

# Tulane part of effort to support better working conditions for Sodexo employees

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Across the country, students are demanding that university presidents take action to defend on-campus workers from corporate giant Sodexo. Facing daily disrespect on the job, unsanitary conditions and receiving poverty wages, Sodexo workers on campus have been standing up to their bosses, and students have begun to take their fight to university presidents, who make the decision to contract with corporations like Sodexo.

Among the students who have organized themselves in support of Sodexo food-service employees are those who attend Tulane and Loyola universities.

On March 24, students and other supporters presented Tulane University President Scott S. Cowen with a letter and two petitions — one with one with 1,096 student signatures and another with 110 faculty signatures — demanding that he defend the right of Tulane’s food-service employees to unionize and protect the rights of every member of the Tulane University community to be treated fairly and ethically by the contractors Tulane hires.

“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 students wrote. “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 12 issue of Hullabaloo (student newspaper) — 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.

“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,” the letter concludes. “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.”

“President Cowen and our administration made the decision to contract with Sodexo, which has proven time and again to violate the basic values this university is supposed to stand for,” Tulane freshman Sarah Sklaw said last week. “It’s time for President Cowen to tell Sodexo to clean up its act or start packing.”

“I have been working on Tulane’s campus since 1970, and I can’t get respect from Sodexo or the university president,” Joyce Bradley, who is 61 years old and a Sodexo worker on Tulane’s campus. “President Cowen comes by it’s like he doesn’t even see me...he looks through me as if I don’t matter. Sodexo doesn’t offer affordable health insurance. I qualify for the health insurance, but I cannot afford it. I currently have high blood pressure, and cannot afford the generic medication. Sodexo’s actions — just like President Cowen’s action — make me feel like I don’t matter...but I love the students and that keeps me going.”

Students and workers say they have received only empty promises from their administrators thus far. Some administrators have gone so far as to condemn student efforts to support their workers.

In a letter to the editor of Tulane’s Hullabaloo student newspaper dated March 31, Ben Hartley, Area General Manager for Sodexo Campus Services, wrote: “Sodexo offers competitive pay and benefits, and we have an engaged workforce that includes many long-term employees. For instance, a number of our Tulane employees have worked for Sodexo 20 years or more.

“Sodexo pays hourly employees higher than the regional average,” Hartley continued. “In Louisiana, the average starting hourly wage is \$7.48. At

Tulane, Sodexo starting pay for hourly employees ranges from a minimum of \$8 per hour to more than \$13 per hour depending on the position.

“We offer our employees a robust benefits plan, including medical, dental, vision, flexible spending accounts and retirement plans, as well as an educational reimbursement. Employees have a variety of choices for their health benefit plans. Premiums start at \$18 a week and go up from there, giving them a choice on the premium and coverage levels that best meet their needs. On average, the company pays about two-thirds of the cost of all health insurance premiums.”

In addition to pointing out that 25 percent of Sodexo’s current managers started out as hourly workers, Hartley wrote, “

Our annual surveys consistently show that Sodexo employees have a positive relationship with our company, and are happy with their work environment and managers. Eight out of 10 employees believe that they benefit from a good work/life balance at Sodexo.

“Sodexo believes that the decision to unionize or not is an important one for our employees,” Hartley added. “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.”

The effort to secure better working conditions for Sodexo employees is a struggle that is being waged on many fronts across the U.S., including Atlanta’s Emory University.

“President Wagner has completely disregarded the voices of both workers and students around this issue, and instead has chosen to only believe the words of Sodexo management,” said Andrea Nicholls, a graduate student at the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University. “The administration’s inaction on blatant injustices happening on its own campus is an embarrassment to the Emory community. We reject the administration’s shameless support of Sodexo’s unethical practices and will continue to demand that Emory be held accountable.”

In response to the conditions they face, workers are attempting to organize unions, and have faced blatant intimidation from Sodexo during this process. At Ohio State University, Janet Long, a pro-union worker, was reportedly

fired. At Loyola University New Orleans, pro-union worker Ms. Terry was also fired.

“Our administrators refer to existing policies of ethics and refer our demands for better standards to committees for legal review. They seem to forget that these policies have been in place for years and to date have done nothing to protect our workers from the real-life wrongs of Sodexo,” said Brian Ford, a senior from Napa Valley, CA majoring in International Relations at Tulane University. “We have seen Sodexo intimidate our workers and fire them after they stand up to better their situations. This is not the excellence that I expect from my school.”

