

SEIU escalates union efforts

Workers and students present demands to regional management

By [Max Coll](#) | Section: Apr 9th, 2010 [April 9th 2010 Edition](#), [Issues](#), [News](#) [ShareThis](#)

Sodexo employees, Tulane and Loyola students, and representatives of the Service Employees International Union marched into Sodexo's regional office yesterday to deliver a letter condemning the company's reactions to the workers' unionization movement.

The letter, which they left on the desk of District Manager John Monica, demanded that Sodexo cease unlawful campaigns to intimidate workers and charged the company with 13 violations of the National Labor Relations Act, three of which are specific to Tulane and Loyola Universities.

“At Tulane University workers tell of Sodexo management interrogating them about their union activities and threatening workers who continue their support for SEIU,” according to the letter. “At Loyola University workers complain of a Sodexo work rule restricting employees from talking about the union at work and that Sodexo discharged union supporter Terry Shelley in retaliation for her support for the union.”

Corey Taylor, an SEIU representative who was present at the protest, said the campaign is aiming to ensure workers' protective rights.

“These workers are coming together to try to better conditions,” Taylor said. “As they have engaged in these efforts, Sodexo has responded with terminations and harassment.”

Representatives of Sodexo's regional office told the protesting group that Monica was unavailable to comment but that they would place the letter under his door. The company also responded to SEIU's allegations in a letter to the editor in *The Hullabaloo* this issue, featured on page 10.

“Sodexo believes that the decision to unionize or not is an important one for our employees,” according to a letter by Ben Hartley, Sodexo Campus Services area general manager. “We follow the National Labor Relations Board standards that call for open dialogue to ensure employees are fully informed before they make such a decision. Any claims to the contrary are false.”

Tulane President Scott Cowen responded to various student organizations Tuesday, acknowledging the community's interest in the unionization movement and emphasizing the school's existing employee policies.

“The treatment of Tulane University employees is already comprehensively covered in the faculty and staff handbooks and university employment policies,” according to Cowen's

statement. “I mention this fact so that the issues you may have with Sodexo are not conflated with the existing Tulane policies regarding its treatment of university employees.”

The university also released a statement affirming its recognition of the workers’ right to unionize.

“Tulane supports the efforts of workers on our campus, if they so desire, to have union representation, which is guaranteed by the National Labor Relations Act,” according to the public statement. “We expect our vendors, like Sodexo, to accord their employees the respect and dignity that all people deserve.”

In an effort to increase awareness of the unionization movement, the Tulane University Solidarity Committee has organized a workers’ appreciation barbecue today to show support for Sodexo workers. Michael Hogg, interim vice president of student affairs, said the location of the event was moved due to security concerns and required the presence of Tulane police officers due to the potentially violent nature of the gathering.

“Here you have groups of people with differing views who are quite passionate,” Hogg said. “We want it to be civil and not a threat to anyone on the spectrum. [TUSC] told us that they can not guarantee anyone’s safety, so we are requiring the presence of security.”

Brian Ford, a member of TUSC, said that while Cowen and the administration claim to seek a civil and balanced discussion, their actions have suggested otherwise.

“Actions like moving this barbecue at the last second suggest that the administration is attempting to intimidate the conversation, basing it on fears they possess rather than a dialogue based on the facts,” Ford said. “The concept of unionization has them frightened and our rapid growth of support has them on their heels despite the fact that our actions have been peaceful and orderly.”

An SEIU flyer that protesters scattered across Sodexo’s regional office depicted a wanted sign with pictures of Tulane and Loyola managers dressed in cowboy attire. Hogg said the use of these flyers was in poor taste and hinted at violence.

“Taking other employees and belittling them, no matter what side you’re on, is in poor taste,” Hogg said. “A wanted poster means you are looking for someone.”

SEIU representative Tara Young said the Sodexo workers’ conditions and the company’s unlawful reaction to the unionization movement clearly violates Tulane University’s mission statement and stance in the community.

“After Hurricane Katrina the university placed a major emphasis on community service around the New Orleans area,” Young said. “But what about their workers? Community service is about caring for your neighbors.”

Ford countered Sodexo's claim that their \$8 hourly pay is 52 cents higher than the starting hourly rate in Louisiana, noting the high living costs of New Orleans.

"Sixty cents above minimum wage is not a livable situation, and at an esteemed institution like Tulane we need to do better," Ford said.