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## Casino Women: Courage in Unexpected Places

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## Casino Women: Courage in Unexpected Places

### Abstract

*[Excerpt]* *Casino Women* is a pioneering look at the female face of corporate gaming. Based on extended interviews with maids, cocktail waitresses, cooks, laundry workers, dealers, pit bosses, and vice presidents, the book describes in compelling detail a world whose enormous profitability is dependent on the labor of women assigned stereotypically female occupations-making beds and serving food on the one hand and providing sexual allure on the other. But behind the neon lies another world, peopled by thousands of remarkable women who assert their humanity in the face of gaming empires' relentless quest for profits.

The casino women profiled here generally fall into two groups. Geoconda Arguello Kline, typical of the first, arrived in the United States in the 1980s fleeing the war in Nicaragua. Finding work as a Las Vegas hotel maid, she overcame her initial fear of organizing and joined with others to build the preeminent grassroots union in the nation-the 60,000-member Culinary Union-becoming in time its president. In Las Vegas, "the hottest union city in America," the collective actions of union activists have won economic and political power for tens of thousands of working Nevadans and their families. The story of these women's transformation and their success in creating a union able to face off against global gaming giants form the centerpiece of this book.

Another group of women, dealers and middle managers among them, did not act. Fearful of losing their jobs, they remained silent, declining to speak out when others were abused, and in the case of middle managers, taking on the corporations' goals as their own. Susan Chandler and Jill B. Jones appraise the cost of their silence and examine the factors that pushed some women into activism and led others to accept the status quo.

*Casino Women* will appeal to all readers interested in women, gambling, and working-class life, and in how ordinary people stand up to corporate actors who appear to hold all the cards.

### Keywords

casinos, women, unions, corporate gaming, management

### Disciplines

Collective Bargaining | Gaming and Casino Operations Management | Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Unions

### Comments

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# **CASINO WOMEN**

Courage in Unexpected Places

**Susan Chandler  
and Jill B. Jones**

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## **“YOU HAVE TO DO IT FOR THE PEOPLE COMING”**

**Our system is one of detachment: to keep silenced people from asking questions, to keep the judged from judging, to keep solitary people from joining together, and the soul from putting together its pieces.**

—Eduardo Galeano, *The Book of Embraces*

We met Geoconda Arguello Kline and Mirna Preciado in their tiny office at Culinary Union headquarters in downtown Las Vegas. The Culinary Union, which represents casino workers throughout Nevada, is at 60,000 members one of the largest union locals in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The aging, low-slung, blue-and-white building with CULINARY painted across it in huge letters has an energy that is palpable. It is as international as the Miami airport, and workers from dozens of countries go in and out the doors on union business.

Geoconda, president of the union since 2005, and Mirna, a staff organizer, came to Las Vegas in the early 1980s. Originally from Nicaragua, Geoconda, her parents, and daughter had settled first in Miami. At home, before the war, they had been moderately well-off, but in 1979 Miami the best job Geoconda could find paid \$5.00 an hour, no benefits. For four years she struggled. “It was very, very difficult,” she remembered, “because you can’t really live on \$5.00 an hour. If your kid gets sick, you have to go to the Jackson Memorial [Public Hospital] and stand in the line because you don’t have the money.” Mirna, on the other hand, had come to Las Vegas straight from Mexico, eager to try life in the United States—“in Mexico, you know how it is,” she said. “You work for a week and you get paid like \$24.”<sup>2</sup> Both women, in a strange coincidence, had brothers with union jobs on the Strip, and it was their brothers who insisted they try Las Vegas.

Neither Geo nor Mirna was sympathetic to unions or even familiar with them when she arrived. Mirna, a divorced mother of two, used to hide from union organizers in the parking lot of the Frontier Casino where she had found work

as a waitress. "I was the last one who signed the card to become union," she said. "I was really scared. Really, really scared. Me by myself and my kids—how am I going to do it? I didn't know nothing about that I have rights." Geoconda, a single mother, too, worked as a maid at Fitzgerald's Casino in downtown Las Vegas. She also resisted the union organizers when they pressed her to become active. "It was hard," she said. "I never worked as a maid before.... My little girl, she was born with a disease. She had five surgeries. I didn't really want to be involved in the beginning, be part of the union. I just bought my house.... It was, 'No, I don't want to be involved because I have my kid sick and I know I can't do much.'" But the organizers kept talking, explaining that the company was threatening to take away the health benefits. "Now that was something that really affect[ed] me," Geoconda said. "Because if I don't have the union, I can't take care of my kids.... I would pick the best specialist for [my daughter], the best places to take her.... And then I was thinking what would happen [if I didn't have union benefits] ... and I start getting involved." A union all of a sudden made sense: "You compare," she said, "I was making almost double what I was making in Miami.... And I saw the difference. I saw completely the difference. I saw what I could offer to my kids, the benefits, and I saw I could save money and buy my first house."

Geoconda spoke of her growing experience as a union member with collective power and her realization that workers, even immigrant workers, have rights: "When I start to organize at Fitzgerald's," she said, "it was an incredible experience for me because I start to really believe in the power. When I organize the coworkers and people are ready to leave, it was like for me this fist. We got the power. The companies can't have everything.... And it was like I really found this is the truth. You never knew your power and the power your coworkers can have together. If we get together, we can move companies." When the strike deadline came, the Fitzgerald workers were ready—but at 4:00 a.m. the company folded. "We signed the contract," Geo said. "Came back to work. After the negotiations we feel great." Geoconda worked at Fitzgerald's for another year and then was hired by the union as an organizer. "And from that time to now," she said, "I'm involved in union fights."

Geo's and Mirna's lives intersected in 1991 on the picket line of the Frontier Casino. Five hundred fifty workers, Mirna included, had walked out of the Frontier in protest against the draconian wage and benefit cuts exacted by owner Margaret Elardi. The longest work stoppage in U.S. history (from September 1991 to January 1998), the Frontier strike solidified the Culinary Union's identity and strength in Las Vegas, and for strikers provided years of education in power and rights, grassroots organizing, national and international solidarity, and "keeping on keeping on" when strikers' spirits flagged and desert temperatures soared. (We shall learn considerably more about the Frontier Strike in chapter 5). In this

strike, where Geoconda was a lead organizer and Mirna a picket captain, the two women developed their friendship, the kind of abiding friendship that comes from long struggle together.

A decade later, Mirna and Geoconda talked about their experience. "I changed totally," Mirna said. "I was happy, because for the first time in many years—you know—I feel strong. I could do something on my own. I'm a woman from Mexico. I don't even speak good English, but I could fight for my rights. That's the beauty of when you learn about what the union is, because the person that I am right now, the woman that I am right now, it's what I learned in the union."

