

# Learning from Las Vegas: Unions and post-industrial urbanisation

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## Abstract

Las Vegas is often portrayed as the apogee of postmodern urbanism, but we argue that you cannot understand Las Vegas without understanding the role of unions in the City's political economy. By focusing on the social relations surrounding workplace, class, and gender we highlight alternative versions of Las Vegas' history. The Culinary Union, a UNITE HERE local, has introduced new institutional forms and played an active role in the local growth coalition. They have set standards around work intensity, training, and job ladders. Highlighting the ability of the union to affect these issues contributes to a counter-narrative about the City which stresses the agency of labour to actively produce Las Vegas' cultural and economic landscapes. The postmodern narrative about Las Vegas hides these important lessons. Learning from Las Vegas can transform issues of signs and symbolism to issues of union organising and institutional structures in the post-industrial economy.

## Keywords

institutional innovation, labour organising, local growth coalitions, place dependence, postmodern, UNITE HERE

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Each city is an archetype rather than a prototype, an exaggerated example from which to derive lessons for the typical.

Venturi (1977)

For decades, the city of Las Vegas has been at the centre of many stories – not only in film and novels, but also in promotional literature produced by local boosters, investors and academics. In many of these narratives, Las Vegas has not only been a setting for scenes of avarice, vice, and greed, but its

urban form has been treated as a main character, in and of itself. In this narrative, Las Vegas is often portrayed as a postmodern fantasy world where what really matters are the City's signs, symbols and facades; its embrace of spectacle; and its ability to constantly reinvent itself. Here, the city is a

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malleable urban space competing for the tourist gaze and the gambling dollar where landscapes, as well as fortunes, are made and unmade overnight.

In this account, Las Vegas is held up as a unique environment and a distinct mode of development. And indeed, the region is different than most other metropolitan areas in the United States. Tourism, gaming and the hospitality industries dominate the region and the service sector makes up an unusually large portion of its economic base. Las Vegas is therefore the quintessential postmodern urban form and post-industrial economic landscape.

But what makes Las Vegas interesting is not its inimitable character, but that it has often been held up as an archetype, a model for emulation, an exaggerated form of the American norm. From the work of Robert Venturi and his associates at Yale, to work by Mark Gottdiener and his colleagues, as well as Sharon Zukin and her students, the image of Las Vegas as an extreme, but normal, American city has run through the academic understandings of the city.

Las Vegas has been a favourite case study for postmodern scholars who, following in the footsteps of Venturi and his colleagues, stress the City's playful juxtaposition of kitsch and simulacra. These accounts stress Las Vegas as a symbol, image, or representation. Although these stories of Las Vegas are appealing, and certainly entertaining, we argue that they are incomplete, they encourage a fundamental misunderstanding of the city, and that, ironically, they erase the city's social history – struggles around class, immigration and ethnicity. This typical postmodern narrative about Las Vegas ignores the political economy of the city – workplace relations and class and ethnic conflict are almost completely absent from this literature. This would be an oversight in studying any city, but it is a particularly important omission when analysing Las Vegas.

Las Vegas is a postmodern landscape. But that landscape, like all landscapes, is a product of human labour (Mitchell, 1996). It is therefore also a city shaped and structured by one of the basic institutions that marked modernism – labour unions. Over the years, Las Vegas has not only become the 'hottest union city in America', it was also the site of one of the longest running labour disputes in modern American history. Las Vegas' labour unions have created a mix of older and newer institutional arrangements that has resulted in higher wages and benefits for many working in the low-end of the service sector (Gray, 2004). Unions have been a major actor helping deliver the quotidian routine of service-sector production in Las Vegas, but crucially, they have also been fundamental in shaping the daily patterns of social reproduction in the lives of its workers.

By organising so successfully, unions have transformed the region, and the power relations that partially constitute it. In 1997, the then AFL-CIO president John Sweeney predicted that 'just as surely as New York set the (labour union) standards for the past 100 years, Las Vegas will be setting them for the next 100 years' (Associated Press, 1997). Thus, Las Vegas is being held up once again as a model for the nation; Las Vegas is a city to learn from.

In the next section, we analyse the existing literature and argue that it offers an incomplete account of the dynamics of the City. We then explore union strategies and successes in Las Vegas. Through interviews with local union officials and secondary data and literature, we explore the extent to which the Las Vegas union movement, particularly the unions organising in the hotels and casinos, have produced a different model of post-industrial labour relations. Finally, we look at the union's role in the local growth coalition and the relationship between place and space in this model of

trade union organising. Ultimately, we argue that there are important lessons to be learned from Las Vegas, if of a very different nature than Venturi and his colleagues originally intended. Other cities and regions struggling with the growth of the new service economy can learn about trade union organising and new institutional forms in a post-industrial context.

### Las Vegas without agency

In many ways Las Vegas has been understood as the archetype of American urbanisation in the last 30–40 years. With the exception of Los Angeles, probably no American city has attracted the kind of attention that Las Vegas has in terms of representing the emerging forms of urbanisation in the postmodern world of signs, multiplicity of meanings and consumption.<sup>1</sup> This has taken numerous cultural forms including film, photos and other visual mediums; novels and popular press; as well as academic scrutiny. While there isn't the space here for a full discussion of all of that literature, a brief set of highlights should suffice.

It was the work of Yale architects Venturi, Brown and Izenor which drove the intellectual understanding of Las Vegas as the crystallisation of new American urbanism, and their call for us to 'learn from Las Vegas' has been heard and echoed many times over. Their work is important therefore, because they see the significance of Las Vegas in both its role as the exemplar American city, and its emphasis on symbolism and representation over social relations, structures and even the built form (a bold statement, indeed, from architects). In so doing, they consciously held up Las Vegas as an archetype – 'an exaggerated example from which to derive lessons for the typical' (Venturi et al., 1977: 18). The 'typical' for them was the competition among neon signs; the juxtaposition of casinos, wedding

chapels, and parking lots, and the ornamentation and monumental quality of the buildings. They state, 'Symbol dominates space ... Because the spatial relationships are made by symbols more than by forms, architecture in this landscape becomes symbol in space rather than form in space ... The sign is more important than the architecture' (Venturi et al., 1977: 13). This leads to their logical conclusion that, 'If you take the signs away there is no place' (Venturi et al., 1977: 21).

