

Santa Rosa Press Democrat
Wednesday, June 18th, 2014

Casino Workers May Get Union

by Matt Brown

Larry Smith gave a cheer as he signed his union card Tuesday in a conference room at the Graton Resort and Casino.

Smith, who has worked as a porter in the maintenance department since the casino opened just outside of Rohnert Park in November, said unionizing will result in labor practices that are more equitable.

“We want to speak with one voice,” he said. “A lot of people are scared to take sick days. We don’t want to feel scared.”

About 600 gambling, maintenance and food and beverage workers at the new casino, one of Sonoma County’s largest service employers, are deciding this week whether to join a union.

Representatives from Unite Here, which represents 100,000 workers at gambling sites in the U.S. and Canada, explained the benefits of the union to off-duty employees Tuesday.

“We help to protect their jobs,” said Wei-Ling Huber, president of Unite Here Local 2850 of Oakland. “You want to have transparency, fair rules, security for the long term. When given the choice, people overwhelmingly choose to be represented.”

The organizing drive is the result of a deal struck between the union and the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, which owns the casino. Tribal chairman Greg Sarris, who is pro-labor, made the right to unionize a part of the gaming compact he signed with the state and the management agreement with Las Vegas-based Station Casinos.

“I’m very happy to see that the agreement I made is now being fulfilled,” Sarris said. “Unions are there to ensure my dream of a more equitable society.”

Station Casinos referred questions about the organizing drive to the tribe.

Union reps said that casinos often intimidate employees who try to organize, or discourage them from unionizing. Organizers sometimes have to meet with casino workers in secret, they said.

But Tuesday's drive, which is expected to continue this weekend, was held in the casino's event center, was well advertised and included slideshow presentations on the benefits of unionizing.

"Very often, there is a lot of fear at other casinos," said Sarah Norr, a researcher with Unite Here Local 2850. "We have to meet in parking lots. This is a whole different climate. There are tons of people coming in."

Organizers needed to enroll at least half of the 600 casino employees in order to create a union shop. They planned a separate drive later this year to organize the 400 employees of the casino's restaurants and food court. Those employees work for the restaurateurs, not the casino, and are not covered under the agreement that guarantees the right to unionize.

Additional classes of employees, including managers, card dealers and security are not part of current unionization efforts.

The union appeared well on its way to signing up enough employees. About 200 had signed up by Tuesday afternoon, many sporting red Unite Here T-shirts.

Others trickled into the conference room on their breaks to listen to the presentation.

Many employees said they appreciate the benefits of working at the casino, including above-average wages, health coverage and free meals during breaks.

But some said they were hopeful a union would protect them and get clarity on policies governing sick leave and time off.

"We want to be treated better," said Christina Vega, a member of the cleaning staff.

"We want to better ourselves and keep what we have."

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