

Casino workers protest bill

Industry – Union leaders led a protest at Assemblyman Charles Calderon's office Tuesday, alleging that a bill being championed by the assemblyman would allow expansion of an Inland Empire tribal casino without adequate protections for workers.

About 30 workers and union members carried placards denouncing Calderon and the Morongo Resort and Casino, shouting slogans including „Without Justice or Respect, There is No Peace!“ in Spanish.

Calderon could not be reached for comment.

Assembly Bill 266 would allow tribal officials to triple the size of the Cabazon-based casino. Published reports state that the resort complex already generates between USD 15,000 and USD 20,000 per month for each of the Morongo tribe's 775 adult members.

But officials with Unite Here Local 11, which represents hotel and restaurant workers, say the law will not guarantee that the casino's employees will share in any windfall resulting from the expansion. They said employees are already being paid close to poverty wages and are actively discouraged from unionizing by casino managers.

The casino's Web site lists jobs, not including supervisor or cook positions, as starting between USD 7.50 and USD 10 an hour, or roughly USD 15,600 to USD 20,800 per year. The federal poverty line for a family of four is USD 20,794, said Paulina Gonzalez, a Unite Here spokeswoman.

„What is important to us are labor provisions, which are not addressed at all in this bill,“ said Gonzalez, who added that Calderon has received hundreds of thousands of dollars from tribes for his campaigns for state attorney general and Senate.

This newspaper could not confirm those figures.

But according to the California Secretary of State's Office, Calderon received a total of USD 18,000 from California tribes for his 2006 Assembly run, USD 6,000 of it from the Morongo tribe. That is about 3 percent of the total USD 526,000 he raised in 2006.

„We have an assemblyman who purports to work for the Latino community, most of these workers are Latinos, and here he is taking almost USD 1 million from tribes while not doing anything for Latino workers,“ Gonzalez said.

Officials for Calderon, D-Industry, told protesters the assemblyman was in committee meetings in Sacramento and could not be reached.

One of the protesters, Stella Wilson, said she was hurt on the job while servicing slot machines at the casino, and was later fired for overriding – entering the wrong information into the casino's computers.

„We don't have a voice in anything there,“ she said. „All we are asking for is a living wage, protection on health insurance and a right to choose whether to join a union or not.“