Many have followed Venturi and his colleagues both in their fixation on the signs and symbols of Las Vegas and in the later growth of the fantasy worlds of the massive corporate casinos and resorts. George Ritzer states that:

the simulated character of these settings helps to make them magical. Thus Disney and Las Vegas can juxtapose a wide range of fake worlds within a single geographic area. Visiting so many 'real' worlds would require far more expensive and time-consuming around the world journeys. Instead, one can magically visit their simulations in a single locale. (Ritzer, 2000: 190–191)

Likewise, William Fox highlights the intersection between simulacra and reality in the City's use of public finance for new forms of private museums. 'Las Vegas offers us a fake Venice with real paintings by Italian Renaissance masters. The fact that the spectacle is augmented by genuine art-works helps make it all the more believable as a whole' (Fox, 2005: 168). The question, however, is not so much whether Las Vegas is authentic – a question that itself begs for clarity on the all too elusive meaning of 'authentic' (see Zukin, 2009) – but how we understand it and its importance as a city.

Even those writers that have not dwelt upon the issues of signs, symbolism and questions of authenticity have focused almost exclusively on Las Vegas as a city of

consumption and recreation. By consumption we mean both the consumption of signs and symbols and consumption in the more Weberian sense. The city has been almost exclusively presented and understood as a space for adult tourism and gaming. It is the intertwining of the signs and symbols with the physical act of consumption (for instance, of a hotel room) for recreation and amusement that have been projected as Las Vegas' meaning and importance as an urban space.

Las Vegas is also often portrayed as an archetypal example of contemporary American urbanisation. This is particularly true for work from two of the most significant theorists in contemporary urban sociology: Sharon Zukin and Mark Gottdiener. In her work with her graduate students, Zukin moves from the images and practices of Coney Island to those of Las Vegas (Zukin, et al., 1999) in their depiction of urbanisation as a process of consumption. Zukin et al. (1999) state:

Although Coney Island once dominated the urban imaginary of wish fulfilment and fantastic growth, Las Vegas has taken its place. Contemporary cities are no longer built on visible and tangible production but on money changing hands. Urban design no longer delineates separate zones for work and leisure; all become one in the consumption of an image that is the city's primary product. With these discursive practices, Las Vegas may well be called the typical 'capitalist city'. (Zukin et al., 1999: 647–648)

A comparable understanding is reached by Gottdiener and his colleagues, who argue throughout their book on the city that Las Vegas represents not an anomaly but 'several important trends in contemporary American society', albeit in an exaggerated form (Gottdiener et al., 1999: xi). In their rich and detailed work on the city they describe a process of 'normalisation' of Las Vegas. This

normalisation process works both ways, as Las Vegas becomes more of a 'typical' American city (which they argue has three primary components: regional, multi-polar development; domination of real estate capital over the city's economic, and political, development; and very large inequalities and social cleavages), and more and more American cities become like Las Vegas (as 'place marketing' and urban theme-parking become the norm) (see Sorkin, 1992). Likewise, Michael Dear (2000) uses the City as an exemplar of the 'youthful phase' of postmodernism. Rothman shares this perspective and states:

Las Vegas now symbolizes the new America, the latest in American dream capitals. As New York once defined the commercial economy and Chicago, the city of big shoulders, epitomized the industrial city, Las Vegas illustrates one of the pillars of the postindustrial postmodern future. (Rothman, 2002: xxvii)

What these accounts, with a few notable exceptions (Alexander, 2002; Rothman, 2002), lack is an incorporation of labour in the production of the landscape that is being consumed. An urban landscape, like all landscapes, is inherently the product of human labour which produces a form and physical environment that becomes a landscape through the active processes of those consuming it. But many scholars who work on Las Vegas seem to uncritically accept much of the fantasy. Academics' embrace of the City's facade helps to produce and reproduce the narrative of postmodern Las Vegas. These works accept the built form as given, rather than investigating or exploring how it is actively produced through human labour and the social relations and practices that constitute that labour process.

Some of the writing on Las Vegas is striking in how poorly it deals with labour. After discussing the often poor working conditions and pay of those employed in the consumer

services sectors – particularly those in the hospitality industries – Robert Parker states: ‘To a large extent, the financial welfare of these low-wage workers has been heavily dependent on the generosity of tourists who augment service-worker incomes with tips’ (Parker, 1999: 121). This is an astonishing statement, and one which denies the potential agency of workers to have any part in the relations and structures that organise the production process of which they are a central part. But it does worse than just deny the *potential* agency of workers, it completely erases one of the most significant trends in the economics and politics of Las Vegas in the last 25 years: that Las Vegas has become one of the most heavily unionised cities in the United States.

However, a few authors have begun to address this critical gap in the portrayals of Las Vegas. Most notable among these are the aforementioned Rothman (2002) book *Neon Metropolis*, and the collection of essays he edited with Mike Davis, *The Grit Beneath the Glitter* (Rothman and Davis, 2002). Both works powerfully insert labour as an agent in the city. While the urban studies literature has been mostly blind to the story of labour in Las Vegas, that is certainly not true for labour studies researchers, who have produced a growing body of work on the city (Chandler and Jones, 2011; Getman, 2010; Sallaz, 2009). This article should be seen as part of this effort to broaden and deepen the understandings of Las Vegas by highlighting labour’s role. In so doing, we hope to expand the narrative framework which urban studies scholars use to examine the City, and enable a broadening of how the field of urban studies understands the postmodern and post-industrial city.