We asked Mirna if she had ever had doubts as months turned into years on the picket line. She replied, "This is hard to believe [for] people who haven't been in a strike—but the longer the strike was going, the more years, the stronger you get as a union member.... Yes, sometimes I cry. Sometimes I argue with Geoconda. 'I can't stand it no more. I wish I could go home. How long is this going to take?' Yes, many times. But I never thought to say, 'I'm going back to work to the Frontier.' Geoconda always used to tell me, 'Mirna, we're going to win. We're going to win. Let's stick together.' We keep fighting. So we won."

Discipline, too, was part of building power. Mirna and Geoconda exchanged memories about how Mirna changed and what Geoconda learned working with her. "I was one of the bad girls probably of the strike," Mirna began. "Geoconda knows. The first years in the strike, I'd say, 'Geoconda, we're going to buy a lemonade.' We used to leave the line once in a while. [But Geoconda] was always there. 'Come on, let's go, Geoconda. You need a break.' 'No, [she would say].' We didn't understand. Later, I didn't leave the line like at the beginning. I knew the responsibility. That's what I mean, the changes—you grow."

Geoconda reflected on her own growth as an organizer and how she came to see beneath the surface of workers' complaints. "It's tough," she said. "The strikers walk four or five hours. Some, they have to go to other jobs to support their families. Some days was great. Some days was not that great. But people worked through the struggles and know they're going to have their victory one day." She continued, "The struggle makes you see a lot of things you not see before in human beings. It's a process. Summer here is pretty hot. That's when they come to us and say, 'it's so hot.' We know that they aren't talking only about the weather. They're talking about, 'I can't take it.' That's what they really wanted to submit to you. And that's why we always say, 'It's not that bad.' We try to [find] something.... You know, really pay attention to how [they] feel that day. 'My family,' [they say], 'got a lot of pressure.' [You talk, and then] they start feeling better. After awhile—it's hot, but we're okay. Keeping going, be another day."

Paolo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* speaks of *conscientization*, the growth in adult learners of an awareness of their place in history.<sup>3</sup> In a final



exchange, Mirna and Geoconda spoke about their own historical consciousness. "That's the thing about the union," Mirna began. "It's the workers who are here [at the union hall]. Just like me. Geoconda used to be a maid. Me, somebody from Mexico who didn't speak English, who didn't know nothing. We're just workers.... We're just workers organizing workers from our experience."

And Geoconda, always eloquent, replied:

What makes a good organizer [is someone who] understands what [the change] is going to be. That's your goal, that change. And you speak it every day when you talk to your committee.<sup>4</sup> You talk to them about rights and [the] future. And when they say it's too difficult, [you say] yes, but somebody did a more difficult thing [to get us] where we are. We're lucky. Some people got killed. Some people got tear gas for where we are right now. And you have to do it not only for you, you have to do it for the people coming. I think if you're an organizer, you understand that part. It's not only you who's doing it. Somebody did it before, and you're doing it for somebody in the future. That's the beauty of being an organizer—when you understand the movement. It's a change for the families, a change for better. It is great. It is great for me.

For the past decade, we have been asking women, Geoconda Kline and Mirna Preciado among them, to talk with us about their lives and experience as Nevada casino workers.<sup>5</sup> Most of these women worked on the lowest rungs of the casino hierarchy as maids, waitresses, laundry workers, janitors, bartenders, and cocktail waitresses. Others—dealers, pit bosses, supervisors, and vice presidents—were higher placed. In long (two- to four-hour), semistructured, confidential interviews, we asked about the women's backgrounds, their families, their experience at work, and their opinions about the casinos' relationships with workers, families, and the community. In addition to these interviews we spoke at length (and nonconfidentially) with Culinary Union activists and staff as well as former and current women casino workers who had publicly taken on Nevada's gaming industry.<sup>6</sup> The individual interviews, supplemented by focus groups of former casino workers, Latino leaders, educators, and health and social service professionals who worked with casino families, set in motion numerous other inquiries. We talked with over seventy key informants—labor leaders, demographers, economists, lawyers, researchers, legislators, advocates, community activists, etc.—and visited research centers, archives, libraries, federal courts, the legislature, union halls, demonstrations, bars, and coffee shops in Las Vegas and Reno, all in an effort to assemble the context of the women's lives and become familiar with the industry that dominates Nevada.

William Blake writes of "see[ing] a world in a grain of sand," and that fairly well captures the challenge (and opportunity) of understanding and appreciating these remarkable women's lives in the context of the history, economy, and forward motion of the state and nation.<sup>7</sup> The entire process, and in particular the women's stories, opened worlds we did not know existed and, it is fair to say, changed our lives.

Las Vegas and Reno, its considerably less glamorous sister 450 miles to the north, are arguably the most gendered cities in the nation, and for years the enormous profitability of the gaming industry there has ridden on the backs of women assigned classic female occupations—making beds and serving food, on the one hand, and providing sexual allure on the other. It is a world that feminists routinely scorn, but to their loss, for in this world women like Geoconda Kline—maid, immigrant, and now president of one of the most powerful union locals in the country—consistently emerge.

The stories of Nevada gaming are legion and peopled almost exclusively by the men, historic and contemporary, who have extracted the state's considerable wealth, Benny Binion, Bugsy Siegel, Howard Hughes, Sheldon Adelson, and Steve Wynn among them. Women, when present in the literature, which is nearly never, serve as objects of heterosexual men's desire, occasionally as molls (think Julia Roberts in *Ocean's Eleven*) and sometimes as birds with broken wings (Sera in *Leaving Las Vegas* as an example). The absence of women in this geography extends to more serious and scholarly works as well—in Marc Cooper's 2001 *The Last Honest Place in America*, a study we like very much, the only woman consulted at length was a lap dancer, herself recently a man.

There is, however, another geography, almost completely invisible, and it constitutes the ground of this book.<sup>8</sup> This alternative world is characterized by a deeply caring culture quite different from the fabulous, profit-driven world of global gaming, and in it women like Geoconda Kline and Mirna Preciado predominate. Its population is of all colors and many nations; native and immigrant; straight, gay, lesbian, and transgendered. It possesses graduate degrees and sixth-grade educations. It is highly skilled, able to turn over thousands of hotel rooms a day, pour \$500 bottles of wine, and sweep millions of dollars in chips off gaming tables. When organized as it is on the Las Vegas Strip, it has incomparable staying power and organizing skills that match any political campaign in sophistication.

