

Local Government/Nonprofit

Children's Farm Home in Corvallis organizes; Workers build a union for better conditions and client care

Wanting to improve their job security, their working conditions, and secure basic worker rights, employees of the Children's Farm Home near Corvallis voted 38-34 for Union representation by OPEU/SEIU Local 503 in a National Labor Relations Board-supervised election held on July 20.

"Now we have proof that Farm Home workers support each other," said health services assistant **Sheila Winsjansen**. "We are determined, through our Union, to continue improving the quality of care we deliver."

"The Farm Home is a fire-at-will employer," said organizing committee member **Mark Wickenheiser**. "We wanted more stability in our jobs."

KEY MOMENT - One of the key moments in the campaign was when the workers' solidarity saved the job of a worker who management was attempting to fire.

Residential treatment specialist **Damon James** had been harassed by management for some time when workers intercepted a memorandum that recommended he be fired because, according to the memo, he was not safe to be around children. James had worked at the Farm Home for seven years.

That's when the workers at the Farm Home started acting like a union. All the workers signed a petition of support that went to the board of the Farm Home.

"It was a trumped-up charge," said Wickenheiser. "Management showed that it had nothing to do with his child care skills when 'training' they gave him to improve his child care skills was to work with a maintenance crew painting for 21 hours a week."

SAFETY CONCERNS - The safety concerns of the workers derive in large part from the changing population at the Farm Home. No longer are the 12-to-17-year-olds only delinquent boys and girls; now they come to the Farm Home with mental illnesses as well — in part because



Enjoying their organizing victory at Children's Farm Home are Damon James, Richard Hill, Sam Felty, Mark Wickenheiser, Marcia Babel, Marcia's daughter, and Sheila Winsjansen.

money is available for people with mental illnesses.

Boys with attention disorders and hyperactivity are constantly on the move; those with attachment disorders have no empathy for others.

These conditions come on top of histories of arson, abuse, drug and alcohol problems, and some who have been institutionalized for so long they have difficulty functioning in a "normal" way.

For this population, the Farm Home has cottages made out of wood

hired Preventive Personnel Management of Oregon, a Portland-based firm with a history of union-busting activities. By and large, their involvement backfired on management. One of the union-buster's ideas was for the employer to hold captive-audience meetings.

"A lot of people were upset with the employer for the captive audience meetings," said Wickenheiser.

COMMUNICATION - Communication was another one of the organizing issues — something that

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and without sprinklers; children are transported to the hospital in vehicles lacking security devices; there are no seclusion rooms for those who have committed infractions of Farm Home rules; and the workers need more training on search procedures.

MANAGEMENT CAMPAIGN - The Union organizing campaign began in January and throughout was confronted with numerous attempts by management to derail the drive through various legal maneuvers.

Farm Home management

drive, we knew how hard they had worked and knew that they had worked harder for a longer time than we had."

Waverly activist **Michael Creighton** was one of several OPEU members, many coming from the child welfare and social service professions, who participated in the organizing drive at the Children's Farm Home.

"Michael put in 3-4 days doing whatever it took," Wickenheiser said. "He was impressive. He could tell us things as another worker that none of the organizers could. Organizers can't reach you the way another worker can."

MEMBER ORGANIZERS - Others who participated in the organizing drive were OPEU Vice President **Chris Parks**, Health Local 333 President **Geri Washington**, Linn County Local 390 President and CAPE chair **John Hawkins**, Welfare Office Workers Local 461 President **Lucy Lahr**, Welfare Officer Workers Local 461 activists **Marilyn Wells** and **BUBB** Board member **Karla Spence**, and Senior & Disabled Services Local 411 activist **Sylvia Rice**. **Andrew McGuire**, the member organizer (MOC) assigned to the campaign, works at Children's Services Division.

BARGAINING FIRST CONTRACT - Looking forward to the job of strengthening the Union they have built and bargaining a first contract, Treatment Team Leader **Marcia Babel** summed up the feeling of many workers when she said, "I'm very excited, but there is a lot to do."

"It's a satisfying victory," said Residential Treatment Specialist **Richard Hill**. "It is great to be able to finally have the opportunity to bargain with our employer."

"We know what we have done so far," said Wickenheiser. "That and how we were able to do it, makes the next part of our job easier. Knowing the workers are there will make it work."

"This feels great," said James. "This was a team effort by the workers here. We feel our Union will help us improve our working conditions and that will improve client care."

"Because of our organizing