### Las Vegas as a union city

In this section, we argue that focusing on the social relations around workplace, class,

and gender conflicts highlight alternative versions of Las Vegas’ history. We use the hotel and casino, or ‘gaming’, industry as a case study.<sup>2</sup> UNITE HERE<sup>3</sup> is the parent union of Culinary Workers Local 226, the largest and most powerful union in Las Vegas which represents workers in the City’s hotels, casinos, and mega-resorts. The Culinary Workers Union has been exemplary in its results, tactics and institution building. Steven Greenhouse, the New York Times’ labour correspondent, describes the Culinary Union as ‘unusually farsighted’, and the ‘most successful union local’ in the United States and highlights the union’s rise from 18,000 workers in the late 1980s to nearly 50,000 members two decades later (Greenhouse, 2008). The Union has been successful in organising many typically ill-paid and insecure occupations in the service sector, such as housekeepers, porters, desk clerks, and waiting staff, and thus has become a model for organising in what Cobble calls post-industrial unionism (Cobble, 1991).

That Las Vegas should come to represent a model of a strong ‘union city’ is surprising both because of its conservative state legislature and its economic structure. First, Nevada is a right to work state. Right to work laws forbid union membership as a condition of employment. This allows firms to hire non-union employees at a union workplace. Many US states have passed right to work legislation in order to lessen the strength of unions and to create a ‘pro-business’ environment. Nevada is no exception and the state legislation is backed up by a non-profit group, Nevada Employees for the Right to Work (NERW), which issues periodic legal challenges to the unions in Las Vegas (Fink, 1998).

Secondly, Las Vegas’s economic structure is heavily skewed towards the service industries. Virtually all of its employment is in service industries (Table 1). And more than one in three workers is in leisure services (and

**Table 1.** Employment in the Las Vegas MSA by industrial sector, 2012 (in thousands).

Sector	Las Vegas		United States	
	Employment	Percent	Employment	Percent
Total all non-agricultural industries	805.6	100.00%	134,427.6	100.00%
<b>Goods producing</b>	55.3	6.86%	18,360.3	13.66%
Mining	0.2	0.02%	800.5	0.60%
Construction	35.4	4.39%	5640.9	4.20%
Manufacturing	19.6	2.43%	11,918.9	8.87%
<b>Services producing</b>	750.3	93.14%	116,067.3	86.34%
<b>Trade, transportation and utilities</b>	149.2	18.52%	554.2	0.41%
Wholesale	21.0	2.61%	5672.8	4.22%
Retail	92.7	11.51%	14,875.3	11.07%
Transportation, warehousing and utilities	35.5	4.41%	4414.7	3.28%
<b>Information</b>	9.5	1.18%	2677.6	1.99%
<b>Financial activities</b>	38.1	4.73%	7786.3	5.79%
<b>Professional and business services</b>	98.8	12.26%	17,930.2	13.34%
<b>Education and health services</b>	71.6	8.89%	20,318.7	15.11%
<b>Leisure and hospitality</b>	266.0	33.02%	13,745.8	10.23%
Casino hotels and gaming	163.1	20.25%	265.0	0.20%
<b>Government</b>	93.2	11.57%	21,917.2	16.30%

Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Las Vegas-Paradise, NV Economy at a Glance, 2012.

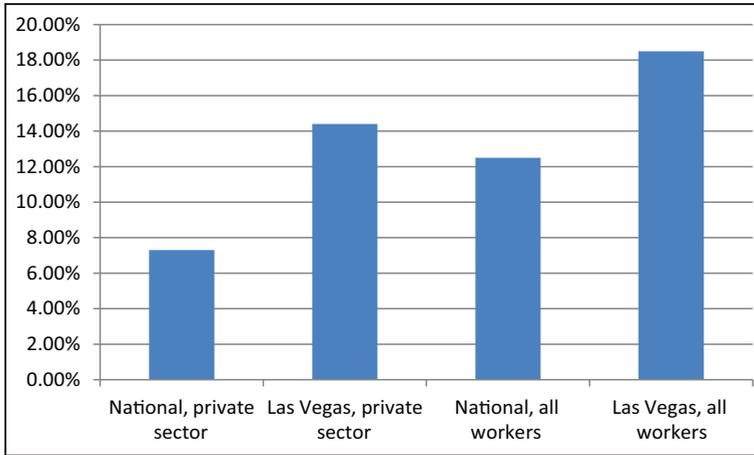
one in five is directly employed in casinos or casino hotels). The city's economy is therefore much more service sector oriented than the national economy, and its concentration is in consumer services, rather than producer services.

Personal and consumer services are sectors with traditionally low unionisation rates since scattered work sites, high turnover, and a largely non-union history make these sectors difficult to organise. For instance, the union coverage rate for 'accommodation and food services' in 2012 was only 2.5% nationwide, and in 'amusement, gambling and recreation industries' it was 5.1% nationwide (Hirsch and Macpherson, 2013). However, despite these structural difficulties, Las Vegas has impressive union density rates, particularly in services. This is the result of three major unionisation efforts in hotels and casinos, hospitals, and construction. In 2012, 14.4% of private sector workers in the Las Vegas MSA were covered by union contracts. This is almost twice the national

average of 7.3% (Hirsch and Macpherson, 2013) (Figure 1), despite the almost complete absence of manufacturing from the MSA, which has historically, and currently, higher union density than (private sector) services.

Looking at the membership figures for the Culinary Union, we can see that the Union's membership peaked in 2006 with over 51,000 members (see Table 2). Despite the loss of membership in the wake of the great recession of 2008, the Union's membership has been remarkably solid and has steadied at around 49,000 in 2013. This is despite the national context which has seen union membership and density rates continue to fall, even though the national labour market began its modest recovery in 2010 (see Greenhouse, 2013), and the fact that the Las Vegas area was particularly hard hit by the housing bubble collapse.

While we cannot prove causality, the Culinary Union's success in generating and maintaining this kind of density must, in part, be explained by the resources it has put



**Figure 1.** Rates of union coverage for the Las Vegas MSA and nationwide, 2012.  
 Source: Hirsch and Macpherson, 2013.

