

Ferguson, Missouri nursing home workers in fourth month of strike

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Workers at the Christian Care Home facility in Ferguson, Missouri are entering their fourth month on strike with their struggle being isolated by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)

At least 65 full-time workers and 25 part-time workers have been on strike since December 1 when after several months of negotiations no agreement on a new contract could be reached. In a letter sent in December to the striking employees the Christian Care Home indicated that they had been permanently replaced.

The attorney representing the workers told the *St Louis Post Dispatch* that though workers cannot be fired under the law, if they are replaced they would lose preference to return to their jobs over subsequently hired employees.

Contract negotiations began in July of 2017, with the SEIU asking for a 75-cent across the board raise, a derisory amount that would still leave workers deep in poverty. However, Christian Care Home offered them a nickel. The median income for a nursing assistant at Christian Care is \$9.65 an hour. The area standard is \$1.60 per hour higher. The median annual nursing assistant salary for a full time worker in the US is \$29,164, which roughly translates to about \$15 per hour.

The SEIU is touting a ruling Wednesday by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) that it found merit in a complaint filed by the union charging management with engaging in unfair labor practices. The union filed the charges in late November citing the owners, Christian Woman's Benevolent Association for "making unilateral changes to staffing, hours and schedules without negotiating these, failing to answer grievances, canceling scheduled bargaining meetings and not being available for bargaining and failing to

provide relevant information in a timely manner thereby restricting workers in the exercise of their rights."

If the nursing home is found to have engaged in unfair labor practices, workers would then have the right to return to their jobs, but would do nothing to advance the workers wage demands. Meanwhile, the SEIU has not lifted a finger to mobilize broader support for the workers struggle.

Indeed, the NLRB ruling has no immediate practical effect on the course of the strike. If no settlement is reached then the NLRB can issue a complaint against Christian Care and a trial will ensue. Meanwhile, the striking employees are struggling to survive a \$50 a day in strike pay.

The Christian Care Home in Ferguson, Missouri is a 90,000 square feet 150-bed home with approximately 100 direct workers that include nursing assistants, dietary care workers, and housekeepers.

"We would work so hard we would be limping out of here. Our day shift was really our evening shift and half of our evening shift was out night shift. It was a hard decision to take this strike, and it has been hard out here," said Brenda Davis, a union steward quoted on the SEIU Facebook page who works as a restorative aide helping with patient therapy.

About 30 residents of the nursing home have been moved to other facilities. New hires lack the training and expertise to care for the elderly. Doris Barge, whose 94-year-old mother lives at the nursing home, stood with the strikers on the picket line. She told the *Dispatch* that the part time hires filling in for the striking workers do not have the training and ability to do the work. She has had to change her mother's diaper and delivery of meals is often delayed sometimes by several hours. "These people (the striking workers)

have worked hard for their rights”, and the disparagement they have had to face from the employers such as saying they have abandoned their patients and responsibility is utterly base and malicious.

In the US, about 600,000 nursing assistants provide personal care, assistance with daily activities, and clinical support for 1.4 million nursing home residents nationwide. These nursing homes are an integral part of the healthcare system and it is projected that by 2050 the population of adults over the age of 65 will double from 47.8 million to 88 million. It is estimated that 59,000 new assistant jobs will be created by 2024.

Nursing assistants outnumber any other class of workers employed in nursing homes by at least three to one. They also spend more time than any other nursing staff assisting the residents, providing a median of 2.4 hours of hands-on care per resident per day. However, their jobs are primarily government-funded via Medicare and Medicaid.

Because of their demanding physical work helping lift or carry residents they are 3.5 times more likely to sustain an on the job injury compared to a typical US worker. Yet wages have not kept up with inflation over the past 10 years. In 2005 the inflation adjusted hourly wage was \$12.22. In 2015 it declined to \$11.87 per hour. Because most nursing assistants in the industry work part time or for part of the year they earn closer to \$19,000 per year. Seventeen percent of nursing assistants live below the federal poverty line and 40 percent rely on some form of public assistance. This leads to high turnover rates and high numbers of vacancies for nursing assistants.

The Christian Care Home received 18 health citations from its most recent standard inspection, almost three times the state average.

According to Kaiser Family Foundation, people that need long-term services and support (LTSS) are the elderly and non-elderly with intellectual or physical disabilities, behavioral health issues such as dementia, spinal cord or brain trauma or disabling chronic conditions.

As they note, there are few affordable options in private insurance market and limited coverage under Medicare while those with insufficient resources rely on Medicaid. Total national spending on LTSS in 2013 was \$310 billion with Medicaid covering 51 percent of total expenditures. The rest came from other public and

out-of-pocket spending while private insurance accounted for 8 percent.

Only few individuals can afford to pay for long-term services and support as most have fixed incomes with limited personal savings and assets. In their report they state, “In 2013, half of all Medicare beneficiaries, including seniors and younger adults with disabilities, had incomes below \$23,500.” Simultaneously, nursing home operators are facing lower reimbursements, higher costs, and lower occupancy. Investors in these sectors are expecting dividends in return, making conditions untenable for everyone.



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