

**SEIU fights for reinstatement****Nursing home worker fired after joining union campaign**

By **DON McINTOSH**  
Associate Editor

Elizabeth Lehr was well liked by her managers at Laurelhurst Village senior care community. Six months after her summer 2007 hire as a receptionist, Lehr got an "employee of the month" plaque. She was recognized for her "kind manner" and praised for answering the phone "with a smile in her voice." Lehr, 23, says she loved her job, her co-workers, and the residents she came to know, some of whom would spend all day with her in the lobby of the Southeast Portland assisted living facility.

On April 2, she was fired — 10 days after she got involved in a union campaign.

That's all too common in the United States, where every year thousands of workers are fired, illegally, for trying to get union representation in the workplace.

Lehr first learned there was a union campaign when she overheard two office managers discussing it. Workers were coming in when they weren't scheduled, the managers said, and talking to co-workers in the break room. Later, a manager giving Lehr a ride home remarked casually that dietary



**Receptionist Elizabeth Lehr, one-time "Employee of the Month," was fired 10 days after joining a campaign to unionize Laurelhurst Village nursing home.**

aide Henry Olivera was involved with the union campaign, and said he'd better watch out.

Lehr decided to ask Olivera about

the union.

Service Employees International Union Local 503 — a 45,000-member statewide union of janitors, health care workers, and public employees — represents workers at 26 Oregon nursing homes. Its staff organizers had begun meeting with workers at Laurelhurst Village. Laurelhurst Village, 3060 SE Stark, Portland, used to be Catholic-owned Mt. St. Joseph, but was sold in 2004 to a for-profit company, Portland-based Farmington Centers. Farmington owns 16 nursing homes in three states, including Farmington Square in Beaverton, Gresham, and Tualatin, and other locations.

Olivera, one of the earliest Laurelhurst Village workers to get involved in the union campaign, helped arrange a visit at her house from a union organizer to explain the union campaign. Lehr says unionizing sounded reasonable to her.

"I felt it was the best avenue for us to have a living wage and benefits that we deserve, and have a voice to advocate for residents," Lehr told the Northwest Labor Press.

Lehr agreed to join the organizing committee, and started talking to co-workers. A week later, her first public

act in support of the union tipped off management to her sympathies. Lehr and four other workers made an unannounced visit to Laurelhurst Village CEO Hannah Austin to protest the unexplained suspension of a pro-union co-worker.

Two days after that, April 1, Lehr came in on a day off to distribute fliers in the break room during shift change, taking care to hand them only to workers who were off the clock. In walked the site administrator, the second-in-command manager at Laurelhurst Village. Managers have their own break area, Lehr says, and until the union campaign were seldom seen in the break room used by workers. The administrator, maybe to justify her presence there, made a big show of looking for coffee, Lehr said, not knowing that the coffee maker there had been broken for a long time. Lehr figured the administrator was there to conduct surveillance. But Lehr wasn't intimidated. She continued distributing fliers to workers until another manager told her to leave. Lehr argued that she had a right to be there, since the company had allowed off-shift workers on the premises in the past.

In any case, shift change was over.

Lehr left the break room, and sat on a couch in the lobby of the skilled nursing building, waiting for a friend to get off work. But again the manager appeared, and ordered her to leave.

"What will happen to me if I stay?" Lehr remembers asking. Lehr found out: The police would be called. A pair of officers arrived (one of them a police union rep, Lehr says). Lehr left rather than be arrested for trespass.

When Lehr returned to work, she was called into a meeting with her supervisor, a human resources manager, and the CEO. She was called insubordinate for having lingered in the lobby; told she'd been "physically aggressive" during the employee delegation to the CEO; and accused of copying paychecks to get names of employees the union could talk to. She denied the accusations, but was fired anyway, escorted off the property, and banned from the facility.

For Lehr, it was a heavy blow. Laurelhurst Village contested her unemployment claim. She's jobless in a tough job market, and worries that being fired for unionizing will be a stain on her employment record, something hard to explain on future job applica-

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