

## City Business New Paper

### N.O. City Council hears wage theft accusations against Sodexo

POSTED: 01:50 PM Tuesday, April 13, 2010

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Wage theft, racial discrimination, poverty-level wages and inadequate health care were among a flurry of allegations aimed at France-based Sodexo at a New Orleans City Council committee meeting today.

The accusations against Sodexo, which manages cafeterias and other facilities in public schools and private universities in New Orleans, came from employees and the Service Employees International Union.

Algiers resident Lisa Cooper told council members that, while serving as a temporary manager at Benjamin Bratt Elementary School, she saw other managers erase hours from time cards.

"I witnessed some awful things," Cooper said.

The SEIU today released a report that claims Sodexo systematically stole \$22,000 from New Orleans-area workers by erasing overtime hours from weekly time reports in 2009. The erasures occurred every Wednesday and Thursday, and one employee lost \$1,245, according to the report.

Councilman Arnie Fielkow said he invited Sodexo representatives to attend the meeting, but none were present.

In a written statement, Sodexo spokesman Alfred King said the company "found an error in its computerized time-clock system" and the problems occurred between 2007 and 2008. SEIU and Sodexo agree the money was returned, but the union says reparations occurred only after employees pressured Sodexo management.

Terry Shelly testified that her unionizing attempts resulted in her being fired from a job as a cashier in a Loyola University New Orleans cafeteria.

SEIU represents some New Orleans-area workers, but employees working at Tulane and Loyola universities have been unable to unionize and face threats of surveillance, among other intimidation efforts, according to SEIU.

"Those allegations are false," King said, noting that Sodexo is more than 15 percent unionized. "Sodexo respects our employees' rights to unionize or not unionize as they choose."

Tulane senior Brian Ford testified in favor of Sodexo employees and said students are organizing a rally this week.

"We have seen intimidation on our campus," Ford told council members.

Council members acknowledged that city government cannot control what occurs on private campuses. But Councilwoman Stacy Head said the city's penchant for outsourcing has resulted in public service workers receiving lower wages.

Head and Fielkow agreed to explore their flexibility under public bid laws to consider treatment of employees when awarding contracts. •