

Care Ambulance drivers protest low wages in Southern California health care workers protest

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On Monday, Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) staged a protest in Los Angeles and Orange counties to demand better wages and working conditions. The workers are members of Local 370 of the International Association of EMTs and Paramedics (IAEP), a division of the National Association of Government Employees.

The workers are employed by Care Ambulance Service, acquired in 2011 by the Falck group, a Denmark-based international EMT multinational and the largest ambulance and EMT service provider in the world. Care's purchase was part of a wave of purchases of ambulance services by hedge funds all over the world; Falck was acquired by Baltica Insurance Company in 1988.

Falck operates in 29 countries across the world, in Europe and in the Americas. Its profits shot up by 12.5 percent in 2021, during the deadliest period so far of the coronavirus pandemic. The company "now delivers a positive return to its owners," in the words of its financial report.

Three-quarters of Falck/Care Ambulance drivers in Orange and LA County get paid \$15 per hour, which became the state minimum wage for California on January 1. A news article on Monday's protest rallies in the *Los Angeles Times* quoted IAEP Local 370 President Ryan Walters, who described EMT workers at Care Ambulances as very young, often under the age of 21. "Some people leave before they can even drink." He added, "The company wants to hire people and use them up as fast as possible."

Speaking at the Los Angeles rally across from City Hall, IAEP leader Phil Petit said: "Fifteen dollars, the minimum wage [in California], is not enough money

for the work that you guys do. ... [I]t is unacceptable, and it ends now." Local 370 has been in negotiations with Falck for more than a year.

But Petit was not able to explain why wages have remained so low for EMTs and ambulance workers and did not present any strategy to fight to raise workers' wages and improve working conditions, other than denouncing the company for refusing to bargain.

According to the IAEP press release announcing Monday's protests, since negotiations began over 25 percent of Care Ambulance drivers have quit or retired because of low pay and management harassment.

Despite non-response and slow-response fines from Orange and LA County authorities, Care, presumably under orders from Falck, continues to stonewall health care workers. A spokesperson for the ambulance service denied that its workers are resigning and retiring at a faster rate than at other ambulance services in Southern California. As of January, after months of negotiations, Care has yet to make a wage offer.

Along with its high cost of living, California ranks 23rd out of 50 states nationwide for low EMT wages. So far, the IAEP negotiators are demanding that Care's wages be raised to the level of drivers in Compton, California (\$18 per hour), which it frames as a way of protecting the companies by encouraging employee retention.

"It is without reservation that we, the representatives of IAEP Local 12-370, agree that without immediate action, this unit [Care] will undoubtedly fail to serve California," said a January 24th statement from the local. In other words, rather than mobilizing a struggle by EMTs for higher wages, the IAEP poses as a friendly adviser to Falck, Care and the state

government.



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