

March 24, 2010

Dear President Cowen,

We write to you to address an urgent matter for the Tulane University community. The workers who prepare and serve the food at Bruff Commons, Lavin-Bernick Center, and all other food service locations have been subjected to working conditions that are unacceptable and treatment that is degrading. The food service employees on campus have shown courage and integrity in organizing for change, but have faced resistance and intimidation from Sodexo—Tulane’s contracted food supplier. Sodexo’s behavior belittles Tulane’s core values—humanity, openness, integrity, courage, and excellence—treating these as business-speak buzzwords, rather than the beliefs and philosophy of the Tulane community of students, faculty, and staff.

The recent unethical meetings held by Sodexo's upper management to dissuade their employees from organizing (as reported in March 12th's Hullabaloo) exemplify the challenges that workers organizing will and have been facing. In these difficult times, Sodexo’s policy of laying off most employees over the summer leaves workers in a vulnerable position—one that most faculty, staff and students at Tulane will not experience. Sodexo’s unwillingness to guarantee workers a right of first recall in the fall treats them as disposable objects and serves to intimidate a valuable part of our community. We ask that Sodexo give each employee a letter that guarantees his or her first right of recall in the fall. As the president of our university and the leader of our community, we expect you to ensure that Sodexo complies.

As the largest employer in New Orleans and a university that prides itself on its leadership in the community, we believe it is only logical that we implement a labor code of conduct. Tulane’s employees, whether employed directly or through contractors and subcontractors must be allowed the unimpeded exercise of their legal rights. This means the right to unionize by any legal method, including majority sign up, free from intimidation, so they can improve their working conditions. But words are not enough. Tulane must show its commitment through action. Therefore, it is imperative that Tulane implement a Labor Code of Conduct that will bind Tulane and its contractors to these fair and legal provisions. Attached is a Labor Code of Conduct that achieves these goals and helps Tulane live up to its values. Xavier and Dillard have already demonstrated their support for workers’ rights and this is an opportunity for Tulane to take the initiative among major American universities in ensuring fair labor practices on campuses.

Tulane must hold to its core values, and we expect you to take the lead. X students have signed a petition supporting our proposal. The implementation of a labor code of conduct, the right of workers to organize, and the first right of recall for Sodexo employees is most urgent. As a sign of good faith, we expect a response from you no later than Thursday, April 8th regarding Tulane’s implementation of these policies.

Since the levees broke in 2005, you have been asking us as students and as a community if we wanted to make a difference. Today we ask you the same question. We must remember that the bottom line is not the source of our humanity, our integrity, or our excellence. As a wise man once said, “the measure of your life will ultimately be determined by what difference you make for others not just what you do for yourself.” Let it be known that we are prepared to make that difference at Tulane.

Sincerely,

African American Congress
Men of Color
Amnesty International
Tulane University Solidarity Committee