**Table 2.** Culinary Union, local 226 membership 2001–2013.

Year	Membership	Change
2001	42,080	—
2002	45,434	+ .08
2003	42,288	− .07
2004	44,408	+ .06
2005	51,102	+ .15
2006	51,162	+ .001
2007	50,443	− .01
2008	46,227	− .08
2009	45,805	− .009
2010	47,567	+ .04
2011	47,098	− .01
2012	47,472	+ .01
2013	48,997	+ .03

Source: US Department of Labor, LM2 reports.

into organising. The AFL-CIO under John Sweeney, made union-building a priority and called upon the union movement to dedicate a larger portion of their budgets to organising. However, Milkman and Rooks (2003) note that although many unions supported the rhetoric, many were reluctant to shift staffing priorities away from servicing existing members. Milkman and Rooks’

**Table 3.** Culinary Union employees.

	Reporting period March 2011–2012	Percent of total
Total union employees	156 employees	100%
Organising	90	58%
Servicing	20	13%
Researchers	6	4%

Source: US Department of Labor, LM2 reports.

census of unions in California in 2001–2002 highlighted the problem: they found that just 6.2% of union locals employed one or more organisers and only 1.9% employed three or more. Strikingly, a tiny 0.2% of all local unions in California employed more than 25 organisers.

Within this context, it is notable that the Culinary Union in Las Vegas commits roughly 40% of their annual income to external organising. This commitment can be seen in their staffing priorities. Table 3 shows that in 2011, the Culinary Union had 158 employees, 90 of whom were in organising. The Union’s commitment of resources

to organising needs to be understood in comparison to only 20 union employees, mostly grievance specialists, in the more traditional 'servicing' mode. This level of commitment seems necessary to change the fate of unions in the current political climate.

The importance of organising notwithstanding, the Union's success also reflects the growth of the large corporate casinos in Las Vegas. In 1968, the state of Nevada passed a law to allow corporate ownership of casinos. In response to this, from the 1970s to the 1990s, the familial capitalism of the smaller casinos was replaced by the large corporate concerns and the average size of the casinos and hotels increased exponentially. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, a typical Las Vegas hotel or resort employed from 3000 to 5000 employees and some had more than 10,000 (Casino City Times, 2008). Although emblematic of the service economy, in many ways, the scale and scope of these casinos and resorts resemble the older industrial structure of the post-war manufacturing. For example, the work performed by house-keepers, or cleaners, in Las Vegas is carefully analysed by teams of professionals, in a contemporary form of Taylorism, to determine the most efficient ways to clean a room. As D. Taylor, the union's Treasurer,<sup>4</sup> explained, 'in many ways, it's (Las Vegas) like a modern Pittsburgh, but we produce drinks and rooms instead of steel. It's a modern factory' (Mia Gray interview with D. Taylor, 2011). Many of the traditional arguments explaining why service sector unionisation is particularly difficult, such as the fragmentation of the service sector workforce and high rates of turnover, become less important in this environment.

Even more importantly, UNITE HERE's success in organising and helping shape the local labour market in Las Vegas is dependent upon their tactical organising in the upper segments of the market. In an

industry that is highly segmented by price and quality of service, the Culinary Union has targeted their organising efforts on the high-priced 'upscale' hotels and casinos and mid-priced 'full service' properties in urban areas or resorts rather than the lower-priced 'economy' or low-priced 'budget' establishments in the suburbs or road-side locations (Waddoups and Eade, 2002). These hotels and resorts in the two upper market segments compete on quality, or service provided, instead of price and are likely to value the stable and well-trained workforce that a union can help provide.<sup>5</sup> Low turnover in a workforce leads to more firm-specific and industry knowledge, or human capital, which leads to higher productivity and lower recruitment costs. Following this logic, Waddoups and Eade (2002) suggest that collective bargaining might help the up-scale and full-service hotels and resorts produce the type of workforce they need, and thus, unions may encounter less resistance in this part of the market.

As a result of these targeted efforts, the Culinary Union estimates that over 90% of the Class A, luxury hotels and mega-resorts in Las Vegas are now unionised. In fact, only one major mega-resort, the Venetian, is not unionised. Its owner, Sheldon Adelson, is a significant figure in national conservative and Republican party politics, and has resisted unionisation more strongly than the other casino owners. In addition, the local union estimates that nearly 70% of the local casinos (those marketing themselves to the local residents rather than tourists) are organised. This level of union density has given the Culinary Union a large amount of leverage with employers and has allowed them to play an important role in structuring the local labour market within the industry.

Analysing the contemporary success of the Culinary Union allows us to start to construct a very different narrative around the importance of Las Vegas. This alternative

story would have to foreground issues of race and gender. The level of unionisation achieved by the Culinary Union is particularly striking in an industry that is disproportionately comprised of female workers, many of them people of colour, since women, ethnic minorities, and immigrants were traditionally seen as particularly difficult to organise (Wells, 2000). Data from 2012 show that 68% of service workers and 70% of labourers in the industry in Las Vegas are from a minority background (EEOC, 2012).

Las Vegas has a long history of racial discrimination against minority workers and consumers. Sallaz (2009) details the legal and tactical fight of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), starting as early as the 1930s, to stop the Las Vegas casinos discriminating against African American consumers. Likewise, discriminatory employment practices – where African Americans were limited to the lowest-paying, least desirable occupations – were challenged in the 1970s, when the US Department of Justice made an example out of the Las Vegas gambling industry as they issued consent decrees and formal complaints against major corporations. This was reinforced by the large firms' need to obtain gambling licences from the State of Nevada. Sallaz argues that Las Vegas was used to make 'a symbolic statement' that equitable labour market practices were an essential component of good corporate citizenship (Sallaz, 2009: 177). In the politics of race, the nation was again meant to learn from the example of Las Vegas.

As in many other parts of the service sector, an understanding of race in the labour market is closely intertwined with that of gender. Las Vegas' casinos and hotels have a long history of African American and Latino women, in particular, being heavily over-represented in the 'backstage' occupations, particularly as cleaners and in the

kitchens. The former Secretary-Treasurer of the Culinary Union estimates that over 80% of housekeepers in Las Vegas hotels are immigrants or women of colour – mostly Latinas, African Americans, Asians, and newer immigrants from Eastern Europe and Bosnia, and over 40% are Hispanic (Mia Gray interview with D. Taylor, 2011).