Tulane student organizers were disappointed late last week that Tulane administrators decided to move a Worker Celebration Day barbecue scheduled for Friday afternoon from the larger, grassy LBC Quadrangle to a much smaller, paved area known as the Pocket Park Quad. The university is also requiring students to pay three NOPD officers to provide security for the event.

The administration reportedly made the decision to move the barbecue because “they’ re convinced that movements are associated with violence,” Brian Ford told The Louisiana Weekly Friday. “Amnesty (International) is actually putting up all of its entire budget for the year to pay for three police officers to provide security over the course of a two-hour barbecue.”

Amnesty International and the Tulane University Solidarity Committee planned the barbecue to show their appreciation for food-service employees, who they say have received little recognition support from university leaders. The barbecue included music and food donated by five New Orleans restaurants.

“We had been talking about it for a while,” Ford told The Louisiana Weekly.

“We wanted to have a day to celebrate our workers, a really positive sort of de-politicized event that really just shows appreciation for what the workers do, to re-affirm that they’ re really an integral part of our community and that we care about them.”

Ford said he and other members of TUSC were told by Tulane administrators Thursday that the organization “could not guarantee the safety of the students at this event.”

Ford said that President Cowen responded to its March 24 letter in support of the workers by applauding student efforts to support workers. “He said that we were an example of the kind of thing that Tulane has become known for: Community involvement, leadership and overall awareness,” he said.

Brian Ford said that they were also informed that the Labor Code of Conduct that the student leaders submitted would be forwarded to the university’s Social Ethics Committee.

“That’s basically the legal track for changing Tulane legal policy,” Ford explained. “It will take a while, but that’s the way it goes. There will be a large effort to follow up with that to make sure it goes through.”

Ford and other TUSC members were sorely disappointed that Cowen did not address Sodexo’s policy of not rehiring certain employees. “That’s incredibly pressing because in 30 days most of our 200-plus employees here are going to be laid off,” Ford explained. “None of them know if they will be rehired in the Fall. It’s an opportune way for Sodexo to weed out workers who have had the courage to stand up for bettering their situation because they don’t have to offer any reason for not bringing them back. So we think it’s really imperative that we get some sort of commitment from either Sodexo or the administration that we do expect our workers back and that we do want them back.”

Ford said pushing that point will be the focus of the remainder of the semester.

“We’ve been very respectful in our campaign,” Ford told The Louisiana Weekly. “We’ve been about openness and getting things done in a civil way, which is part of our core values. In Cowen’s response, he says that he is committed to that dialogue but actions speak louder than words and the administration’s actions show that they’re not interested in an open dialogue based on facts. They’re interested in a conversation that’s based on unfounded fears and irresponsibility, and those have nothing to do with our core values here.”

Ford said that the administration cited a quote by Tulane senior Lauren Elliott in The Louisiana Weekly in which she said that President Cowen would be “sorry” if he chose not to respond to the students’ March 24 letter.

“They said that that could be interpreted as a personal threat of violence against Scott Cowen and I would like to clarify that it’s not a threat, it’s a statement of fact based on Cowen’s reputation for being community-oriented and trying to improve New Orleans,” Ford said.

“If they choose to respond with hollow words and then act in ways that very much contradict their values, we don’t have to do anything for Cowen to be sorry. He’s making himself and his own administration sorry.”

Ford agreed that it was ironic that President Cowen’s commitment to fairness and justice is being questioned just weeks after he received The Times-Picayune’s Loving Cup award for his efforts to improve post-Katrina New Orleans.

“That is part of the irony,” he told The Louisiana Weekly. “We feel that our leverage is based on this institution and Scott Cowen’s reputation. Given those two things, there really is no legitimate way for them to deny or justify the fact that we aren’t providing livable wages for our workers and that that directly harms the community. Disrespect of our workers on campus is not what we stand for at Tulane and it is not what he’s receiving this recognition for.”

“Members of our senior administration have met with Sodexo officials regarding these allegations,” Tulane University President Scott Cowen told The Louisiana Weekly Friday.

“Tulane University is committed to the ethical, responsible and dignified treatment of all individuals who are part of the university community. This commitment is part of the university’s core values,” Cowen wrote in an earlier statement.

In addition to Tulane, Loyola and Emory universities, mass demonstrations are planned at the following universities this week: Clark Atlanta University, Clark University, Denison University, Fullerton College, Georgia Institute of Technology, Georgia State University, Morehouse University, Ohio Dominican University, Ohio State University, the University of Denver and Whittier College.

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