

President Cowen –

While we appreciate your timely written acknowledgement of the letter we delivered to your office, in that response you failed to acknowledge the most time sensitive issue. We will again emphasize to you the vulnerable position of the workers who are laid off for the summer, and the necessity of the right of first recall in the fall. The courageous efforts of the workers towards unionization in a hostile environment would be for naught if they are not rehired because of their organization activities. Because Sodexo has demonstrated that it cannot be trusted to protect its workers' rights, we expect the University to ensure that appropriate measures are taken to prevent wrongful firings, including the explicit, written indication of due cause for any workers not rehired at the end of summer leave.

You suggested we contact Sodexo with our concerns. General Manager Phoebe Cook received a letter from the students (attached), which she refused to accept. She would not even allow the letter to be left in her office until contacting Anne Banos, who works for Tulane University, making it clear that on Tulane's campus, Sodexo answers to Tulane's administration. Not only is Sodexo unresponsive to the students, contacting Sodexo is a very superficial response to a deeper institutional issue at Tulane. In refusing to answer for the wrongs Sodexo has committed on our campus while under your watch, you are choosing to ignore the issues of inequality, disrespect and the lack of dignity that tarnish our name in the New Orleans community.

Forwarding the issue of a Labor Code of Conduct to the Social Issues Committee appears to be a show of good faith that the University, and we hope that your administration continues to take significant steps towards addressing fair labor practices for everyone at Tulane. However, we do not feel that passing the issue along diminishes the necessity and urgency of such a code nor does it diminish your role in making a Labor Code of Conduct a reality. We fully expect the Office of the President to remain engaged in the discussion.

The students have contacted you, as the leader of this University, to uphold our core values. As indicated in the statement released by your office, Sodexo is a vendor that is paid by the University and the University fully expects that all vendors treat their employees well. Workers have publicly stated that Sodexo is not treating them well and that they cannot address these issues within the structure of that company. Your refusal to acknowledge this fact belittles their humanity [was that phrase in the first letter?]. Your shirking responsibility for the treatment of subcontracted workers on Tulane's campus insults the values of our university and brings your reputation as a community leader into question.

Tulane recently released an economic report claiming the university's importance in the community as the largest employer in the city of New Orleans. To dismiss Sodexo employees as outside of your responsibility and then to use them to suggest how Tulane economically benefits the city is contradictory. On page 24 of the economic impact report, it boasts that

“Tulane employees, and the employees of its suppliers and contractors, similarly use part of their earnings to buy a wide variety of goods and services – housing, utilities, food, personal services, and other household needs – from local businesses; and the employees of those businesses do the same.”

Can the university truthfully and ethically claim this positive impact, when these very employees are not making living wages? When the administration of Tulane has explicitly denied responsibility for working conditions that are unethical and degrading?

The university recently honored some of its employees that have reached milestones at Tulane. Many food service employees, who have been here longer than the contracted vendors have received no recognition for their dedication to serving the students, faculty, and staff at Tulane. The administration's attempt to associate this campaign—which has been entirely peaceful and orderly—with violence was an appalling way to respond to our attempt to celebrate these people who serve us every day and yet are treated shamefully. To truly give the employees the respect they deserve, Tulane must move beyond superficial shows of appreciation. Tulane must tell Sodexo that if it continues to intimidate its employees and treat them unfairly, it will no longer be our contracted food supplier.

Your commendation of the students becoming engaged in community issues is not a satisfactory response to the issues presented. Students are involved with this issue because we are appalled by the way Tulane has used subcontracting to displace responsibility for the working conditions of a large and important group of campus employees. We are not involved with this issue to improve the image of community engagement at Tulane. Please do not think that mere recognition or praise is enough to address our demands.

Your response does not even acknowledge that unfair labor practices are occurring in our campus community. Last week a delegation of workers went to your office to express their concerns directly to you, and were instead given a meeting with an administrative assistant. While we understand that you have a very busy schedule, your unwillingness to meet face to face with campus food workers or to acknowledge their concerns as legitimate is unacceptable from a public figure who is supposed to represent our entire community. To believe the words of Sodexo over the words of these workers devalues them as a part of our community and shows that we value business contracts over the welfare of our community. We expect you to acknowledge the disparity between our Core Values and the workers' reality and address this immediately.

As Barbara Ehrenreich, the writer who was recently Tulane's powerhouse speaker, said on her visit to campus, "You can contract out your labor, but you cannot contract out your moral responsibility." Understand that we are fully committed in solidarity with our workers and we will continue to be vocal and visible to this end. As long as the administration takes the position that Sodexo workers will not receive the same treatment as all other members of the Tulane community, we will continue to fight openly against the despicable way they have been treated by their employers. This week is a national week of student action with students at universities across the country speaking out against the unjust and exploitative practices of Sodexo on their campuses, and we will be no exception. We hope that you will take the time to observe the non-violent demonstrations and actions that we will be displaying and that they will give you cause to reflect more deeply on what your responsibilities as the leader of this institution are.

Sincerely,

Tulane University Solidarity Committee

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