Chandler and Jones (2011) focus on the important role played by women in organising the hotels and casinos in Las Vegas. Their interviews with the female housekeeping staff highlight the links between the physical nature of the work, the lack of dignity on the job, and the development of a collective culture of resistance. For example, the women describe injured knees, raw hands, and sore backs incurred while cleaning rooms and standard poor treatment by employers. However, they also explain how, over time, the high levels of camaraderie led to the emergence of an alternative culture between the women as 'resistance was a critical part of the culture'. Chandler and Jones (2011) argue that this was the foundation for collective resistance.

Equally important, Latino and African American women have played an extremely important role in *organising* as well as being organised (Chandler and Jones, 2011). The Culinary Union has long prided itself on its comprehensive organising tactics, which involve the continuous involvement of members, but they also encouraged members – housekeepers, waiting staff and laundry workers – to rise into leadership positions. For example, Hattie Canty, an African American former housekeeper in one of the Strip's hotels, became president of the Culinary Union in 1990. Although the membership of the union was predominantly female, Canty was the first woman to serve as the top officer. Canty is credited with transforming the union by revitalising, organising and persevering through the longest strike in US labour history. Her tenure in

office signalled a new era of labour organisation in Las Vegas, particularly important in overcoming race-oriented divisions in the workplace, and helped reduce racial animosity in the ethnically diverse union (Taylor, 2012). Stressing the tangible benefits of collective action, Canty oversaw a period where membership more than doubled. Likewise, the Union's current Secretary-Treasurer, and vice president of the UNITE HERE international, Geoconda Arguello Kline, was born in Nicaragua and moved to Las Vegas in 1983, where she worked as a room attendant. Like Canty, she is seen as a crucial figure in the formulation of the contemporary union tactics and strategies. Leaders like Canty and Arguello Kline have used the city's dominant narrative of malleability and change and turned it to their own advantage, as a largely female, immigrant population started to exert local political and economic power through the Culinary Union. As Canty stated in a 1996 *New Yorker* article:

My house is paid for. I bought cars while I was a maid, I bought furniture, I bought the things I needed for my family while I was a maid. And the way I did it is through organized labor. (Mosle, 1996)

Furthermore, the Culinary Union itself has been active in efforts to help immigrant workers (Getman, 2010). The Union has hosted and funded a programme to help immigrants become US citizens, providing free help and advice to over 8000 immigrants (union members and nonmembers) since 2001. The programme is a free alternative to expensive immigration lawyers and roughly 'twenty percent of all naturalisations in Nevada come through the Culinary Union program' (Chandler and Jones, 2011: 73). In this way, the Culinary Union has provided a bridge for immigrants to access the resources and politics of the union, higher wages, and citizen rights. Ruth

Milkman (2000) reminds us that unions have historically been an 'avenue of assimilation' for immigrants both by allowing civic participation and by encouraging broader political involvement (see also Ness, 2005; Sterne, 2001). Importantly, in this incorporation of new immigrants, the Culinary Union has been working to undermine the racial and ethnic divisions that can often be produced and reproduced in industries that are segmented by ethnicity and race. In this way, it is part of a broader, conscious, effort in hotel unions to bridge divides between workers and build solidarity between them – in particular between African Americans and Latinos (see Parks and Warren, 2012; Wells, 2000).

The union has also actively challenged discrimination in the casinos and hotels in Las Vegas. The Culinary Union has highlighted and challenged the link between ethnicity and ill-treatment in the workplace. For example, in an on-going dispute over union representation between the Culinary Union and Station Casinos, the union has highlighted Station Casinos' actions as particularly targeting Latino workers. The union's campaign included full page adverts, which read 'Station Casinos Fired Latinos'. After years of anti-union harassment, the union took the company to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) which arbitrates on labour law. In 2011, the NLRB found the company guilty on 87 separate counts of labour law infraction. The Culinary Union stressed that 78% of those violations involved Hispanic workers. The company appealed the ruling, but lost the appeal in the fall of 2012. The union protests continued and more than 150 Culinary Union workers were arrested for acts of civil disobedience in 2011, and in 2012 15 workers, mostly Latinos, staged a seven-day hunger strike to highlight the vulnerability of the workers trying to organise (Culinary Union, 2012). The Culinary Union's ties to

the city's prominent African American and Latino workforces highlights one avenue for race relations and working class agency in the nation's shifting urban landscape.

As this highlights, of course, the hotel and resort owners have resisted the union campaigns. The union's history over the last two decades is one of periodic labour-management disputes – mixed in with extended stretches of labour-capital co-operation and partnership (Getman, 2010). Las Vegas is the site of one of the longest running labour disputes in modern labour history.<sup>6</sup> Workers at the Frontier Hotel-Casino went on strike in 1991 when the Frontier refused to recognise the union. The dispute was in stalemate for many years and was only resolved when the hotel was sold to new owners six and a half years later and the new owners signed the same contract offered by the other resorts. Furthermore, employer resistance is a consistent issue; as the staff director of the UNITE HERE local put it, 'every casino owner thinks they're the ones that are going to stand tough against the union' (Mia Gray interview with T. Pappageorge, 2009).

Despite strong employer resistance, the Culinary Union has embraced comprehensive corporate campaigning with an active membership playing the major role in organising. As part of this, they shifted their efforts from National Labor Relation Board (NLRB) elections to employer neutrality agreements and card checks, which has since become more widely used by American unions. John Wilhelm, reflecting on his time as HERE president, said: 'We pioneered card checks in Las Vegas. I believe the best reading of the history is that card checks became more prevalent in the labour movement because of our extraordinary success in Las Vegas' (Getman, 2010: 101). Other elements of the Culinary Union's comprehensive campaign have focused on exploiting corporate vulnerabilities, which often have

spatial components at many scales. Getman highlights that, like many other union campaigns, the Culinary's local allies (other unions, politicians, progressive groups, and community leaders) helped create moral and physical community support for actions (Getman, 2010), but it is at the national and international levels that their strategy stands out.

