

Tulane Univ. food service employees seek unionization

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Members of four student organizations and faculty of Tulane University gathered last week to express their support for the institution's food service employees, who have been seeking to form a union with their counterparts at Loyola University.

According to the four student groups that organized the events - the Tulane University Solidarity Committee, African American Congress, Men of Color and Amnesty International - the food service employees at Tulane University are facing resistance from management as they attempt to gain union recognition.

"Tulane contracts their food services through the French corporation Sodexo in order to cut costs," according to those who organized last week's activities. "Employees have highlighted poverty wages, abusive supervisors and inadequate and unaffordable benefits as their main grievances. Unable to live off Sodexo wages, many work second and third jobs to support their families. A large number of campus workers are on food stamps as well, forcing Louisiana taxpayers to subsidize Sodexo's poverty wages and poor benefits. Employees who have worked in Tulane's dining services for decades have seen negligible pay raises that fail to keep up with inflation as well as regular cuts in hours."

Sarah Sklaw, a freshman working with Sodexo employees, said, "Many Sodexo employees say there is no outlet for workers to voice their grievances to management, consequently there is no avenue to make changes to working conditions."

Campus workers said recently that they have been instructed not to speak with students about working conditions. Despite this polarizing atmosphere that has attempted to drive a wedge between students and workers, Tulane student involvement has become key to the campaign. Students are exerting pressure on the administration to adopt a labor code of conduct that would enforce the right of contracted employees to organize free of intimidation by either Sodexo or the Tulane administration.

Lahzie Takada, a Tulane senior who is working on the campaign, said, "Tulane is nationally recognized as a university committed to social responsibility and community service in the New Orleans area. This reputation would be severely damaged if Tulane fails to ensure that its campus workers are treated with basic dignity. If Sodexo workers believe that only a union will help them achieve this, then

we as students support their legal right to form one free of intimidation and we ask that President Cowen do the same."

The Tulane University Solidarity Committee has circulated a petition in support of a labor code of conduct. Its members say that in a matter of weeks, more than 15 percent of the student body signed on. Over 100 Tulane faculty have signed on to a letter in support of the student's efforts.

"As our professors put it in their separate letter, 'We strongly encourage Tulane's administration to adopt a labor code of conduct that embodies the values expressed by the students' petition-the values that Tulane University has heralded since its post-Katrina renewal,' student leaders said last week in a written statement.

On Wednesday, March 24, the four student groups held a forum in support of the workers' ongoing effort to form a union with Barbara Ehrenreich, acclaimed author of *Nickel and Dimed*, in the Alcee Fortier building.

Lauren Elliott, a senior from Atlanta, said Ehrenreich has a background in food service and shared her experiences with those in attendance Wednesday. "We had a discussion with her, with several of the employees and students from both Tulane and Loyola because the same thing is happening with Loyola employees right now," she told *The Louisiana Weekly*. "They have asked for a union and are struggling to form one right now."

After the forum, students and faculty delivered two petitions - one with 1,096 student signatures and another with 110 faculty signatures - and a letter to Tulane University President Scott S. Cowen, followed by a University-wide rally in front of the Lavin-Bernick Center for University Life. The letter asks President Cowen to hold Tulane to its core values, to support the campus' food service employees and to respond by Thursday, April 8, with a plan of action that ensures that Tulane and its contractors behave in an ethical, legal, and just manner.

The students and faculty are demanding that food service employees not be penalized or fired by Sodexo because of their union activities and that Tulane implement a labor code of conduct for all faculty, staff and contracted and subcontracted employees, Elliott said. "The main component of that is that every group of employees is given the right to organize free of intimidation, which is already a legal right but is certainly not always enforced," she told *The Louisiana Weekly*.

Elliott said the second demand is particularly important because Sodexo executives allegedly met with food service employees during work hours in an attempt to discourage them in their efforts to form a union.

"Several workers told us that if they didn't go they were going to be written up," she said. "Several of the workers had also been interrogated about the union."

Elliott said that efforts to form a union had been going on longer at Loyola and that the main organizer of Loyola's food service unionizing efforts was fired as a result of those efforts.

"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 letter to President Cowen reads. "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."

"We're demanding that (President Cowen) responds by April 8 with a plan of action," Elliott told The Louisiana Weekly. "If he doesn't, he's going to be sorry."

President Cowen was out of town and could not be reached for comment.

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