*Casino Women* is an inside, women-focused look into the world of corporate gaming, on the one hand, and the alternative culture of the workers who make it run, on the other. It is necessarily a complex study for it explores the gaming industry in two distinct locales (largely unorganized Reno, where workers'

low wages and meager benefits mirror those of hospitality workers generally, and highly organized Las Vegas, where well-compensated union families play a major role in city life) and over a sixty-year sweep of time, during which gaming moved from Mafia domination to global empire. The subjects discussed in *Casino Women* work in a wide range of jobs, some unionized (maids, cooks, janitors, waitresses, and cocktail waitresses)—that is, where there are unions—and others not (dealers, middle management, vice presidents).

In this exploration of places unseen, three themes repeatedly asserted themselves.

*Transformation* was the first. “I changed totally,” Mirna Preciado said, summing up her experience as a Frontier striker and union activist, “and... for the first time in many years I [felt] strong.” We heard this story of transformation again and again from women activists we interviewed. How and why did that sea change occur? How was it, for example, that a young African American woman—Hattie Canty, whom we meet in chapter 4—moved west from Louisiana in a major social migration, found work as a maid in a Mafia-run Las Vegas hotel, and despite being assigned a role at the bottom of the economy, joined with others to create the preeminent grassroots organizing union in the nation and in time became its president? Or that a white, Nevada-born, working-class woman—Edna Harman in chapter 7—a Navy veteran, moved from alcohol, tranquilizers, and dealing cards to a lifelong connection with liberation theology and Maryknoll missionaries that landed her in Bolivia and speaking to rallies of immigrants in Reno? Much divided these activist women—some organized within the casinos, others outside. Some were deeply religious; others had no religion at all. They varied widely in their countries of origin, family composition, race, and class background. What united them was their compassion for others and their willingness to take on commitments larger than their own and their families’ lives.

The union activists were not the only women who experienced this transformation. Unorganized women also stood up to gaming corporations and reported, like Mirna, changing “totally.” Dealer Teresa Price (see chapter 10, “Big Tobacco Rides the Strip”) who like all dealers was forced by virtue of her job on the gaming floor to eat smoke, hour after hour, year after year, was one. “Who made the rule that gambling and smoking go together?” Teresa asked. “And why do dealers have to die?” Teresa’s question in time opened a religiously kept secret world of collusion between Big Gaming and Big Tobacco designed to keep casinos full-smoking environments. Another nonunion woman, bartender Darlene Jespersen—in chapter 6—said “no” to her casino and its requirement that female food and beverage employees wear a heavily made-up, stereotypical “Barbie” face to work. Darlene was terminated and eventually brought suit against the company in a case that made her a *cause célèbre* in law schools across the country.

But the women's narratives unfold a story much larger than individual transformation. The collective actions of union activists like Geoconda and Mirna changed the lives of tens of thousands of working Nevadans significantly for the better. In Las Vegas, "the hottest union city in America,"<sup>9</sup> those changes included winning wages on the Strip that enable a maid to buy a house; "Rolls-Royce" health coverage free to members and their families (to use the *New York Times*' designation<sup>10</sup>); the opportunity to win a better-paying job through free classes at the Culinary Training Academy; the chance to take a leave from work and participate in the Union's powerful grassroots political machine; and most important, dignity. These are enormous contributions that make life for union families quite different from that of hospitality workers generally. Furthermore, these changes were accomplished not by governors, legislators, agency leaders, or university personnel (including faculty), but rather, as Mirna said, "just workers organizing workers." How and why that was possible is a second theme the book explores.

But not all women acted. Many were fearful and remained silent. Why that was—and the consequences of silence—is a third theme that emerged from the women's stories. Casinos have an enormous impact on women workers, and often for the worse. Dealers in particular—in chapters 8 and 9—reported being miserable at work but afraid to speak out—"one word and out you go," they said. All too often their fear was accompanied by self-loathing and despair. Middle managers—in chapter 11—rarely acknowledged despair, but their dreams of what a management job and "crossing over to the other side" might bring were seldom realized.

It was only relatively late in the book's process that we became aware of the contrast between the two groups of women, one at the bottom of the casino hierarchy that stood up against enormous odds, and the other, in more privileged positions, that feared resistance and/or took on corporate goals as their own. It was one of the most fascinating—and ultimately, most illuminating—of the book's findings.

We must begin, however, with the story of corporate gaming and its rule in Nevada.

Las Vegas is the only city you can see from space. Home to international gaming—a trillion-dollar industry with legendary profit-making capabilities and a dominance in the state that extends far beyond casino walls—Las Vegas for the last two decades has grown faster than any other major U.S. city. For the over fifty million people who annually visit Nevada, spending over six times more on gaming than is spent on all other forms of sport and entertainment combined,<sup>11</sup> Las Vegas and the state's 260-plus gaming locations provide a wonderfully illicit

air, a mix, in poker enthusiast Ben Affleck's words, of "glamour and seediness that appeals to something fundamental in the American psyche"—and possibly makes less traumatic the transfer of over \$25 billion annually from gamblers' pockets to gaming's coffers.<sup>12</sup> Separated from the main by neon, a Mafia history, and tens of thousands of acres of desert, Las Vegas and gambling feel like anomalies. In reality they are pure capitalism.

Mario Puzo, author of *The Godfather* and a Las Vegas regular, wrote with enthusiasm in 1976, "Las Vegas is the product of men reputed to have the most cunning criminal minds that America or the world has ever produced. And it is no small tribute to the dazzling alchemy of American democratic capitalism that the whole operation has turned out to be one of the most creditable achievements of our society. Decadent society though it may be."<sup>13</sup> Twenty-five years later, historians Sally Denton and Roger Morris, assessing a vastly changed, now corporate, Las Vegas, seconded Puzo's assessment. "Nevada's gaming industry sits squarely in the mainstream of U.S. power," they wrote. "[Las Vegas is a city in the] unbroken grip of a criminal and then corporate tyranny... a fount of cash, legal and illegal, for criminals, businessmen, and politicians from every continent... [and] a reflection of the near-complete rule of money in American life."<sup>14</sup>

Gaming's size is measured principally by its income, and the numbers are stunning. In 2008, the total annual revenue from gaming and the hotel rooms, food, and beverages associated with it stood at \$25.3 billion; gross gaming revenue alone was \$11.6 billion.<sup>15</sup> Frank "Lefty" Rosenthal, the former casino mogul made famous by Robert DeNiro's portrayal of him in the movie *Casino*, commented on casinos' profit-generating capabilities. "I don't agree with the premise or the concept that it's entertainment," he said.

