

Vegas at Odds

Vegas at Odds: Labor Conflict in a Leisure Economy, 1960-1985. By James P. Kraft, Baltimore, MD, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010, 273 pp., \$55.00/hardback.

Las Vegas resorts employ workers in a number of occupations including chefs, musicians, clerks, parking attendants, security staff, repair workers, bartenders, casino dealers, and housekeepers. Unfortunately, labor relations between workers and management in the industry have been “at odds” in many ways, as James P. Kraft examines in this book that focuses on the years 1960 to 1985.

The first gambling establishments and resorts in Las Vegas were started by entrepreneurs. In the late 1960s, ownership of resorts began changing from entrepreneurs to publicly traded corporations. This change put distance between the workers and owners and created an “impersonal face of management in the new age of corporate control of the Las Vegas tourist business.”

Both custom and law segmented the labor market in Las Vegas before the civil rights laws of the 1960s had an effect. The best jobs were almost always held by white men. Public ordinances barred women from working as bartenders. Dealers and resorts restricted African Americans to working in areas of housekeeping and cleaning. In the history of the fight for equal rights, Kraft includes how public policy, resort owners, and unions reshaped the composition of resort workforces.

Unions were established before the rise of corporate ownership. The Hotel Employees and Restaurant

Employees International Union, known as the “Culinary,” is the largest organization of Las Vegas resort workers. Established in 1938, it includes kitchen workers, housekeepers, bellmen, cocktail waitresses, and other “front-of-the-house” workers. Interestingly, casino dealers are not unionized. According to Kraft, dealers never did organize “because of the adroitness of management in making these concessions, the shortcomings of the union leaders behind the effort, and the indifference or resistance of many dealers to unionization.” The other large union in Las Vegas is the Bartenders and Beverage Dispensers Union. The many smaller unions generally follow the agreements set in the contracts of the two large unions.

In 1956, about a dozen Strip properties formed the Nevada Industrial Council to bargain with the unions. Twelve downtown gambling establishments bargained through the Downtown Casino Association. Later, in 1968, 16 major resorts joined together to transform the Nevada Resort Association (NRA) by making it responsible for negotiating their labor contracts.

Several strikes took place in Las Vegas during the time period Kraft examines. The two largest strikes occurred in 1976 and 1984. Kraft provides an overview of the issues, negotiations, and leaders of both sides.

In 1976, four union contracts expired at the same time and 13,000 workers at 15 major resorts went on strike. Workers from other unions would not cross picket lines, so a dozen resorts had to shut down. One of the main issues was the right of union workers to honor picket lines of other unions, called sympathy

strikes. The governor became involved in the negotiations and compromises were eventually reached. The strike lasted 16 days and caused major financial losses to resorts and to the city as a whole.

In April 1984, more than 20,000 workers from four unions went on strike. The issues included employer contributions to union health and welfare funds, the length of contracts, and sympathy strikes. Several resorts reached agreements quickly. The NRA properties were prepared for the strike and remained open with managers, nonunion employees, and temporary workers covering the limited services still offered. Some picketers harassed the strikebreakers and guests, and there were several clashes between picketers and police with almost 1,000 picketers arrested during the strike. Many workers returned to work after a few weeks because of financial need and the threat of permanent replacement. The Culinary and Bartender unions reached agreements with many but not all of the NRA properties in May. Then, in June 1984, the smaller unions agreed to new contracts. However, the conflict was not completely over until July 1985 when several small resorts filled their positions with nonunion workers. It was the longest and most costly strike ever, and was considered by some to be a major setback for organized labor in Las Vegas.

Kraft uses numerous sources in compiling the labor history of Las Vegas from 1960 to 1985 and does a good job of presenting the views from both sides. Kraft includes some “recollections of employees” whose reflections on their work experiences are interesting and entertaining. In addition, photos of Las Vegas and

workers during this time period help the reader visualize the work atmosphere. Kraft devotes a chapter to workplace incidents to provide an overview of the labor arbitration process. Sometimes the arbitrator ruled in favor of the employee and sometimes in favor of the employer.

Kraft uses these cases to shed light on specific workplace experiences and the perspectives and attitudes of both sides.

This book would appeal to anyone interested in the history of Las Vegas, labor relations, organized labor, or knowing more about the worker

struggles that took place behind the neon lights. □

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