

# Labor concerns presented to City Council Economic Development Committee

By [Bruce Egger, The Times-Picayune](#)

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Workers and union organizers protesting what they call substandard wages and unfair labor practices at local public schools and universities by the international food-service giant [Sodexo](#) drew sympathetic comments but no promises of help Tuesday from [New Orleans City Council](#) members.

A parade of current and former Sodexo food-service and custodial workers at [Tulane](#) and [Loyola universities](#) and [Recovery School District](#) schools presented their grievances to the council's Economic Development Committee.

Several workers said that even after years on the job, their wages are so low they must rely on food stamps and free or reduced-price school lunches to feed their families and are unable to afford adequate health insurance.

Others said Sodexo does not offer opportunities for promotion and advancement and has fired at least one worker who supported the [Service Employees International Union's](#) efforts to unionize workers at Tulane and Loyola.

Helene O'Brien, president of SEIU Local 21LA, said Sodexo managers systematically erased overtime hours worked by 150 employees last year, denying them a total of \$22,000 they had earned. After the workers put pressure on the company, she said, the money eventually was paid but the managers involved remain in their positions.

Council President Arnie Fielkow, chairman of the committee, said he had invited Sodexo to send a representative to the meeting, but no one appeared to speak for the company.

In the past, Sodexo officials have denied some of the allegations.

In a letter this month to the Tulane student newspaper, the [Hullabaloo](#), the area general manager for Sodexo Campus Services, Ben Hartley, said, "We follow the National Labor Relations Board standards that call for open dialogue" before a vote on whether to join a union.

He told the [Loyola Maroon](#) in February that the company offers "benefits that would have been unheard of several years ago" and "does a good job at trying to support staff as much as they can."

The company has said its starting wage of \$8 an hour is higher than the legally

required minimum wage and the average starting wage in Louisiana.

Fielkow said low wages can contribute to crime by forcing parents to work more than one job and by limiting opportunities for young people. But he said the council has no jurisdiction over labor practices at private schools.

Councilwoman Stacy Head said it might be possible to write a city law saying that companies' treatment of workers should be taken into consideration when awarding contracts to take over privatized public functions. But she noted that, like the council's recently passed ordinance denying city contracts to people convicted of certain felonies, any such law must not violate the state's public bid law.

After the committee meeting, the workers and union leaders trooped outside to a rally on City Hall's steps where state Rep. Austin Badon, D-New Orleans, and recent mayoral candidate James Perry voiced support for the workers' cause. Perry, executive director of the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center, is currently running for the 93rd District House seat.

Badon said, "It pains me that this company can feel good about their billions of dollars in profits knowing that their workers are suffering."

Perry urged Sodexo to pay its workers "livable" wages. "We have to put people first," he said.

Sodexo, founded in France in 1966 and formerly known as Sodexho, is one of the largest food-service and facilities management companies in the world, with 380,000 employees at 30,600 sites in 80 countries. For the fiscal year ending in August 2009, it had worldwide revenue of more than \$19 billion.

O'Brien said Sodexo has long-term contracts with Tulane and Loyola. It recently lost its food-service contract with the Recovery School District but still provides food service at some charter schools, she said, and also has a maintenance and custodial contract with the RSD.

The well-known author Barbara Ehrenreich, before a speaking appearance at Tulane in March, met with Sodexo workers and expressed support for their unionization efforts.

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