One lever that the Culinary Union has used as part of its corporate campaign is the regulatory framework governing casino expansion. In 1957, the Nevada Supreme Court upheld the right of the state to investigate potential proprietors and deny property rights to questionable applicants. Following that, in 1959, a Nevada Gaming Commission was established as 'the ultimate authority on all gaming matters' and charged with issuing licences for gambling (Getman, 2010: 169). As part of its comprehensive corporate campaigns, the Culinary Union has used the regulatory apparatus of the Nevada Gaming Commission to apply pressure on individual corporations by arguing against, or in support of, the extension and/or renewal of gambling licences. Within this institutional arena, they have consistently argued that good labour relations are an integral part of good corporate citizenship. This strategy has been effective on many scales and the Culinary has extended this strategy to offer support conditional on positive labour relations as corporations with a local presence attempt to expand their gambling operations into other jurisdictions in the US and abroad.

The Culinary Union's success in implementing a comprehensive corporate campaign has resulted in density rates in Class A hotels and resorts that are high enough to affect the social welfare of the entire region. If a union can organise a large enough portion of the relevant sector, wages can effectively be taken out of competition. This is particularly important in the service sector

**Table 4.** Union wage premium, 2012.

	Las Vegas hourly wage	National hourly wage	2012 union wage effect
Bartenders	14.5	9.09	37%
Food preparation workers	15.08	9.28	38%
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	15.05	9.41	37%
Baggage porters and bellhops	12.9	9.64	25%
Hotel desk clerk	15.95	9.78	39%
Dining room and cafeteria attendants	12.66	8.89	30%
Janitors and cleaners	14.33	10.73	25%
Restaurant cooks	14.17	10.59	25%
Waiting staff	10.36	8.92	14%
Maintenance repairers, general utility	23.22	16.93	27%

Source: Updated version of Waddoups (2000). Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Survey, 2012.

where non-union jobs often pay low wages and offer few benefits. The 'union wage effect' in the hospitality industry in Las Vegas can be seen in Table 4 where highly unionised occupations, such as housekeepers or desk clerks earn 22% to 28% more, respectively, than their non-union counterparts.<sup>7</sup>

Another way to view the welfare effect of a strong union presence is to compare it to a similar city without that union presence. Waddoups (2000) did this by comparing Las Vegas with Reno, Nevada. Both cities are heavily reliant on the 'gaming' industry and the service sector more generally, but Reno has much lower union density rates. Whereas, between 1989 and 1999, the Las Vegas hospitality industry was 36.9% unionised, Reno's was only 5.8% (Bernhardt, 2000). Waddoups found that median wages in Las Vegas were 24% higher than identical occupations in the same industry in Reno (Waddoups, 2000).

Finally, if union density is high enough, the union wage effect tends to push up wages in the entire industry in the region and not just in union jobs (Belman and Voos, 1993; Freeman and Medoff, 1981). Non-union employers must compete with union employers and thus, offer higher wages in labour markets that are highly

unionised. Rogers (1990) argues that each market has a tipping point where unionised employers are no longer at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the non-union competition, because a large proportion of their competitors are also organised. The general welfare effects of strong unionisation can go far beyond the union's own membership.

Thus, the effects of a strong union presence can be seen in two ways. First, union contracts directly affect wages, benefits, and working conditions. This direct worker outcome is felt by union members, additional workers covered by the contract, and often workers employed by other regional employers, who pay higher wages to match the union premium. This means a strong union can affect pay in the entire industry in the region.

Second, high union density can help structure the conditions of the industry-specific local labour market. A strong union helps construct the market rules for the local labour market and thus contributes to the formal regulation of the industry, as well as creates informal conventions and norms. For example, strong unions are able to negotiate around issues of work intensity, training standards, and job ladders that help to set the standards for the industry.

Highlighting the ability of the union to affect these issues contributes to a counter-narrative about Las Vegas which stresses the agency of labour to actively produce the cultural and economic landscape of Las Vegas. The next section explores the Culinary Union's attempts to structure the Las Vegas labour market by setting the standards for training.

### **Institution-building**

The Culinary Union in Las Vegas has also become a model for experimenting with new institutional forms to set training standards and, at the same time, extend union membership. The lack of formal training is a chronic problem for workers in many low-end service occupations. It promotes segmented labour markets and encourages employers to structure jobs that only require low levels of skill. Yet the fear of labour poaching and the free-rider problem lead employers to continually under-invest in non-firm-specific training. Although the union's relationship with casino employers has often been adversarial, both employers and unions have a vested interest in promoting a well-trained workforce (Perrett et al., 2012).

In response to the problem of chronic under-provision of training, the union has created the Culinary Academy of Las Vegas, a training centre for workers in the industry. In 1993 the union negotiated a multi-employer training fund, one of the first in the service sector, to provide a jointly governed training programme in all of the culinary trades in Las Vegas.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the programme works together with the industry's hiring hall, so those graduates are first in line for new job openings at the hotels and casinos (Bernhardt et al., 2003). The Academy is the largest training facility in Nevada. The programme is funded by employers at \$2 million annually and has trained over 35,000 workers (Mia Gray interview with M. Ford,

Culinary Academy of Las Vegas, 2009). The Academy offers vocational skills training, customer service education, 'employability basics', and English language instruction to several thousand students each year. The Academy's focus is on providing practical experience by running a small restaurant and a catering business and through creating 'real' messes in simulated hotel rooms to train housekeepers. The Chief Operating Officer at the Academy stressed in an interview that 'housekeeping is not low skilled work. You have to clean sixteen rooms in eight hours. You have to make a bed in three minutes ... This is not low skilled work' (Mia Gray interview with M. Ford, Culinary Academy of Las Vegas, 2009). Thus, the joint provision of training gets around many of the problems with free-riding and poaching for employers and, importantly, allows the union to set industry standards around levels of training and definitions of skills. The success of the partnership between the Culinary Union and the local industry in creating and sustaining the Culinary Training Academy reinforces Rogers' arguments that high rates of union density can create incentives for employers to 'cooperate in the maintenance or even extension of unionisation' (Rogers, 1990: 7).