I know of no industry in our country that can equal the amount of interest and volume, and handle what legalized gambling is doing throughout this country today.... The general public doesn't understand the strength of gambling... it just has such enormous potential, the number is sky high.... It's the only industry that I'm aware of in the world where the player really has virtually no chance, and the only industry in the world where the pre-requisite need not be knowledge or competency; the only pre-requisite is the license.<sup>16</sup>

The arrival of Howard Hughes in the 1960s, along with the passage of the 1967 Corporate Gaming Act, opened gaming to Wall Street and an access to capital that quickly outstripped any resources the mob could muster.<sup>17</sup> With gaming no longer tainted by Mafia rule, banking and investment interest soared, and brokers advised investors that "well-run gaming operations" were "extremely profitable and exhibited an excellent record of economic growth and resilience

even in times of national economic recession.”<sup>18</sup> Evolving business and marketing strategies—“scientific management” in the 1980s and “global distribution systems,” “branding,” and the addition of shopping malls, players clubs, high-tech planning and management support systems in the 1990s—all brought significant financial gains. Total gaming revenues between 1983 and 1993 increased by 183 percent, and net operating income by 554 percent; absolute return on average assets rose 11 percent, return on invested capital 14 percent, and return on stock equity 17 percent.<sup>19</sup> It was a bonanza.

The top gaming corporations steadily became global empires. Studies of economic globalization have most often focused on portable high-tech industries such as electronics and production sites such as Saipan and the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>20</sup> But globalization also drives the fabulously capital-rich tourist and entertainment industry in global destinations such as Las Vegas and Los Angeles, cities who deal in tourists and capital from all over the world and whose workforces epitomize the transmigration of labor.<sup>21</sup> Recently, expansion into Macau, led by billionaires Sheldon Adelson and Steve Wynn, has been especially profitable for global gaming. In 2008 Macau generated \$13.5 billion of gross gaming revenue, nearly double the amount generated by the Las Vegas Strip during the same period.<sup>22</sup>

If Las Vegas is Nevada’s global city, Reno is its peripheral one, and like other peripheral cities, struggles to maintain itself, often seeing state resources sucked away from it and into the orb of Las Vegas’s larger sun. Working conditions in the two cities are vastly different (although casinos in both cities share the same corporate lineage). Largely un-unionized (Reno owners decided in 1975 when multiple contracts simultaneously expired to break the back of organized labor, and they very nearly succeeded), Reno casinos offer minimum wage to start and the stingy benefit packages characteristic of the hospitality sector generally.

In a pattern familiar to neoliberalism and globalization, a few giants have come to dominate the gaming industry, relations among them continually changing as their owners consolidate, merge, buy, and sell. They include the following:

- Harrah’s Entertainment, the world’s largest provider of branded casino entertainment and the most geographically diversified gaming corporation (Harrah’s owns or manages over fifty casinos on four continents);
- Wynn Resorts, owner of high-end casinos in the United States and Macau, headed by Steve Wynn who, more than anyone else, conceived and developed today’s Las Vegas;
- MGM Mirage, owner of seventeen gaming properties in Nevada, Mississippi, and Michigan and dominant on the Las Vegas Strip where it controls half of the city’s hotel rooms and a third of its slot machines; and

- Las Vegas Sands, located in Las Vegas and Macau, but in recent years more and more identified with its highly profitable Asian base.

The coming of global giants in historian Eugene Moehring's words also "enthroned [in Nevada] a powerful elite of casino executives," such as Steve Wynn, whose net worth in 2009 was \$1.5 billion, and Sheldon Adelson, who in the same year was worth \$3.4 billion.<sup>23</sup> Both men easily made Forbes 2009 list of billionaires, even in an economic downturn.<sup>24</sup> These men wield enormous influence not only in the industry but in the state as well. "When Steve Wynn picks up the telephone, most politicians jump," Don Williams, Las Vegas political consultant, said, commenting on the intersection of economic and political power. "He doesn't get everything he wants, but he rarely loses."<sup>25</sup> In an ominous turn, the world at the top increasingly distanced itself from ordinary citizens, and in a trend seen internationally, the gap between rich and poor in Nevada continued to widen, with gaming CEOs earning more before lunch than casino janitors could make in a year.<sup>26</sup>

Complete control is gaming's watchword, both on the casino floor and off. Eye-in-the-sky cameras, a collection of thousands of ceiling-mounted cameras so effective that they can read the serial numbers on a dollar bill, monitor the behavior of players and employees. Outside the casino, control is even stronger. "By [the gaming industry's] contributions to politicians," Sally Denton and Roger Morris write in *The Money and the Power*, "its tax revenue to reliant public treasuries, its hold over collateral enterprise, and not least its millions spent for ceaseless lobbying that leaves nothing to chance, the industry gains and wields unique influence throughout the nation and world. No political act is accomplished without their express approval."<sup>27</sup> In the legislature, gaming's influence is nearly total and over the years has produced tax policies that have created in Nevada an "all-purpose shelter for private wealth."<sup>28</sup> The state has no personal income tax (a policy it shares with only seven other states); no franchise tax; no inheritance or gift tax; and no corporate income tax (forty-seven of fifty states tax corporate income).<sup>29</sup> The boon for corporations, including developers and corporate mining, is monumental.

Nevada's tax on gaming—6.75 percent of gross gaming revenues, by far the lowest in the nation—is also an artifact of the industry's legislative control. Gaming corporations in other states pay taxes of 15 to 35 percent, and in Macau the rate stands at an amazing 39 percent, an amount gaming moguls are evidently willing to pay.<sup>30</sup> Nevada's sacred cow, the gaming tax rate is something few politicians dare challenge. Nevada State Senator Joe Neal in 2001 attempted to raise the top tier of the tax to 10.25 percent, a rate he later reduced to 8.25 percent, but

was unable at either level to convince a single legislator to sign on to the bill. Las Vegas columnist Steve Sibelius labeled it the "silence of the lambs."<sup>31</sup>

Nevada's general fund, in consequence of these policies, is frequently strapped even in boom years and subject to enormous volatility. In the most recent downturn, when for the first time gaming stock, by conventional wisdom recession proof, tumbled, Nevada found its state budget the fifth hardest hit in the nation.<sup>32</sup> The state's infrastructure, education system, health care, social services, and general quality of life languish at the bottom of nearly every register, a "disastrous" case of "public sector poverty and private sector affluence."<sup>33</sup> It prompts a familiar response among Nevadans, "Thank god for Mississippi," which occasionally edges the state out of its place at the bottom.

But of course not everything is controlled, and that is the story of this book. Although Las Vegas is a preeminent global city, it is certainly an unusual one, for within it live 60,000 union members whose ability to fight together for their futures, as the Elardis learned at the Frontier, should not be underestimated. Global corporations may appear to hold all the cards (an impression they are eager for us to have), but that is not the case. Power invariably is laced with weakness. Gaming, for example, is uniquely labor intensive, dependent on an hourly basis upon thousands of workers to turn over rooms, pour drinks, deal cards, and serve meals. That dependency provides a space within which workers can move. And while corporate gaming has brought untold riches to its corporate owners, it has bequeathed them with weaknesses as well. Modern stockholders are notoriously fickle, and a negative quarterly profit report can profoundly affect investment. Extended strikes are anathema in that situation. Nor can casinos, dependent upon the cash of the thousands of visitors who daily pour into them, risk sullyng the Strip's image with picket lines and labor-management conflict.

