

Security guards at secret Area 51 protest wages, overtime

(12-11-2001) 16:04 PST LAS VEGAS (AP) –

Security guards from the government's secret Area 51 installation staged a public protest in Las Vegas, complaining of low wages and massive overtime in the three months since the terrorist strikes.

"There's been too much overtime since Sept. 11," Union President Vernell Hall said Monday as pickets protested near McCarran International Airport. "Overtime on top of overtime." Hall, leader of the Security Police Association of Nevada, said he could not say where he and more than a dozen other striking security officers work.

He said association members decided to strike after negotiating for three months on a new contract with their employer, Las Vegas-based EG&G Technical Services Inc., on issues including wages and benefits.

Greg Rentchler, security manager for EG&G, told the Las Vegas Review-Journal about 70 guards went on strike early Monday at the company's airport offices and at "remote test locations" where he said they support Nellis Air Force Range operations. He did not elaborate on his reference to "remote locations," but said supervisors manned posts vacated by the striking guards.

Rentchler said Tuesday he was too busy to talk to The Associated Press. EG&G Technical Services Inc. contracts with the federal government to provide services including security for the Department of Defense, Rentchler said.

The U.S. Air Force won't talk about Area 51, but acknowledges that a top-secret test area exists on the dry bed of Groom Lake. The site is about 90 miles north of Las Vegas in the vast Nevada Test and Training Range, formerly the Nellis Air Force Range.

"Some specific activities and operations conducted on the Nellis range, both past and present, remain classified and cannot be discussed," Mike Estrada, a Nellis spokesman, said Tuesday. Stories nevertheless abound about the possibility of experiments on captured UFO spacecraft and alien beings, as well as tests and disposal of high-tech and stealth aircraft.

Even the Las Vegas minor league baseball team, a Triple-A affiliate of Major League Baseball's Los Angeles Dodgers, winks at the secrecy. The team calls itself the 51s.

Monday's picketing guards, who are referred to in Area 51 lore as "camo dudes" for the camouflage they wear, identified their work sites as "nowhere" and "out of town." Some carried

signs outside a nondescript airport gate near where they and other workers board unmarked passenger jets for flights to work.

Bill Hull, a site guard for 17 years, wore a baseball cap featuring an American flag flanked by two alien-face pins. He said he makes \$15.05 per hour but should be making at least a dollar an hour more. He said he hasn't received a pay raise for more than a decade. He said guards work 12-hour shifts, staying four days "out of town," before flying home to Las Vegas for three days off.

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