

## Historic agreement ends long-running strike in the elder care sector



(27 November 2017) Workers in the elder care sector in Bizkaia, northern Spain, backed by the Basque Workers' Solidarity trade union ELA, have reached an historic agreement bringing an end to a 360-day long strike, the longest in the region's history.

The agreement includes the union's main long-standing demands, including a 35-hour working week, a minimum salary of 1,200 euros a month and the payment of 100% of the salary when on sick leave due to an accident at work or an occupational illness.

The elder care homes and day centres sector employs a total of 5,500 workers, 95% of whom are women and 70% represented by ELA. It is a privatised public service, with 70% funding by the the provincial government of Bizkaia and three employers' associations that cover the sector.

This has not been a usual labour dispute, given that the social model of care itself was in play, in an ageing society. Currently, 21% of Basque society is 65 years old or more; within a decade, this figure will reach 26.5%.

In the current model, care work is performed mainly by women, in both the private and the public sectors, with precarious, poor quality jobs. It involves work that is often invisible and undervalued both economically and socially. It is also a sector that is seen as a potential source of profit by many private companies.

The aim of this labour and social dispute was to confer dignity on these care jobs through the improvement of employees' employment conditions, which at the same time, would improve the quality of the service itself.

The dispute developed in a very hostile context, with budgetary cutbacks and increasing privatisation. These have led to an unsustainable situation of staff shortages and bad working conditions that have made it impossible to guarantee decent quality of care. Workers were under time pressure for each task and to be available at all times, with salaries below 1,000 euros and part-time contracts... all characteristics of jobs in the sector.

For the private employers in the sector the priority was to increase the number of places funded by the provincial government in order to continue increasing their profits, while maintaining precarious working conditions. And for many months, the provincial government did nothing to resolve the dispute. It just backed the employers, criminalising the workers on strike and making the dispute more deeply entrenched. It went as far as imposing a minimum service requirement of up to 90% to reduce the impact of the strike.

However, from the very beginning the workers were supported by the families of the users, who have taken part in the dozens of mobilisations. They were aware that the fight went way beyond an improvement in working conditions and that the quality of care of their family members was also at stake.

Finally, on the 27th of October, after over 360 days on strike, an agreement was signed with the employer associations, which includes the main demands made by the workers. This runs until 2020 and includes an increase of the minimum wage to 1,200 euros a month, progressive reduction of the working day down to a 35-hour week, recognition of break times as effective working time, 100% of the salary

being paid for sick leave due to accidents at work or occupational illnesses, an increase in night shift and public holiday bonuses and more....

Additionally, all the clauses preventing the application of the labour reform imposed in 2012 by the Spanish Government have been maintained.

This dispute cannot be understood without taking into account the determination of the striking workers and the support and solidarity of over 100,000 members of ELA whose contributions to the strike fund made it possible to sustain a strike lasting more than 360 days and the important socialisation of the dispute, which has generated significant synergies with feminist and other social movements

In short, it has been more than a labour dispute; it has also been a social and feminist fight, which has allowed steps to be taken towards bringing dignity to care work. The perseverance and determination of the workers in their fight has set the stage for a great trade union and social victory that means an important step forward in the emancipation of the working classes in the Basque Country.

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