*Casino Women* is the story of women moving, and sometimes not moving, in the context of enormous corporate power. It begins with an overview of women's work in the back and front of the house in which maids, the most invisible workers in gaming's highly gendered universe, and cocktail waitresses, the most visible, tell their stories.



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Part I

**BACK OF THE HOUSE,  
FRONT OF THE HOUSE**

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## **“THEY’RE TREATING US LIKE DONKEYS, REALLY”**

### Housekeeping and Other Back of the House Work

**You’re nothing, you’re a bus person. You’re just here.**

—Reno casino worker

**What does a casino offer? It doesn’t offer much, does it? Because I don’t think being a dishwasher, you’re going to end up being a supervisor or being one of the top.... They want you as a dishwasher. They’re not going to say, well, this person has been here for many years, let’s give [her] a chance doing this and doing that.**

—Former Reno casino hostess

Alicia Bermudez, a dark-haired, energetic woman in her forties, works in the laundry of a high-end Reno casino. At the time we interviewed her, she had been employed there for ten years. She was making \$9.53 an hour and took home about \$550 every two weeks. Her annual raises, like those of every Reno worker we interviewed, had been miniscule—“18 cents, 15 cents, the most high, 23 cents—and nobody can survive with that sum,” Bermudez said emphatically.<sup>1</sup> “I’m a mother and when I’m going to the grocery store I fill up my purse with coupons. I just see how much money [is] in my budget... pay your energy [bill], pay your telephone bill, and you know, the kind of things we need.... I have a lot of fellow workers, and we really have a struggle with how we’re going to spend our money. We have to count every cent.”

Working in a casino laundry, Bermudez said, is “like you work in a concentration camp.” Workers at her laundry wash, dry, and fold towels, sheets, and uniforms for three casinos. The work is heavy and “fast, fast, fast, like a machine.” Supervisors hang over employees: “Always they’re looking at you. Somebody go to the bathroom [and] spend like five or six minutes, and they’re asking, ‘Are you sick? Did you have some kidney problem?’ or ‘You should go see your doctor and bring us excuse, because we cannot tolerate to see you in the bathroom too many times.’ Yes! We’ve been told that.”

Alicia’s main concern, however, was with fire. The dryers and ironers were packed into a tightly crowded space, and “when something catch here on fire,”

she said, “we’re going to die like roast chicken because we don’t have any way to go through fire. If they have an accident, someone—maybe more than one or five—they’re going to be dead right away.”

Alicia generally was disgusted with management and especially with the famous corporation that had recently acquired her casino. “They’re very tight,” she said, “and very cheap. They don’t care about how you feel. They don’t care about employees like a human being. They think we’re robots.... And the managers and supervisors, most of time [they] walk on your rights. In my department, they prohibit us to talk when we work. Why? I’m just working with my hands. They say, ‘No. Because we lose production.’... They’re treating us like donkeys really. They don’t care if [the employees] are sweating blood. They’re happy with that. I’m very disappointed with them. And I’m very angry.”

Injustice directed at new immigrant workers especially angered Bermudez. “I see my coworkers treated like nothing,” she said, “and they don’t talk back. Like now in my department, they just hire a lot of new Chinese people... and also some from India, from Mexico. The ones that can hardly say in English, ‘yes’ or ‘no.’” She went on, “I want to be treated the way you expect me to treat you. I want everybody can respect us. I’m just lousy employee here, but I’m human, you’re human. You have a heart, you have same thing I have. Same thing I do, you do. I don’t see the difference to treat us like nothing.”

Alicia’s concern for justice drew her to unions, which she had first become aware of in Mexico. Growing up, she lived across the street from the headquarters of a large union and on Saturdays and Sundays she liked to sit on the curb and listen to the organizers. She learned, she said, “how unions protect workers’ rights” and “how we can make more money being union.” Alicia continued, “The [corporations] want to abuse us because we’re the minority. Even in casinos, even in big corporations in Mexico. They really like to make you feel like a little worm and just step on you. It’s what I learned a long time ago. That’s why I keep on fighting now.”

When the Carpenters Union began an organizing drive at her casino in the 1990s, a fellow worker invited Alicia to a union meeting, and remembering the labor organizers in Mexico, she thought this was her opportunity to make a contribution. “Now I have a chance to work and to help me, to help some of my coworkers—to help this town,” she thought. “This town is a bad town. It’s like nobody care about this town. When they have this power here in the hand, they want to manipulate the minority. [That’s] my own thinking. I can be wrong.”

That organizing drive and the next went down to defeat, but two years later when the Culinary Union came to town, many employees joined up. Organizers came from across the United States, and Alicia got “a good lady from California.” The two women organized day and night, talking with employees about the

union. “Every day we work very hard,” Mrs. Bermudez said. “I wasn’t expecting nothing. Just having hope in my heart [that] one day I would have my contract, one day I want to win that union election.”

Culinary Union organizing campaigns in Nevada are won carefully and systematically, one worker at a time, generally through off-hours home visits and lunch-break conversations.<sup>2</sup> “Many nights, many days, I didn’t have dinner,” Alicia remembered. “I just have a cup of coffee and water. Just sit down around the cafeteria, finding this table, finding another table, until my forty minutes was over. And I did that for months, for years.” Eventually, she said, “I enrolled those people in the union, yes. But I was fighting very hard for that. It’s not easy. And to beat a big corporation, wasn’t easy. Was very hard.”

Bermudez carefully learned her rights, and although she was harassed almost every day, she was never fired. Once the company called a meeting to announce the results of an employee survey in which they had asked workers, according to Bermudez, “What we can do to make the customer happy? What we can do to make this job better? and blah, blah, blah.” She described the meeting: “All was fellow workers there, and [the vice president] was giving his nice speech about how they progress, all the money coming in, all the money they’re going to spend here, and the last thing he said—he mention about the survey, you know—‘We’re very happy because every employee was happy to work here.’ I just stand up and I said, ‘Excuse me, sir. You’re wrong! I’m working and I’m not happy. And you know when I’m going to be happy? When my union contract be signed.’”

Taken aback, the vice president exclaimed, “You’re too emotional!”

“No,” Alicia replied. “When I’m talking about money, I’m not emotional. You just talking about your goals, about how much money you have... but you don’t care. You care less about the employees. We can hardly make money to eat and pay our house rent... We need more money. We make just nothing. You would be happy to get raise every year 13 cents or 10 cents? [If] your supervisor hate you?”

