

# Six-year strike longest in U.S.

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Six years after walking off their jobs, 550 striking Frontier hotel-casino workers had become the symbol of the nation's revitalized labor movement.

Last month, at the AFL-CIO's annual convention in Pittsburgh, Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka boasted that none of the workers, most of them members of Culinary Local 226 in Las Vegas, had crossed the picket line during the longest-running strike in the country.

He called the epic plight of the strikers "an inspiration to us all."

"Not a single one has given up, not a one has lost faith," he said.

During the course of the bitter contract dispute, which began Sept. 21, 1991, 17 strikers died and 106 babies were born to mothers who have walked the picket line.

Through it all, the resort's owners, Margaret Elardi and her two sons, Tom and John, spent millions fighting the union every step of the way, often at the expense of refurbishing their aging resort.

While the Elardis channeled their profits to the strike, their neighbors on the Strip built high-rise towers and larger casinos.

Early on, one of the Strip's most prominent casino operators, then-Circus Circus Enterprises Chairman William Bennett, came out in support of the Frontier workers. For six years, Bennett, who now owns the Sahara hotel-casino, provided pickets with three meals a day.

As late as this week, an estimated 235 of the original 550 strikers still were walking the line in shifts manned 24 hours a day.

Over the years, Trumka and other labor bosses, including AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, and such prominent national figures as the Rev. Jesse Jackson, participated in union rallies outside the Frontier.

Both sides accused the other of federal labor violations.

But in May, after years of deliberating, the National Labor Relations Board came down hard on the Frontier by declaring the dispute an unfair labor practices strike.

The designation, which faulted the Frontier for keeping the strike alive, meant that none of the strikers could be replaced permanently.

Months earlier, a federal appeals court in San Francisco ordered the hotel to pay back millions in lost wages and pension benefits owed to the workers.

The Frontier also landed in trouble with state authorities, prompting Sweeney during a trek to Las Vegas earlier this year to call the hotel "one of the biggest corporate criminals" in American history.

A month after the walkout began, the Frontier was the subject of a state investigation into alleged health and safety violations. The hotel later was slapped with an \$80,000 fine.

In October 1992, the state Gaming Control Board filed a complaint against the Frontier for more than \$500,000 in alleged cash-reporting violations. That resulted in a \$100,000 fine.

Nearly two years into the walkout, in April 1993, Gov. Bob Miller appointed an independent fact-finder with the hopes of bringing both sides together.

That same month, the lowest point in the strike for the Culinary Union occurred when California tourists Sean and Gail White were assaulted by pickets as they were leaving the Frontier.

The attack, captured by hotel video cameras, resulted in criminal charges against several strikers. The Whites also filed a civil suit against the union and the hotel.

By March 1994, the governor's fact-finder issued a report concluding that the Frontier and its owners, the Elardi family, were unwilling to settle the strike.

The governor recommended the dispute be submitted to binding arbitration, but the Elardis refused.

Two months later, 85 political, civic and labor leaders signed a letter urging arbitration, but again the Frontier declined to participate.

In July 1996, international Culinary Union President Ed Hanley traveled to Las Vegas to meet directly with Tom Elardi, the Frontier's general manager, in an effort to settle the strike.

But a week of face-to-face talks proved fruitless, forcing Hanley to leave town without an agreement.

That same month, Miller publicly berated the Frontier at an international Culinary Union convention in Chicago.

The governor called the Frontier's unwillingness to end the strike an "embarrassment" to Nevada and its gaming industry.

Last December, several Frontier whistleblowers stepped forward in a series of SUN stories to accuse hotel officials of using a secret surveillance squad to spy and play dirty tricks on the strikers.

The Elardis denied the allegations, but the FBI and the Gaming Control Board launched separate investigations.

In February, the AFL-CIO's executive council passed a resolution formally condemning the Frontier and pledging to conduct a nationwide campaign to publicize the plight of the striking workers.

Last month in Pittsburgh, former Sen. Howard Metzenbaum, D-Ohio, was chosen to head an AFL-CIO committee to investigate the strike.

Former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo and other prominent political leaders agreed to serve on the panel, which planned public hearings in Washington and Las Vegas. But hearings appear unlikely now in the wake of the resort's sale.

"The fact that the Frontier Hotel still holds a casino license raises serious questions about the Nevada regulatory system," Trumka charged when announcing the committee's formation.

"Most of us in this convention already know the Frontier story," he said. "Most of us have walked the picket line in Las Vegas at least once. These national leaders will make it their duty to find the facts and tell the story outside these walls and across the country."

After six hard-fought years, that story may have finally ended.