

May 6, 2010

Dear President Wagner and Provost Lewis:

We, the undersigned faculty of Emory University, are writing to you in the context of the union organizing effort currently in progress among the food worker employees of Sodexo, one of the University's subcontractors. More specifically, we are writing in response to a statement outlining the University's stance toward this organizing effort issued by the President's Cabinet and published in the Emory Wheel on April 1st.

We have a major concern about this statement.

It is of course right and proper to stipulate (as the Cabinet does in its articulation of University policy) that Emory should remain neutral on the question of whether Sodexo employees should adopt union representation.

But to agree with this is emphatically NOT to endorse the proposition that is offered at the outset of the Cabinet's statement and that appears to frame its entire perspective: that "[t]he employees in question are not Emory employees, and Emory does not control the labor policies of its contractors."

We find this viewpoint disturbing and disappointing. As you must know, the argument by businesses and other organizations that they are not responsible for the behavior of sub-contractors has a long and sorry history. Surely Emory does not want to be accused of seeking refuge behind the notion that practices transpiring on our campus are--effectively--not our problem simply because they are carried out by subsidiary contractors. Surely this is not the proper posture for a University striving to claim an identity--and mount a major fundraising drive--grounded in claims of blending academic excellence and ethics. Surely a school committed to "courageous inquiry" and "engaged scholarship," to being a "noble community," does not want to be viewed as minimizing its responsibilities for what occurs in its own buildings and on its own grounds. Surely Emory does not want to stand accused of finding it easier to extend moral and intellectual capital to foreign lands than to pay mindful attention to what happens in the DUC cafeteria.

Our point (to reiterate) is not that Emory should take sides on the question of unionization by Sodexo workers. Our point is that the University's neutrality should be linked not to disengagement--"the employees in question are not Emory employees"--but rather to a clear and affirmative insistence that this institution's own values compel it to insist that the liberties of all involved--certainly including these very employees--will be taken seriously and safeguarded. We would respectfully suggest that the need

for such insistence is the more pressing precisely because prevailing legal and administrative regimens--not excepting several evoked in the Cabinet's statement--have in actual fact not always proved effective in protecting employee rights.

But then, beyond this affirmative declaration, we would also urge that the University begin to take far more seriously its role as an employer. Emory's non-faculty workforce currently runs to some 20,000 individuals. The University's footprint in the local labor market is thus substantial--and its responsibilities are commensurately sizable. Indeed, just as Emory concluded it needed to initiate new administrative mechanisms--in the form of policies and Commissions--to address race and ethnicity, the status of women, as well as sexuality, gender diversity, and queer equality, so it may well be time to create comparable mechanisms to consider and formulate employment practices appropriate for a "destination university" of the twenty-first century. We would suggest that the proposals advanced by SWS (Students and Workers in Solidarity) for a Presidential Commission on the Status of Labor along with a University Code of Conduct for Contracted and Sub-Contracted Employees could prove useful starting points for these new considerations and formulations.

We hope you will appreciate that we are writing in the spirit of a shared commitment to strengthening Emory. But we hope you will also appreciate our belief that a strengthened Emory must have the imagination--and confidence--to reassess how it deals with its non-academic laborforce.

Sincerely,

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