

600 may lose jobs as a result of Inglewood casino renovation

Written by Administrator

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While working at Hollywood Park Casino, Tafere Haileselassie has been able to achieve what some say is the American Dream.

The Ethiopian immigrant said he put his two children through college and bought a house in the Crenshaw district, all on the tips and minimum-wage salary he earned as a porter at the Inglewood card club.

But come March, when a new manager is scheduled to take over the daily operations of the aging casino, Haileselassie and about 600 workers may be out of jobs. They received their termination notices several weeks ago after months of speculation and have been holding occasional protests outside the casino, including one on Monday.

"If I lose my job, then I lose my house," said the 61-year old, whose wife also works at the casino and received the same notice.

Under new management, the retro-looking casino is scheduled for renovation, with upscale gaming and entertainment.

Since 2009, city officials have been touting a \$2-billion revitalization plan that will transform the historic racetrack into a retail and residential complex. The new project, called Hollywood Park Tomorrow, will incorporate the existing Hollywood Park Casino. Horse racing will be replaced with a shopping and entertainment district. Additional plans call for a 25-acre park, including a lake and a waterfall.

"I'm excited about the opportunities this facility has to offer," said Eric Swallow, who has applied to become the casino's new operator. "It's a diamond in the rough."

Swallow said the final plan calls for adding jobs and hiring many workers from the local community. Although all the existing employees received layoff notices, Swallow said he hopes to "hire as many people as I can."

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But casino employees — many of whom are older, immigrant workers — said his actions tell a different story.

Swallow has not yet signed an agreement pledging to keep the employees for a specific amount of time, an action he said is illegal because his bid to become the new operator has not been approved by the city and the state gaming commission.

The Inglewood City Council was set to approve the license earlier this month, noting that rejecting the request could cause the casino to close temporarily, reducing city revenue. Inglewood expects to receive \$3.8 million in fees from the card club this fiscal year.

But at the last minute, Mayor James Butts pulled the contentious item from the agenda to allow the union and Swallow time to iron out a deal before the California Gambling Control Commission votes on the license request Thursday. Those talks have since reached a stalemate.

However, union leaders said that Swallow is already acting as the new manager and may be trying to cut costs by hiring part-time workers. He has started recruiting new employees, advertising job openings on Craigslist and holding career fairs at the nearby racetrack.

"It's very clear to me that he is trying to string us along and fire all, if not most, of the employees," said Tom Walsh, president of Unite Here, Local 11, the union for 150 of the hospitality workers. "This will have a devastating effect on local communities who survive on these jobs."

The jobs at stake are not glamorous. Most are hospitality and cleaning positions. Workers can earn \$8 to \$11 an hour, plus tips and a full benefits package.

Workers like Pamela Smith and Jamandawa Dunlap rely on the healthcare coverage to pay for medical expenses they said were caused by the stress of not knowing about whether they would keep their jobs. Smith said she suffered a mild stroke in December and Dunlap said she was recently diagnosed with depression.

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"I'm fearful of losing everything — my job, my rent, my everything," Dunlap said, her voice choking. "I'm 53. Nobody is going to hire a 53-year-old cocktail waitress."

Swallow said he plans to revamp the casino much like he did in San Jose. There, he took the ailing Garden City Casino from its old facilities, renamed it Casino M8trix and moved it into a \$50-million state-of-the-art building. He said he also increased the staff by about 300.

"I believe we can do more at this casino but on a larger scale," Swallow said of the Inglewood card club.

Workers and Walsh, the union president, said they want to be a part of that change. Some, including Haileselassie, have worked at the casino since it opened in 1994. They have seen the management change hands twice before, but they never feared for their jobs as they do now.

Last month, most workers were interviewed by the new management team. They were told that they would receive calls in two weeks if they were offered a position. Nobody has received a call back, according to union leaders and the employees. Swallow said he will make hiring decisions closer to the March 5 transfer date.

"All transitions are difficult," he said. "I understand all the employees' concerns."

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