitresses, foodservers, buspeople, housekeeping, porters, cashiers, changemakers, cocktail servers, bellmen, uniformed attendants...just about everyone

is covered in most bargaining units," says Sandra Weese, an organizer for the union, and a new Western States Center board member.

By backing that membership muscle with comprehensive research and a willingness to widen the scope of their struggle, the union has won contracts for its members that would be startling in any other city.

"We have food servers starting out at almost \$8 per hour," said Weese "You get health insurance for your whole family at no cost to you — major medical, vision, and dental. Your co-payment is \$10, you can go to a specialist, you can go to the chiropractor. This is the only place I know of where maids can make the kind of money — and have the kind of benefits — that allow them to buy homes or send their kids to school."

Union contracts cover part-time as well as full-time workers, and the local's health and welfare fund recently extended health insurance benefits to all domestic partners.

But in spite of the city's history as a union town, good contracts have not been easily won.

"It's a war"

Las Vegas is in the midst of an economic boom. The city has packed away the sharkskin suits and martini glasses and is successfully reinventing itself as a tourist playground for the whole family. There are as many crane operators in town as neon sign repairmen, and the casinos are awash in money. Even so, hotel owners and managers dig in their heels when it comes to paying a livable wage.

"These companies make money hand over fist, every quarter, but there's a lot of resistance," said Weese. "They fight the union every chance they get. The casinos in this town would love to have seen the company win the Frontier strike and the union busted. Right now every one is waiting to see what's going to happen at the MGM. They'd love to see the MGM get away with subcontracting."

In an effort to avoid paying union wages to restaurant employees, the New York, New York Hotel and Casino has begun subcontracting food service to outside companies. Employees working for subcontractors make little more than minimum wage and often have

no health benefits. There seems to be little doubt that other casinos will adopt the subcontracting strategy if MGM weathers its battle with the union.

"The same companies are in Laughlin and Reno," Weese points out. "They're not union, they don't pay good wages and for the most part they don't give benefits. They do it here because we force them to do it here."

The local is able, and perfectly willing, to demonstrate the amount of pressure they can bring to bear. When New York, New York unveiled the subcontracting plan, the union struck back with a 10,000 member rally that shut down a sizable section of the strip.

"When you have as many members as we do and you're able to turn them out and shut down the property, it gets their attention," said Weese.

Foresight has made possible this fearless approach. It is only in the last year that labor groups across the spectrum have begun redirecting resources toward recruiting and organizing new members. The culinary workers have devoted half of their budget to organizing for the last three years. The result has been a growing and dedicated membership. According to the union, not one Frontier employee crossed picket lines to return to work.

Although the ability to turn out troops for rallies and pickets is important, it is only part of the union's strategy. Equally important is finding out as much as possible about a company's strengths and weaknesses, and being willing to use that information to carry the battle into an opponent's territory.

"One of the reasons that our union has been so successful is that we do really comprehensive campaigns," said Weese. "We go after these companies in a lot of ways. We go after them in different parts of the country, sometimes around the world. Keeping them from getting gaming licenses in New Orleans when they're fighting us here, keeping the MGM



Photo credit: Culinary Workers Local 226

from expanding in China when they're fighting us here—our research department is very sophisticated."

Union researchers delayed construction of the new and avowedly non-union Venetian Hotel and Casino by pointing out problems in the company's traffic study to county officials. Acting on information uncovered by the research department, the union headed off an attempt by another casino to expand into riverboat gambling in Missouri. When researchers turned up the fact that the Frontier's Elardi sat on the board of directors of Community Bank, the union went after the bank, calling lending law violations to the attention of Federal regulators and leafletting bank customers.

"We follow what they do, where they're going, where they get their money, what their debt leverage is—we look at everything," said Weese, who makes no apology for the union's widen-the-war tactics. "Working people are in a war, these people make huge amounts of money every day, and any way they can put more in their pocket they're going to do it. We go after these people however we have to so working people get what they deserve out of this big piece of pie."

New arenas

Following the philosophy of a diversified attack a step further, the union is carrying its fight into the Nevada statehouse. Under many new contracts, members can agree to have \$1 taken out of their paychecks and dedicated to a union campaign fund. The local plans to run a candidate for state senate in 1998.

"In the state of Nevada, if you look at where

continued on page 11

"This is the only place I know of where maids can make the kind of money — and have the kind of benefits — that allow them to buy homes or send their kids to school."



Las Vegas union wins big

continued from page 3

the money comes from, casino owners put people in office," says Weese. "We need people up there who are making laws that are good for working people."

The culinary workers have flexed their political muscle with tangible effect in the past. When the owner of the Santa Fe Casino, also a state senator, began firing union activists, the union mounted an opposition campaign that succeeded in unseating her.

Will it work elsewhere?

The success of the culinary workers in Las Vegas may be inspiring to activists nationwide; but will the strategies and tactics they employ be useful to workers living in cities that are not boomtowns, or those employed in industries less cash-soaked than the casino business? Can unions without a membership 40,000 strong be effective using similar tools?

The answer, at least in part, seems to be yes. Without question, the success of the Las Vegas union is a testament to the importance of making a strong commitment to organizing. Labor groups across the nation are beginning to realize that merely providing services to existing membership is not enough. The recently elected national president of the AFL-CIO, John Sweeney, swept into office on a platform that emphasized organizing and recruiting as keys to revitalize unions. He has challenged all affiliated locals to devote 30 percent of their resources to organizing by the year 2000.

In addition, Weese urges that all unions, regardless of size or situation, work to expand the scope of their efforts.

"There are different circumstances in different places, but I absolutely believe that unions need to become more comprehensive with their campaigns in general. You can't be narrowly focused. Research is an important part; politics is an important part; organizing is an important part. It all fits together to create a comprehensive campaign." ■

Representing the West

Sandra Weese, an organizer with Culinary Workers Local 226, is the newest member of the Western States Center Board of Directors

I believe that the work Western States is doing is fundamental to where we all need to be. When I was working on political issues with the union, the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN)



held a reception at the governor's office that kind of caught our attention. I began attending their meetings, and through my involvement with them became familiar with Western States. Aside from my work with the union, I'm involved in the community other ways. I'm a woman, I'm a lesbian and all these issues are important to me. All of our groups have been individually attacked by right wing organizations and right wing politics over the last few years, and it's time we come together and fight back. That's what Western States is about.

The hands on help they provide to organizations is extremely important. I think in many cases it has made the difference in the growth of coalitions and their effectiveness. The Center is doing amazing things and I am looking forward to being a part of it.

"One of the reasons that our union has been so successful is that we do really comprehensive campaigns. We go after these companies in a lot of ways."