

# Sodexo reacts to union talk

## Union reps and employees say meetings discourage efforts

By [Leah Askarinam](#) | Section: Mar 12th, 2010 [Issues](#), [Lead Story](#), [March 12h Print Edition](#), [News](#) [ShareThis](#)



TUPD breaks up a student protest when the group failed to provide a permit from the university.  
LEE SAXON / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

Tulane students have come out to support Tulane's Sodexo employees as Sodexo holds informational staff meetings about unionization.

### **Sodexo's meetings**

Sodexo Public Relations Director Monica Zimmer said that this week's staff meetings were first informational meetings, permitted under National Labor Relations Board guidelines, and later business planning meetings.

Service Employees International Union representatives and Sodexo employees, however, said that these meetings aimed to discourage unionization.

Tremeda Stevenson, a cook at Bruff Commons and supporter of unionization, said she worked as a food technician and manager for the Orleans Parish School Board before Hurricane Katrina. Stevenson, along with thousands of other employees, lost her job with the school board after the storm, so she took a job as a cook at Tulane. She was in the school board's union for 22 years.

Stevenson said that Sodexo's meetings presented information that discouraged unionization.

"They stated that the union can't save your job because there are so many people who are in unionized jobs that they're laid off," Stevenson said. "They taught us statistics about how many people were in a union from some year to 2009, and how many people have gotten out of the union."

Zimmer said, however, that Sodexo respects workers' rights to organize.

“We do not harass, intimidate or discriminate against any employee for engaging in union-organizing activities or otherwise supporting a union,” Zimmer said. “SEIU’s allegations that Sodexo intimidates or improperly fires workers attempting to unionize are false. In fact, over the past five years, there has not been even one finding that Sodexo has intimidated or retaliated against workers engaging in union organizing activity.”

Stevenson said, however, that the directors of the meeting belittled the employees, a trend she said she has noticed among Sodexo representatives at Tulane for the past few years.

“They want to make the people down South feel like trash,” Stevenson said. “No, we’re not trash.”

Stevenson said that the meetings may have discouraged Sodexo’s younger employees.

“It kind of messed their minds up when they told them that — that the unions are going to take away your rights, that you’re not going to be able to speak for yourselves,” she said.

Herbert Cressey, a stock manager who has worked for Sodexo at Tulane for 22 years, also said he supports unionization. Before working at Tulane, he worked as a manager of a shoe store, but he came to Tulane when the owner closed it. Cressey said that representatives at this week’s meetings brought up union dues that the employees would have to pay.

“I’ll pay dues,” Cressey said. “I’ll pay \$20 a month because I know my job is protected.”

Rob Hailey, associate vice president of student affairs, said that he did not know exactly what the meetings entailed, but that Sodexo routinely holds mandatory staff meetings.

“Employees have the right to choose union representation just as they have the right not to join a union, and employees should carefully review all of the information before making this important decision,” Hailey said. “Dining services are vital to our campus, and Tulane values food services workers as a part of our community. We hope that whatever differences may exist between Sodexo and its employees can be resolved to the mutual benefit of all concerned.”

Cressey said, however, that he did not think Sodexo’s meetings intimidated employees because they understood the real benefits of unionization.

“I just hope we get it, and things will be better for everybody,” Cressey said.

**Students get involved** Tulane students have begun to support the right of Sodexo workers to unionize. The Tulane University Solidarity Committee is asking students to sign petitions to support the unionization effort.

After Sodexo meetings, the group stands outside the meeting rooms with posters in support of unionization and pamphlets with information on unionization. Senior Brian Ford, Solidarity Committee member, said that Sodexo employees responded positively.

“We’ve been cheering them on,” Ford said. “On their way up the stairs, we heard comments about how they like feeling like celebrities and like the support.”

Sophomore Hunter Beely, another member of the Solidarity Committee, said that students have been open to signing petitions and listening to what members have to say.

“There have been a lot of people who seem to think that Tulane is very apathetic, but we’ve seen a good response from the students,” Beely said.

Stevenson said she thanks the students who have supported Sodexo employees.

“We must be doing something right because it made my heart melt to see all the students behind us,” Stevenson said.

### **Motivation for unionization**

Stevenson said that her managers recently cut her hours from 40 hours, taking away time she needs to prepare food for students. She said she often clocks out and then continues working. She also said that she skips her lunch break, though it has been deducted from her paycheck.

“What I’m saying is so disheartening, and all my coworkers feel the same way,” Stevenson said. “They cut our hours and still want us to do the same amount of work.”

Cressey, a long-time employee, said that he was frustrated with management’s lack of respect for their long-time employees.

“I’ve been here,” Cressey said. “They should ask me first if they have an open position and give it to me before they give it to an outside person.”

Cressey said that he wants Sodexo to pay for his health care and give larger raises. For the past few years, he said he has been receiving 25-cent pay raises annually.

Cressey said he found it necessary to take on a second job with UNICO.

“If I have a problem, I can come in there and talk to [UNICO management],” Cressey said. “At Sodexo, you can’t do that.”

SEIU spokesperon Tania Aquino said that employees make as little as \$8.27 per hour and often cannot pay for healthcare.

“What we’re seeing at Tulane and Loyola is that workers aren’t afraid,” Aquino said. “They know what management is trying to do, and what they’re trying to do is more important than another 10-cent raise or a picnic they’re going to throw them.”

Tulane’s Sodexo Marketing Manager John Coleman declined to comment at this time.