Strike at Ferguson, Missouri nursing home ends after 104 days

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The strike that commenced on December 1 involving 65 full time and 25 part-time employees of the Christian Care Nursing Home in Ferguson Missouri ended last week. The workers approved a new labor contract with the nursing home that grants a derisory 20-cent per hour rise in wages.

Contract negotiations that began in July 2017 with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) asking for a meager 75 cent raise stalled when no agreement could be reached. The nursing home workers including nursing assistants, housekeepers, and dietary care workers, went on strike citing unfair labor practices and violations that including changes to scheduling and work hours without prior notification, failure to give notice about layoffs, and other issues involving vacation time.

In February the St Louis regional office of the National Labor Relations Board said it found merit to multiple counts of unfair labor practices. Two weeks after the "favorable" ruling, on March 13, the management of the nursing home agreed to the new contract, which quickly won ratification under conditions where workers had been left isolated on the picket line for months by the SEIU.

The SEIU, the local media, and Democratic State Representatives Cora Faith Walker and Bruce Franks Jr. all rushed to hail the agreement as a victory for the super exploited workers.

The terms of the agreement call for Christian Care to pay for increases in health insurance rates for 2018, but only half that increase in 2019 and 2020. There will also be payouts for the unfair labor practice and grievance settlements. The employees will return to work on March 19 keeping their previous positions and seniority. There will also be a 20-cent per hour increase in wages effective March 1, 2019.

Several Democratic state legislators are promoting a ballot measure that would raise Missouri's minimum wage by 75 cents to $8.60 followed by 85 cents per hour increases each year until 2023 that would ultimately peg the state minimum wage at $12 per hour. Should this measure pass, under terms of their new contract workers at Christian Care would see a rise of 75 cents in 2019 instead of 20 cents followed by an additional 85 cent raise in 2020. The median wage of Christian Care workers is currently $9.65 per hour, barely above the current minimum.

A number of supportive statements came from readers of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, who posted their comments on the paper's Facebook page when news of the end of the strike was reported.

One wrote, "Nursing home owners have had their hey-day. With wages going up and employers like Amazon coming in people no longer are willing to change diapers and put up with the zero benefits of working in nursing homes for 8-10$ an hour. These workers need to be paid what they are worth!!!!! Nursing homes everywhere are experiencing a shortage!

"Good for them. Though 20 cents an hour isn't much. Especially when raising insurance costs will devour that. Nursing homes treat their employees like crap. Low pay, long hours, mandatory overtime, refused vacation, repercussions for calling off sick, being talked to and treated like they're scum, a patient load that [is] way too high... CNAs are the backbone of every nursing home, normally doing the job of several people. We trust them with loved ones lives but expect them to do it low pay, bad benefits if any and a bad environment."

"I wonder how much the union is going to jack up their extortion.....er... union dues. Will never trust a union again."

In 2007 healthcare costs for the average American, according to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), was $7,700. It rose to $9,565 in 2012. In 2016 it surpassed $10,000 and expected to rise to $14,944 in 2023.

In 2016, premiums for individual coverage averaged $321 per month while premiums for family plans averaged $833 per month. According to eHealthinsurance the average deductible for individual plans was $4,358, and the average deductible for family plans was $7,983. That means a family would spend just under $18,000 if they met their deductible. Additionally, many plans require co-insurance which requires paying out-of-pocket some percentage of all costs even after meeting your deductible until a set maximum is reached.

In a brief issued by The Pew Charitable Trusts on Household Expenditures and Income, low-income families, those in the lower third, spent 40 percent of their income on housing while renters spent nearly half of their income on housing in 2014. Between housing, food, transportation, and healthcare, those in the bottom half have little to no income for any discretionary spending. If a typical home at the bottom of the income bracket in 2004 had $1,500 of annual income left after expenses were paid, by 2014 they were in debt by $2,300.

Though household expenditures continue to climb the median income has contracted. By 2014 median income had fallen by 13 percent from 2004 levels while expenditures had risen nearly 14 percent in the same period. The core expenditures, food, transportation, and housing have started rising again since 2014.

It seems likely the decision by management and the SEIU to end the Christian Care strike was a least in part motivated mediated by concern over the rising militancy among US workers as evidenced by the struggle of teachers in West Virginia and other states.

From the start, the Christian Care Nursing Home strike was isolated by the SEIU from broader sections of the working class. Indeed, the calling of isolated strikes or limited one-day or two days actions is part of a systematic strategy to demoralize workers for the purpose of better imposing management dictates.

This was particularly evident in Southern California last year, where the SEIU isolated a series of contract struggles. In September it called off a potentially powerful strike by San Diego County workers in the midst of a strike by Riverside County workers, settling instead for a paltry wage increase. The deal accepted by the SEIU was virtually identical to one the county offered when negotiations began months earlier.