

Pro-union receptionist fired at nursing home accepts cash settlement — then gets a tattoo

A Southeast Portland nursing home settled a series of federal unfair labor practice charges July 14, and agreed to back pay for Elizabeth Lehr, a receptionist who was fired after she supported a union campaign.

Laurelhurst Village, a subsidiary of the Portland-based Farmington Centers chain, did not admit it had broken federal labor law in opposing a campaign by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503. But the nursing home agreed to post notices in four languages in employee break rooms saying it will not do anything that interferes with employees' right to join a union.

In the notices, Laurelhurst Village promises not to interrogate employees about union activity or restrain, coerce, discipline or discharge workers for engaging in union activities. And it clarifies that employees have the right to come in during off hours to promote unionization. The notices, in English, Spanish, Creole, and Tagalog, were posted July 28 and will remain up for two months.

The two sides agreed to settle the charges just before a federal administrative law judge had been scheduled to hear the case. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) earlier investigated and found Laurelhurst Village had broken labor law in 11 separate instances, including its firing of Lehr. Lehr, a 23-year-old part-timer who at one time was employee of the month, was fired April 2 — 10 days after publicly supporting a



ELIZABETH LEHR

campaign to join Local 503. Local 503 had been seeking a federal court order reinstating her.

In the settlement, the company agreed to \$2,646 in back pay for Lehr, plus an undisclosed amount in exchange for her waiving her right to reinstatement. The dollar amount was confidential under the terms of the settlement, but Lehr described it as a meaningful amount, and said she felt vindicated by it. To celebrate, she had

the phrase "Union Made" tattooed on her rib cage. Lehr also won her unemployment claim, which was earlier opposed by Laurelhurst Village attorneys.

Though Lehr won't be returning to Laurelhurst Village, she said she remains committed to the union campaign.

Local 503 organizer Guillermo Galarreta said the campaign is reassessing its strategy. The union intends to keep a spotlight on abuses at Laurelhurst Village, but as of late July, the campaign remained at a standstill.

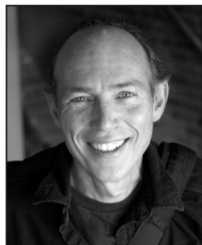
The union campaign was making swift progress in March and April, before management's crackdown changed the dynamic in the workplace. But the crackdown made workers fearful of taking action.

"A lot of the damage has been done by the employer," Galarreta said. "We're trying to rebuild the organizing committee."

The NLRB settlement might be expected to embolden workers, demonstrating that their activities in support of unionizing are protected by the law. But Galarreta suggested Laurelhurst Village was undermining the effect of that by fostering misinformation — including the story that Lehr's settlement ran to six figures, and that paying for it means Laurelhurst Village won't have money to pay for other workers' health insurance. Galarreta said both of those things were untrue, and said the union is considering filing a follow-up unfair labor practice charge.



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