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Tribal Members Take More Jobs At Foxwoods



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By MICHAEL MELIA, Associated Press
9:09 a.m. EST, November 26, 2012

LEDYARD, Conn. — As benefits of tribal membership go, few compare with the six-figure stipends once enjoyed by the **Mashantucket** Pequots, who own and operate the giant **Foxwoods Resort Casino**. Since those payments dried up, more have started taking advantage of another privilege: casino jobs.

The Pequots, a tribe of roughly 900 people in southeastern Connecticut, receive special consideration for employment and promotions under the law. Tribal members who take entry-level jobs at the casino also have been eligible for supplemental pay raising their minimum wage to about \$24 an hour.

A trickle of recent tribal hires has included 15 who took jobs as table-game dealers. While tribal employees represent a tiny fraction of the 8,000-strong workforce at Foxwoods, their status has emerged as a contentious labor issue, with one union pushing in contract talks to protect veteran workers' seniority rights.

The Pequots halted generous revenue-sharing payments to adult members earlier this year as they struggle through a financial crisis brought on largely by a slump in the casino business. The tribe still helps with college tuition payments and offered financial and employment counseling to help members through the new austerity, but jobs are one of the biggest remaining benefits of membership.

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A Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation spokesman declined to comment on how many members are working at Foxwoods.

Lori Potter, a Pequot member and former tribal spokeswoman, said that as of a few years ago, about 120 of the tribe's roughly 500 adult members were working at the casino, ranging from housekeepers to executives. Even if dozens more have been hired, she said they could not be considered a threat to current employees because their numbers are so small. She added that positions are not created for tribal members.

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Towers, everybody is going to know you have some kind of preference. It's the same kind of thing in this scenario," Potter said. "It's not anything that's really over the top."

Tribal law gives preference to qualified Pequots, their spouses and members of other federally recognized tribes for hiring, promotions and shift assignments. Also, job postings are shared with tribal members at least two days before they are circulated publicly.

John Cotter, a deputy regional director for the National Labor Relations Board in Hartford, said it is not often involved in disputes at Foxwoods because the casino has an understanding with the unions to resolve issues internally.

"They claim they are in effect a separate government. It's a very sensitive issue to them based on history and other concerns, so the unions agreed to respect that," Cotter said. "I can understand the unions decided if they were ever going to get a contract, they had to concede on that point."

The 15 tribal members working as new dealers represent a large increase from the past when only a few would pass through, some of them learning the ropes before moving up in the business, said Mary Johnson, president of Local 2121 of the United Auto Workers, which represents more than 2,000 workers at Foxwoods.

Tribal spokesman Bill Satti said members hired at Foxwoods receive the same starting pay rate as other hires. But Johnson said Pequot workers' earnings can be supplemented by a tribal program, and several Foxwoods employees who spoke on condition of anonymity out of concern for their jobs said tribal members are paid no less than \$24 an hour.

A handful of tribal members work in jobs covered by Local 371 of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which represents more than 300 beverage workers at the casino. Arbitration hearings began this month in talks for that union's first contract.

Some union members say they are worried about how tribal workers will fall into rotations if more are hired. One article of the arbitration focuses on whether tribal employees can choose not only what shifts they work, but also which days they are on the schedule, according to two members who spoke on condition of anonymity out of concern for their jobs.

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