Rogers (1990) also highlights how high rates of union density allows unions to pursue a broader, political, agenda rather than a narrow economic one. In Las Vegas, the Culinary Training Academy combines elements of both community and union organising and is an important part of the union's local community development efforts. This is an example of what Perrett et al. (2012) argue is increasingly fundamental to many unions – broad-based learning which extends the union's influence beyond the workplace and into the community. The Academy's COO explained, 'we have a gigantic outreach programme, particularly to African Americans and Asians. It's a big priority for us and the

Culinary Academy is a big part of that' (Mia Gray interview with M. Ford, Culinary Academy of Las Vegas, 2009). The Academy is located in a majority African American, low-income neighbourhood in Las Vegas to increase accessibility and to encourage low-income workers and the unemployed to participate in the programme. Through the Academy, many unemployed or underemployed local residents have trained for entry level positions in the past five years and have found their way into the industry and often, at the same time, into the union. As part of this effort, in 2001, the training programme was expanded by merging with Nevada Partners, a state-funded programme that prepares people entering the workforce. Although the State funds are separate, the increased total budget allows the Academy to train roughly 1000 additional people directly from the community. This brings together the labour movement with local economic development efforts.

The Academy has done well in the usual indicators of success. Its graduation rates are unusually high. Pam Egan, the Chief Financial Officer of the Culinary Academy, estimates that the programme has a 75% graduation rate, which compares favourably to the national rate of 25% (Mia Gray interview with P. Egan, Culinary Academy of Las Vegas, 2009). The Culinary Union's Secretary-Treasurer attributes this high graduation rate to the strong links between the training and the job. 'We train workers where the jobs exist. The casinos help – the casinos get what they want. But it's also in tune with the needs of the workers. That's why it works' (Mia Gray interview with D. Taylor, 2009).

The Academy is important within the industry as it not only trains newcomers but, perhaps more unusual in the industry, existing workers too. The programme is expanding its services to help existing workers train in order to move into better-paying

positions. The ultimate goal is to allow front-line workers to create a career in the industry by promoting new job ladders (within the industry if not the firm). For example, the Academy allows a kitchen worker to train as a fry cook, or a wine server to train as a sommelier. This opportunity, argues Executive Chef, Sterling Burpee, in an interesting adaptation of the postmodern narrative of Las Vegas, 'allows workers to reinvent themselves through training' (Mia Gray interview with S. Burpee, Culinary Academy of Las Vegas, 2009). In this, the goal is for the Academy to function as a mechanism to create internal labour markets for workers to advance. As such, the training allows the union to partially structure and regulate these occupations by setting skill norms and conventions as well as allows the workers access to the occupations by training them in the same norms and conventions. Crucially, this approach reinforces Lloyd and Mayhew's (2010) point that it is not only the level of education and training that is the key determinant in reducing the size of the low paid workforce, but the role played by pay setting institutions.

### **Las Vegas as growth coalition**

The explicitly spatial organising strategies of HERE raises important questions of place, space and the politics of growth in Las Vegas and in trade union organising in the hospitality and tourism sectors. Despite the history of labour conflict in Las Vegas, over the last 10 to 15 years there has emerged a period of relative worker-management and union/casino cooperation. This co-operative relationship has certainly benefitted from the growth of the city and the 'gaming' industry. Additionally, the union's international helps to promote this relationship. This is particularly true under John Wilhelm, who was the Culinary's chief negotiator, and became general secretary of HERE. Wilhelm rather

famously negotiated the end of the six-year and four-month strike at the Frontier Hotel mentioned above, which had involved five separate unions and was resolved when the local family owners sold the hotel/casino to an outside businessman.

This cooperative relationship between the unions and casino owners has been furthered by the union playing an active role in the local growth coalition, with Wilhelm himself often acting as a spokesperson for the gaming industry. Las Vegas's local government and urban politics are dominated by pro-growth interests, and at the heart of these interests are those of the gaming industry – although its dominance in local politics has certainly been increasingly challenged in recent years by the emergence of real estate developers and, to a lesser extent, the large senior citizen population in the city (see Gottdiener et al., 1999). The depth of the 2007–2009 recession, which hit Las Vegas particularly hard, also prompted a discussion within the state of Nevada on the need to diversify the state's and city's economy (see Brookings Institution, 2011; Nagourney, 2013). In the face of these real and potential threats, the unions have been fighting alongside the casino owners to protect the interests of the gaming industry in the city. For instance, the unions have lobbied extensively at the federal level to get the federal government to finance an expansion of Interstate 15, which connects Las Vegas to Los Angeles, and is a key component of the city's tourist market. The unions also worked unsuccessfully to fight the passage of Proposition 5 in California in 1998, which made it easier for gambling to occur on Indian reservations in that state. The unions stated that their opposition to Prop. 5 was based on the fact that the reservations were not prepared to protect the rights of workers to organise. This claim, however, was belied by the fact that at the same time this lobbying was going on, Wilhelm was playing a

significant role on the National Gambling Impact Study Commission, which called for a moratorium on all further legalisation of gambling. This moratorium would, in effect, codify the oligopoly of those places where gambling is legal, with Las Vegas obviously realising a disproportionate amount of the future oligopoly-based profits.

By playing such an active role in the growth politics of Las Vegas – often to the exclusion of other people and places – the unions are, in effect, reproducing at the local scale the old national scale labour-capital framework which dominated labour relations in the US from World War II to the 1980s. But this cooperative, localised form of the state-capital-labour is also different in that the capital involved is but a localised component of the much larger trans-national corporations that own most of the casinos and, particularly, resorts. Ever since Howard Hughes began buying casinos in the late 1960s, Las Vegas casinos have increasingly gone from being locally-owned, if largely constructed through the pension funds of the Teamsters Union, to being owned by trans-national and multi-national corporations (i.e. MGM and ITT). Despite their global reach, the uniqueness of Las Vegas as a place and space has meant that these corporations have had to involve themselves more in local politics than is often the case in global corporations that are more spatially mobile.

