

Pauma casino workers aim to unionize

Written by Administrator
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About four miles east of Casino Pauma, on nontribal land, nearly 100 of the casino's workers and their backers gathered Wednesday at a community center to rally for union rights.

The workers — largely in service and maintenance positions — hope to become the third group of casino employees to unionize in San Diego County, which has nine casinos. They would also become the second group to be represented by Unite Here Local 30, which represents a similar set of employees at nearby Pala Casino.

The Pauma workers said they haven't gotten a raise in at least four years, are pinched by rising health-care costs and want to negotiate some workplace policies. At Pala, the roughly 720 union members get annual raises of 20 to 45 cents per hour and have fixed health-care expenses, said Unite Here lead organizer Regina Longo.

In a statement, Casino Pauma general manager Harry Taylor said the casino recognizes the rights of its employees to engage in union activities and prefers the secret ballot method for any planned unionization vote — [per a recent federal court decision](#) .

“As for team member concerns about the quality of raises and benefits, Casino Pauma, like the rest of the nation, is slowly emerging from the 2008 recession,” Taylor said. “Casino Pauma has already implemented wage increases on an annual basis for qualifying team members, and as we continue to return to pre-2008 revenue levels, we expect to revisit our overall compensation and benefit strategies.”

Wednesday's rally, held in Spanish, culminated with signature counting for a pro-union petition that has been circulating since efforts to certify a Casino Pauma union began last May. Attendees counted 149 signatures, more than half of the total pool of 226 Pauma workers in the bargaining unit, and delivered a letter indicating those results to the casino's officials.

“The workers have expressed they want a union, but the tribe is not respecting it,” Longo said.

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Because of the sovereignty issue, collective-bargaining rules at Indian casinos differ from those for businesses on nontribal property. Each tribe's policy is outlined in [compacts reached with the state](#)

Last month, Pauma won a federal lawsuit against the state that allowed it to resume using its 2000 agreement because the 2004 compact contained a state error. That ruling indirectly changed Pauma's collective-bargaining policies: The tribe is no longer required to remain neutral on the issue, and any unionization vote must now take place by secret ballot instead of on so-called authorization cards.

Pauma workers have health benefits, time off and a retirement account with an employer match. But Alicia Andaluz, 45, a cook in the casino's pizza restaurant, said through a translator that she pays \$260 a month for health insurance for her family. She said that's a struggle based on her \$16 hourly salary, which is up from \$8.18 when she started 11 years ago.

Maintenance worker Martin Loya, 43, started at the casino eight years ago earning \$12 per hour. He has been promoted and received two cost-of-living increases through 2008, with a current hourly rate of \$20.70.

"It's been interesting to see the different changes that we've gone through," Loya said. "Like anything else, the place — because of the economy — it's had its ups and it's had its downs."

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