Alicia Bermudez’s casino became the second of only two casinos in northern Nevada to go union. “Tears was coming from my eyes that night,” she said. “I was very, very happy. It’s like I have my hand full of gold—that’s how I feel—because my salary is going up. I’m going to make more. I don’t want to spend eighteen years and get ten cent raise every year or three cents.”

Alicia Bermudez talked to her young daughter about everything that was going on with the union. Sometimes her daughter would say, “Why you do that, Mama? Because days you disappear.” Taking her child in her arms, Bermudez replied: “I’m not disappeared. I disappear from the house, but I’m attending something very important. Maybe for you, because I don’t know that you want to go to college. I don’t want you to start like a cook over there making \$5.50 or

\$5.25 or \$6.25 how they pay the cooks now. That's a lousy salary." Alicia continued, "So I told her this is why I fighting. Because I don't know if I can be alive tonight. I can die tomorrow, but at least when I gone I'm going to be very happy wherever I go because I see the people be protected by the union. They can have not the best salary, but they can have something decent at least."

Back of the house workers like Alicia Bermudez—maids, laundry workers, porters, janitors, cooks, dishwashers—constitute the vast majority of casino and hotel workers, with maids alone accounting for between 25 and 30 percent of employees.<sup>3</sup> Nearly always female and, in Nevada, predominantly immigrant and Latina, these women serve as the base of gaming's enormous global empire, working—if they are employed in non-union casinos—long hours at low pay and in jobs characterized by hard labor, high rates of injury, and few if any ladders to advancement. Unseen and unheralded, back of the house workers appear to work without voice in a geography in which they are present, but like ants, silent, as—one imagines their employers thinking—befits their lack of education and inability to contribute anything of consequence to the larger culture.

In our experience, however, back of the house workers are neither silent nor invisible. Repeatedly, we discovered women like Alicia who speak out, form family-like ties with other workers, and defend each other. Critically, they build within the context of daily interactions a culture quite at odds with that of the casino and its drive to maximize profits. They often, like Alicia, possess a keen sense of both power and injustice and a sophisticated understanding of themselves as a group with interests utterly distinct from those of corporate management. Not satisfied with the rank to which they were assigned, back of the house workers often have the improbable notion that they are more than arms that work and that together with their fellow workers they can actually change the world. They possess as well a sense of history and a vision for the future, like the one Alicia shared with her daughter. Somehow they find ways to educate themselves, perhaps sitting on a curb listening to Mexican organizers or absorbing lessons from union activists. In time they may become activists themselves.

This leads us to a central question of this book. How is it that these employees, who are overwhelmingly women, immigrants, and workers of color, by all estimates invisible, and who have fled from poverty or economic and political upheaval in their countries of origin and arrived in Nevada with basic English, little money, and sometimes no papers—how is it that out of their ranks women like Alicia Bermudez arise? How is it that two of the last three presidents of the Culinary Union have come from housekeeping? That they have built one of the strongest unions in the country? That the Culinary Union focuses its organizing efforts on them?

In this chapter back of the house women tell their stories. They are all from Reno, a useful place to begin, for it reflects much more than Las Vegas the realities faced by nonunionized service workers in the United States and around the globe. The women describe their initiation into maid work, the nature of that work, the injuries they suffer, the abuse that daily accompanies their efforts, and then remarkably take us into a world whose hopefulness we did not anticipate encountering.

Who applies for back of the house work in northern Nevada casinos? The conventional wisdom is that the women who seek out these quintessential jobs of globalization are disregarded workers, non-English speakers, simple and easily manipulated—and happy enough for maid work because they qualify for few other positions.

The portrait contains a grain of truth. For nearly all the women, many of whom were the sole reliable source of income in their families, applying to be a casino maid was not a difficult decision; it was a matter of survival. Because of this most women assessed casino work from two sides, and though critical of conditions they encountered, they were well aware that many families’ livelihoods depended on it. “I think casinos—well, they provide, and they do that on a quick basis,” is how one Latino focus group member summed it up. “[You can get a job fast] and no education required. It’s just physical labor. We know what we came to do: we came to work. And that’s what we’re doing.”<sup>4</sup>

“If you’re Latino,” a social worker in a Reno family resource center serving Latino families told us, “you can apply for maid, you can apply for dishwasher, those are the main jobs that you find. You can find [them] quickly. And if you speak some English, you can [be] . . . a change person, but that’s not frequent.” Nearly everyone commented on this universal tracking of Latinas into back of the house work. It was discriminatory, but as a maid from El Salvador said, “One has to take it because we need the job.”

There was an interesting and important turn to this opinion, however. In the view of many Reno housekeepers, tracking Latinas into housekeeping jobs, though discriminatory, said something as well about the value employers placed on their skills and work ethic, a source of power that did not elude the women’s notice. One Salvadoran woman said with feeling, “They know the Latina women they work hard,” and backed up her observation with the story of how she secured her first job. “I was going to watch the river,” she said, “and this guy was in the door [of his casino], and he started speaking to us and he offered me the job. And over there, 100 percent of the people working in the housekeeping department were Hispanic, and he loved them very much. That guy was very nice. He loved Hispanic people.”

Regardless of who was hired, it was the estimate of most that it was Latinas who stayed. One maid laughed, "The Americans sometimes would come a day and leave. The Spanish people stayed longer." It was her opinion that "the Americans" weren't pushed as hard to finish and that often Latinas were left to complete the work: "So we have the case in the casino where if you were Latino you had to clean fifteen rooms. But if you were African American, maybe you can clean thirteen, because you say, maybe, 'oh, I cannot handle it.' And if you were white, the same thing. But Latinos, after they finish, because they're hard-working people, they have to do the work that's been left by the other people."

Many immigrant workers come to Nevada with an education and professional experience, but lacking English and the opportunity to use their degrees in this country, they find themselves cleaning toilets. About this there was a good deal of sadness. Raquel Marquez was an example of such a woman. A teacher, graduate student, and political activist, Mrs. Marquez fled El Salvador in 1980. "I was a member of the Human Rights Commission," she said, "and also I was a member of the teachers and students union. I participated in the Commission of Truth they were having because too many people were disappearing and we have to find out who was doing that. Of course it was the military...and because of that, I got in a controversy with the government." One day a man from the government came to her and said, "If you want to leave, you have twenty-four hours or else." Raquel, whose daughters were eight and nine, was devastated. "I thought that [he was] kidding," she said, "but then I went to talk to some of my friends, and they said, 'you have to leave.' And that was that. My heart, I left behind."<sup>5</sup>

Raquel knew a couple in Reno who was willing to take her and her daughters into their small apartment. "I have to sleep on the floor," she said, tears rolling down her face. She hoped to return to El Salvador, "but," she cried, the memory still fresh twenty years later, "the next year some of my colleagues were killed. Mon-signor Romero got killed so I knew I couldn't go back." After a couple of months, Raquel applied for a maid job in a casino. "It was very traumatic," she said. "Like I told you [my family] we don't have anything fancy—but my father was kind of a landlord.... We had cows, we had chickens. We had land." In contrast, the casino, Raquel said, "well, that [was] horrible.... I had to work for money for food, it's not like I enjoy it. I wouldn't [be] cleaning rooms in my country. I was a teacher."