The relative exceptionalism of Las Vegas, and the importance of processes such as 'place marketing' in the city have actually, therefore, both forced the global corporations to be locally involved, and have enabled local union organising to be more successful. As we've already suggested, due to the success of the 'place marketing' of Las Vegas as a city, the threat of mobility of capital is greatly reduced, since, for all intents and purposes, there is not a possibility of leaving Las Vegas. Place marketing, which is normally thought of as a process which

undercuts class politics and replaces it with place-based local politics, is actually a process which, when it is successful, can enable trade union organising to flourish and develop. Certainly this union organising will be in the context of place-based politics. But, as the Las Vegas example demonstrates, it is far from clear that place-based and class-based politics are mutually exclusive.

The success of place marketing in Las Vegas and the production of the image of Las Vegas as a relatively unique space for adult-based recreation and consumption has created a context in which capital is place dependent. Place dependence, as it has been theorised by Cox and his colleagues (Cox, 1995; Cox and Mair, 1988), is a situation in which social relations, usually those associated with the accumulation of capital, are bound to a place and in which there is a lack of spatial substitutability. Las Vegas is certainly such a context. Simply put, the casinos, hotels, and mega-resorts are anchored in place. They cannot flee unionisation by moving their operations elsewhere, if they want to retain their market share. Such locally dependent industries are easier to unionise because the threat of capital mobility is simply not credible; and such a threat can often be debilitating to worker organising (see, for instance, Bronfenbrenner, 1996, 1997). And while Las Vegas is certainly unique, this applies to many other locales with strong place-based attractions. New York, Los Angeles, New Orleans, San Francisco, Boston and many other cities in the United States (and around the world) possess tourist attractions that are unique and place-based. Mobility of the hotels in those metropolitan areas to other places is simply not a viable threat that can be used to undercut trade union organising or public support for that organising. The result is that there is a potential transformation in the relations between global capital and other actors, such as unions, that constitute

places. The space-based power of global capital is therefore severely, and ironically, tempered by the success of place marketing and place dependence.

## Learning from Las Vegas

For decades, Las Vegas has been celebrated for its postmodern landscape – its embrace of facade, symbols, malleability, and fragmentation. But that landscape, like all landscapes, is a product of human labour. Far from representing its antithesis, the organisational and spatial strategies of organised labour in Las Vegas display a deep understanding of the relationship between fragmentation and malleability of the postmodern environment. Crucially, by confronting the postmodern elements of precarious work, fractured corporate structures, and institutional form, organised labour in Las Vegas has been able to utilise the malleability of the industry to reshape the local political economy. Questions of what we should learn from Las Vegas can actually therefore be transformed from issues of consumption and signs and symbolism to issues of trade union organising and institutional structures in the post-industrial economy. Because in one basic way the ‘normalisation’ of Las Vegas is occurring, as the manufacturing sector continues to decline as a component of the American economy, and the service sectors continue to grow. What, therefore, we can learn from Las Vegas is how to successfully organise service sector workers.

The use of new institutional forms, organising strategies, and a long term commitment to organising new workers have all yielded a situation in Las Vegas where union density rates are high and so are workers’ wages. This is even more striking because it has occurred in the service sector, in a conservative ‘right to work’ state, with a disproportionate number of women and people of colour.

The success of UNITE HERE in Las Vegas has been dependent upon not just achieving a union presence, but obtaining a minimum union density in the industry. The high rate of unionisation in the hospitality industry has given the union strength to bargain for institutional innovations, such as the Culinary Academy, in addition to issues of wages, benefits, and workloads. But, replicating their successes in other areas and other industries depends upon reaching a high level of union density. This, effectively, takes wages out of competition and forces employers to compete on other factors, such as amenities and service.

Additionally, the Culinary Union's success shows the importance of controlling the institutions that, formally or informally, set standards or norms within the industry and thus structure the local labour market. The Culinary Academy not only helps determine the supply of trained labour, but also helps set industry norms surrounding labour quality. At the same time, this type of institution can help recruit new members, form links with the community, and can be a part of larger organising strategies.

The success of unions, such as the Culinary Union, in Las Vegas allows workers in the service sector to do very well compared to their peers in other cities in Nevada and nationwide. Even more remarkable, Las Vegas provides a model whereby unskilled and semi-skilled workers, many of them women of colour, in the service sector are able to make a secure middle class income. In this way it is reminiscent of the political economy of the height of the Fordist era, but with different workers who are employed in quintessentially post-industrial work. Thus, it provides a new model of union organising in the post-industrial economy. None of these 'lessons' are visible through the post-modern, consumer-based, narrative surrounding Las Vegas which erase the city's social history. Actively constructing a

counter narrative of the City which stresses the political economy of the city remains an important task. This, ultimately, is the most important set of lessons for us to be learning from Las Vegas.

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### Notes

1. Of course, one could argue that the story of the strength of the labour movement in Los Angeles is also under-discussed relative to other components of the urbanisation process in that city (see Voss and Fantasia, 2004).
2. All information in this section is from interviews with officials at the UNITE HERE local 226, the Culinary Union, and the Culinary Academy in Las Vegas, unless otherwise stated.
3. HERE (Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union) and UNITE (formerly the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees) merged to create UNITE HERE in 2004 (see Getman, 2010).
4. D. Taylor served as Staff Director of the Culinary Union from 1990 to 2002 and Secretary Treasurer from 2002 to 2012. He is now President of the parent union, UNITE HERE. Since his election, he has pledged 'to develop leadership among young people and people of colour, and to expand the success of the union in Las Vegas to hospitality workers elsewhere' (UNITE HERE, 2013). Taylor's new role is seen by many as explicitly spreading the lessons learned from the Las Vegas model.
5. See Freeman and Medoff (1984) for empirical evidence that unionisation lowers turnover.
6. The longest strike in the US was the United Auto Workers strike against Kohler Co. in Sheboygan, WI. It ran from April 1954 to October 1962.
7. Notably, Las Vegas workers who are 'amusement and recreation attendants' make almost exactly the national average for their

occupation. This sector, which includes the casino dealers, has proven much more difficult to unionise, and unionising drives of these workers by the Transportation Workers of America (TWU) have largely proven unsuccessful (Strow, 2001).

8. The Culinary Academy also receives federal, state, and local training grants to supplement their budget and allow training of community members who are not part of the union.

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