

Unions flex muscle in Nev.'s high-stakes Senate race

By Michelle Rindels, AP

A busload of casino housekeepers wearing pinstripe uniforms and Caesars Palace nametags waited at a warehouse early voting site just off the Las Vegas Strip, speaking in Spanish as they clutched pocket-sized brochures listing candidates endorsed by the powerful Culinary Union.

Asked who they chose in Nevada's super-close Senate race, one worker simply said "the Democrat." Another identified her choice as Democrat Catherine Cortez Masto, explaining with an argument progressive groups have relentlessly lobbed against Republican Rep. Joe Heck even after he revoked his endorsement of Donald Trump earlier this month.

"What I know about Joe Heck is he's totally leaning toward Donald Trump," Ana Aguirre, 40, said in Spanish, adding that she was particularly concerned that Heck is open to revisiting the idea of birthright citizenship.

And on Trump? "I've thought about the possibility that he's president, and I feel terror," she said.

Inflamed by Trump's candidacy but with an eye on turning the whole ticket blue, organized labor groups including the heavily immigrant Culinary Union are in the thick of an aggressive get-out-the-vote campaign that's contributing to Democrats' early voting turnout lead in Nevada, and raising alarms for down-ticket Republicans. The union's work so far this cycle included ensuring 34,000 of its members are registered to vote, reassigning 150 of its members to full-time political work and leading a ground operation that's knocked on more than 200,000 doors.

Workers try to sway their co-workers in casino cafeterias and by phone, and they're leaving no room for excuses in physically getting people to the polls. Chartered buses shuttle casino workers to an early voting site during their paid lunch break, and they're handed a boxed lunch for the ride back.

The election comes just as the union engages in a labor dispute with management at Trump's Las Vegas hotel, adding more ammunition to their campaign against him. A majority of workers voted for Culinary Union representation in December, but management has yet to come to the bargaining table to negotiate a contract.

As a result, union officials say, Trump workers make an average of \$3 less an hour than their counterparts at hotels with union contracts.

"I think the workers at his hotel have a really strong message to bring the country and that is – what happens to them in Las Vegas could happen to America if he gets into the White House," said Yvanna Cancela, the group's political director.

Democrats have a 6 percentage point registration advantage in Nevada but have lived and died on motivating low-propensity voters in their base. Danny Thompson of the Nevada AFL-CIO often rallies his volunteers with reminders of the "red wave" in the 2014 midterm election, when lackluster Democratic turnout wiped out a bench of rising star Nevada Democrats and rendered the party largely defenseless against anti-union efforts in the Republican-dominated state Legislature.

"We lost everything," he says. "We got a do-over."

His group has coordinated waves of reinforcements from states like California with less-competitive elections. The LA County Federation of Labor, for example, has its members making phone calls into Nevada to talk about the Senate race and brings busloads of volunteers from Los Angeles for weekends of

canvassing in Las Vegas.

“We see the work that’s happening here being critical to the national conversation, and we also have sisters and brothers in need here who are facing an uphill battle,” said Rusty Hicks, executive secretary treasurer of the union. “While we have our own work, we certainly feel a sense of responsibility to support those who need support.”

While they lack union muscle, Republicans point out that they’ve had boots on the ground far earlier than in years past, including 67 paid Republican National Committee staffers in Nevada as of late October. The organization has tried to mimic Democratic successes with a sophisticated data collection program modeled after President Barack Obama’s campaigns.

Republicans say that even though Democrats have an 8-point turnout lead in absentee ballots and the first six days of early voting, Democrats haven’t run away with the election.

“We always knew that we would go into early voting with a deficit. Republicans vote on Election Day. It’s their conservative mentality,” said Donald Trump’s Nevada State Campaign Director, Charles Munoz. “We feel extremely confident in what we’re seeing and trying out on the ground ... I think we’re going to see that the Democrat lead for turnout taper off.”

But fears of a blue wave that could sink Heck are evident in outside TV spending. Groups linked to the billionaire Koch brothers that pulled off TV to focus on field work returned to the airwaves this week to boost Heck, while the Senate Leadership Fund, linked to Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, planned \$7.5 million in last-minute ad spending in Nevada.

Labor isn’t taking its foot off the gas.

“There is still a difference between people power and money,” said Randi Weingarten, head of the American Federation of Teachers. “They don’t have people power so they try to fight by fear and not by hope. Catherine fights by hope, by opportunity. She exudes opportunity.”