Reno housekeepers spoke at length about the nature of maid work and what they had learned from their experience on the job. Housekeeping is essentially a collective undertaking, one that provides many opportunities to reach out to each other and share opinions about what is happening. The women rapidly gained confidence in their ability to take on this hard work and among themselves drew conclusions about the relations of power within the casino.

Valerie Miller was an anomaly—a white housekeeper, born and raised in Nevada. When we first met Valerie, she had worked nineteen years as a housekeeper. The work paid poorly and taxed her body, but it had also provided warm and lasting friendships. She especially enjoyed a group of Vietnamese coworkers, who, she said, were “like brothers to me.... I just grew up with those guys. Some people [would] talk to them and [then say], ‘I didn’t understand a word they said!’ I understood them perfectly because I worked with them so long.”<sup>6</sup>

Her closest relationship, though, was with Hannah Gertz. “[In housekeeping] you always work with a partner,” Valerie explained. “So I got Hannah, and we had floors twenty-four to twenty-seven. Those rooms were our responsibility... and her and I did them together. [When] they raised the rooms to fifteen, we’d have thirty rooms we’d do.... It was fun. It was horrible. We’d have to hurry so fast.... Our faces would be all red. But gosh, I’ve worked there so long I feel like the people there are my family.”

Miller was proud that she and Gertz had been assigned the top floor executive suites. “They thought we were the best,” she said, “so they put us together up there.” The two women worked hard to clean the rooms perfectly—“because it’s like your home,” Valerie said. “You want it to look good, too. Well, that’s how I’ve always been anyway. My mom taught us that—do a job good.”

After almost two decades as a housekeeper, Valerie Miller’s knees were failing. They hurt so badly she had applied for and gotten a job supervising other housekeepers. “I have bursitis, and it’s from being on my knees,” she explained. “That’s why I changed to this job—to get off my knees. Sometimes I couldn’t walk, my knees [were] so bad.... [They offered me] light duty, but I never took it. You lose pay and I’m a single parent, so I couldn’t do that.... I tried not to limp and [to] not think about it, but they were [getting] worse and worse.... Gosh, I didn’t want to be crippled—that’s what I was worried about... I’m going to end up in a wheelchair.”

For many years, Valerie Miller, although painfully shy, had stood up for housekeepers. She and Hannah had fought to require the casino to provide workers with anti-hepatitis shots. “We have to clean throw-up sometimes, you know,” she explained. “We do that a lot. And blood. We felt that we should have the hepatitis B shot... because, gosh, it’s so easy to get something.... Hannah and I, we just kept bugging them. We fought for that shot, and they’re going to give them to us now.... Me, I’m a fighter. I like to stand up for what’s right.”

When the Culinary Union began organizing in her casino, a friend who had become an organizer asked Valerie for her support. “Okay,” she responded, “Sure, I’m there.” Eventually, Miller herself became a leader, “because,” she said, “when [the present owners] took over it was terrible.... They were slave drivers. They wanted one person to do several people’s jobs.... Yeah, they’re really cheap. They’re really bad. That’s why we wanted the union.”



It had been a real struggle, she said, getting people to stand up for themselves. “You know, [the workers] are the ones with the power, [but] they’re different races, and they’re so scared. They’re afraid of the boss. They’re afraid of losing their job. Just couldn’t get it through their heads, you know.” Of course, the company did everything possible to fan workers’ fears. “They were very angry,” Valerie said. “They were retaliating against us. They were threatening people that they’re going to get fired if they keep being involved with the union. But, you know, I kept staying involved. I was scared, too, because I didn’t want to lose my job. But, you know, I just did it because I felt that that was what was right. You know, somebody needed to do something about the company. They were something else.”

Valerie was appointed spokesperson for one of the early visits to the bosses. “I was shaking,” she laughed. “I was literally scared to death, but I did it anyway. It was really hard, but it was really worth it.” And it wasn’t only at work where things had improved. “It has made me stronger in my whole life,” she said. “I stood up to my husband.... I took steps to get him out of our lives where I couldn’t before.... It took me a long time to get there, but I finally did it. I’m getting off my knees. I’m doing something for myself.”

Valerie Miller’s narrative, to which we shall return, captures well the nature of maid work—heavy, fast-paced, and injurious. Back of the house work is hard physical labor, and body stories, that is, stories of injured knees, raw hands, sore backs, marked the women’s narratives. Valerie described as well the critical themes that emerged from housekeepers’ description of their work, one of the most important being its collective nature and the close ties that developed among workers. These included friendships like those between Valerie and her Vietnamese “brothers” that defy the conventions of separation so dominant in our society, a kind of anticolonial imperative, as it were, that emerged from daily life on the job. Pride in work well done, often handed down through generations, and the women’s effort to present the casino in the best possible light also appeared frequently in women’s stories, something rarely remarked upon in conventional assessments of maids and their work. And finally, the great contradiction that corporate management—who benefits enormously from the work of these employees, to all appearances exemplary (Valerie was once named Employee of the Month)—seemed entirely willing to enforce work regulations that used up women’s bodies with disastrous effect, not only on the women and the families who love them and depend upon their income, but also on society as a whole. We all must work, but few among us are faced with the reality of ending up in a wheelchair as a result of our labor.

