

Union Distortions No Help In Avery Heights Dispute

No one laments the seemingly endless union picketing taking place at the Avery Heights retirement village more than Avery manage-

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ment. We sympathize with our New Britain Avenue neighbors and Hartford commuters who deal daily with traffic jams and inconvenience. There is no pleasure in driving past this small group of union members seeking "justice."

Unfortunately, what justice means in this case is debatable. And the seeming disregard for truth by New England Health Care Employees Union District 1199 throughout this action is troubling. A case in point is a recent union media campaign.

Anyone who has heard union radio ads or seen fliers blanketing our neighborhood would conclude that Church Homes Inc., Avery Heights' owner and operator, is brazenly disregarding the law by disobeying a recent court "order" to reinstate union workers who walked out on their jobs

in November 1999. Nothing could be further from the truth.

No such order was ever made. The decision offered in November was a recommendation to the National Labor Relations Board, not an order imposed on Church Homes. And the recommendation was made by a regional administrative law judge employed by the NLRB — the same NLRB that is presenting the union's case — not an independent federal judge in the United States justice system.

The case before the NLRB involving District 1199 and Church Homes is a lengthy process, and November's recommendation is an initial step in this process. Church Homes appealed the recommendation because we believe our actions in hiring permanent replacement workers were just. There is little doubt the union, too, would have appealed a recommendation not in its favor; it has stated as much. The unfortunate consequence is that there will almost certainly be no

quick end to the picketing.

I sympathize with the remaining union members seeking job reinstatement. They are good, hardworking people who deserve to be treated fairly. But they did abandon their jobs. Avery reacted initially with a temporary work force.

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When the union said that the strike would last a "long time," Avery began — in accordance with the law and out of justifiable concern for the welfare of its residents — to hire a permanent work force.

Of more than 160 workers who originally went on strike, approximately 50 were brought back immediately when the union offered to return to work in January 2000. Since then, we have offered jobs back to all but 28 of the original striking union members through a preferential hiring process.

The sad truth about the continued union action at Avery Heights is that it has more to do with image and the union's prospects for future organizing than

"justice" for our employees. The strike was called in part to synchronize the Avery contract with those of union facilities statewide; the union wanted to include Avery in last spring's power play at the Capitol when union facilities statewide went on strike. Both the Avery strike and the five-week walkout last spring have failed.

So who has lost? Almost every-

one involved, including Avery residents whose health and safety were put at risk by a striking workforce; our neighborhood and the city of Hartford; and most of all, those Avery workers who were led down a path by the union for all the wrong reasons.

Throughout this drama, Church Homes has kept a low profile. The newspaper is not the

place to negotiate a contract, and we will not start now. We have always remained open to negotiating a fair resolution.

But public misrepresentations and inflammatory tactics do nothing to advance negotiations or heighten community understanding.

Church Homes is hopeful that District 1199 will choose its words more carefully in the future and that a resolution to this ongoing matter will be reached in a reasonable manner.

Patrick J. Gilland is president and chief executive officer of Church Homes Inc., owner and operator of the Avery Heights retirement community in Hartford.