And maid work was getting harder. Maids surveyed in a number of studies report a significant increase in work burden and a higher number of work-related

injuries.<sup>7</sup> The number of rooms maids are assigned to clean (fourteen to eighteen in an eight-hour day) generally has not increased, but "amenities creep" makes each room more difficult to clean. Rooms that in the 1980s had two single beds, now have two queen beds or a double and a queen. Mattresses are stiff, good for guests, but hard on the maid lifting them. Instead of one or two pillows, maids now strip and stuff four to six pillows per bed. Sheets and duvets are notably heavier. Most rooms now have irons, ironing boards, coffee pots, and hairdryers, all requiring extra maid service, heavier carts, and more trips to the linen closets. Despite the extra work, hotels generally have not increased staff; in fact, they often have reduced it, eliminating the teams of porters who help maids with heavy lifting.<sup>8</sup>

The rates of injury are stunning as growing numbers of studies document. An early New Zealand ergonomic study found that twenty "loaded forward flexion movements"—such as lifting a mattress to tuck in the sheets—are required to make a bed, and that the "low lifting" required to make large, close-to-the-floor beds (the current trend) is especially associated with back pain.<sup>9</sup> In a 2002 study conducted in Las Vegas and San Francisco, researchers concluded that workload change over the previous five years had greatly increased maids' odds of pain. The weight and awkwardness of linen carts and the weight and size of bedspreads were all potential sources for ergonomic stress, as were cleaning products that did not work effectively and required repeated scrubbing.<sup>10</sup> Seventy-seven percent of room cleaners in that study experienced work-related bodily pain, but they very often—like Valerie—declined to report it for fear of losing income or their jobs. Rather, they worked with the pain and self-medicated by taking aspirin and personal days off. The study concluded that room cleaners are a high-risk group for painful and disabling work-related muscular skeletal injuries and that maids' rates of occupational injury far exceed national rates for workers in general. There is a pressing need for worksite injury prevention, the study went on, noting that hotels could easily prevent many common ergonomic problems with interventions such as electrical carts or by retrofitting carts with bigger wheels to reduce pushing forces.<sup>11</sup>

Chronic exhaustion, even more than injuries, marked back of the house workers' lives. Both women and focus group members in our study commented repeatedly that mothers with families "stay exhausted all the time." As one worker described it, "After they get out [of work], they clean the house, they make the dinner for the husband and the kids, they take care of the kids, and after that they go into the laundry, they iron the clothes, and you can find this woman is still taking care of the house around 11 p.m. I don't know what time they get to sleep. It's very amazing. These people are so strong. I feel very sorry for them, because...god!"

For this heavy work, Reno housekeepers repeatedly reported that they started at \$6.00 or \$6.50 an hour and that tips were rarely more than \$10.00 a week. Annual pay increases, as Alicia Bermudez experienced, were more an insult than a raise, and ten years of service could easily be measured by less than a \$2.00 or \$3.00 per hour wage increase. These are wages that punish families and punish the communities where they are the norm. To make matters worse, casino hours are notoriously irregular in Reno. During down seasons, such as the cold, snowy months after Christmas when gamblers from California hesitate to travel over the Sierras, women said they saw their hours reduced by ten to twenty hours. A steady job with overtime suddenly becomes a sinkhole.

As hours disappear, so do benefits, if they existed in the first place. Nonunionized casinos, in a trend seen generally in the nation, employ multiple strategies—such as keeping workers part-time and cutting back hours—to ensure that employees do not qualify for benefits. Even when they qualify, health insurance, which in nonunionized Reno properties may cost \$40 a month for an individual and \$150 for a family, is often too costly for many back of the house workers. Diana Saren, a housekeeper, in a comment heard repeatedly, said, “When you’re making \$6.50 an hour and you’ve got a family of five—you’re not getting [insurance]. . . . It’s just too expensive. [You] don’t make enough money to pay rent and electric and food and gas and pay for child care and then have to pay insurance on top of that.”<sup>12</sup>

Reno social workers in a study focus group, several of whom had worked in casinos themselves and all of whom regularly served casino families, spoke with passion about the insecurity casino families face. “They really have trouble making ends meet,” said one, “because they’re never sure what hours they’re going to work or how many hours they’re going to get during a week, so they can’t actually budget and plan.” The social worker assured us, “These are not people who have just started. These are people who’ve been working there a long time.” Another added, “[Workers] can’t get [health] coverage. The hours are forty, and then cut down to seventeen—very, very arbitrary. An employee does not know when they will be cut. [So] the rent doesn’t get paid that month. It sets off a whole chain. If the rent doesn’t get paid, then you can be evicted. The eviction laws in Nevada are five days, and you can be out for no reason. That is pretty scary for a family that is struggling to make it. People have to choose between do I buy food for my family or do I spend \$150 a month getting insurance for my child. It’s absolutely amazing. [I] know families of five or six that live on \$700 a month.”<sup>13</sup>

Especially painful is the fact that back of the house jobs in nonunionized casinos with rare exception go nowhere. A dedicated social worker added that in all of her years of working with casino families, most of them Latino, she had “met only one mother who got to work beyond housekeeping. She worked [as a change

person].... I have not met fathers that have made it beyond busboy or the very, very low jobs in restaurants."

What is the remedy if wages are low, benefits uncertain, annual raises minute, and ladders to better jobs nonexistent? For many workers it is to seek second and third jobs. Ana Ramirez chose that path. Mrs. Ramirez came to Reno from California, fleeing poverty and an abusive husband. She had heard there was plentiful work in Reno and quickly secured a job as a porterette (janitor) at one of city's finest corporate casinos. Ramirez worked every day cleaning bathrooms and banquet rooms from 6:00 p.m. until 2:00 a.m. It was hard work, and recently she had seriously injured her knee when she fell carrying a load of towels up a short flight of stairs. She was generally exhausted when she got off work at 2:00 a.m., but instead of going home, she walked to her second job, cleaning a fast-food restaurant. When she finally returned to her apartment at 10:30 in the morning, she slept for a few hours, but by 2:00 p.m. was up cooking her grandchildren's dinners and helping them with homework. Then it was back to the casino at 6:00 for another night of work. Ana Ramirez had worked two full-time jobs for most of the last eight years.<sup>14</sup>

Working two jobs is a critically important reality and one insufficiently noted in the literature on global labor. We asked maids, cooks, janitors, and kitchen workers in northern Nevada casinos how many people in their departments work more than one job. "Oh, half, at least," "maybe 60 percent," "I think three-quarters," were answers we consistently received.

"Two full-time jobs?" we asked, somewhat in disbelief.

"Yes, most of them," workers replied.

The toll that working two jobs takes on children, on couples trying to maintain a relationship, and on workers' physical and mental health is enormous—as is the toll on the community. Exhaustion, compromised immune systems, marital issues, worry about children, especially teenagers, and depression were all regularly reported. "I could tell you about the physical pain," a cook said, touching knees and shoulders. "But the mental cost is even greater. I love books and used to read a lot. Now I am too tired—and depressed, too. What is there to look forward to?"

What made hard work devastating was the disrespect that accompanied it. Dignity was nearly impossible to come by, as was appreciation for a job well done. "[It's the] the way they treat you," Alicia Bermudez said. "They just think you're a workhorse and they kick your butt and send you out there, and then they don't even give you a thank you. It's not right. You have to treat people how you want to be treated." Another young maid added, "Well, it's like you would do something nice or you're always on the ball, working hard, not even a thank you. I guess money for me is not a lot, but a thank you is a lot, because I know they're seeing my work.... I know I'm being appreciated."<sup>15</sup>