News



Sodexo food service employees at Loyola University New Orleans pose in solidarity during a teach-in organized by student activists, Unite Here Local 23 and the Catholic Labor Network last November. Workers won union representation this spring and are preparing for contract negotiations. (Courtesy of Unite Here)



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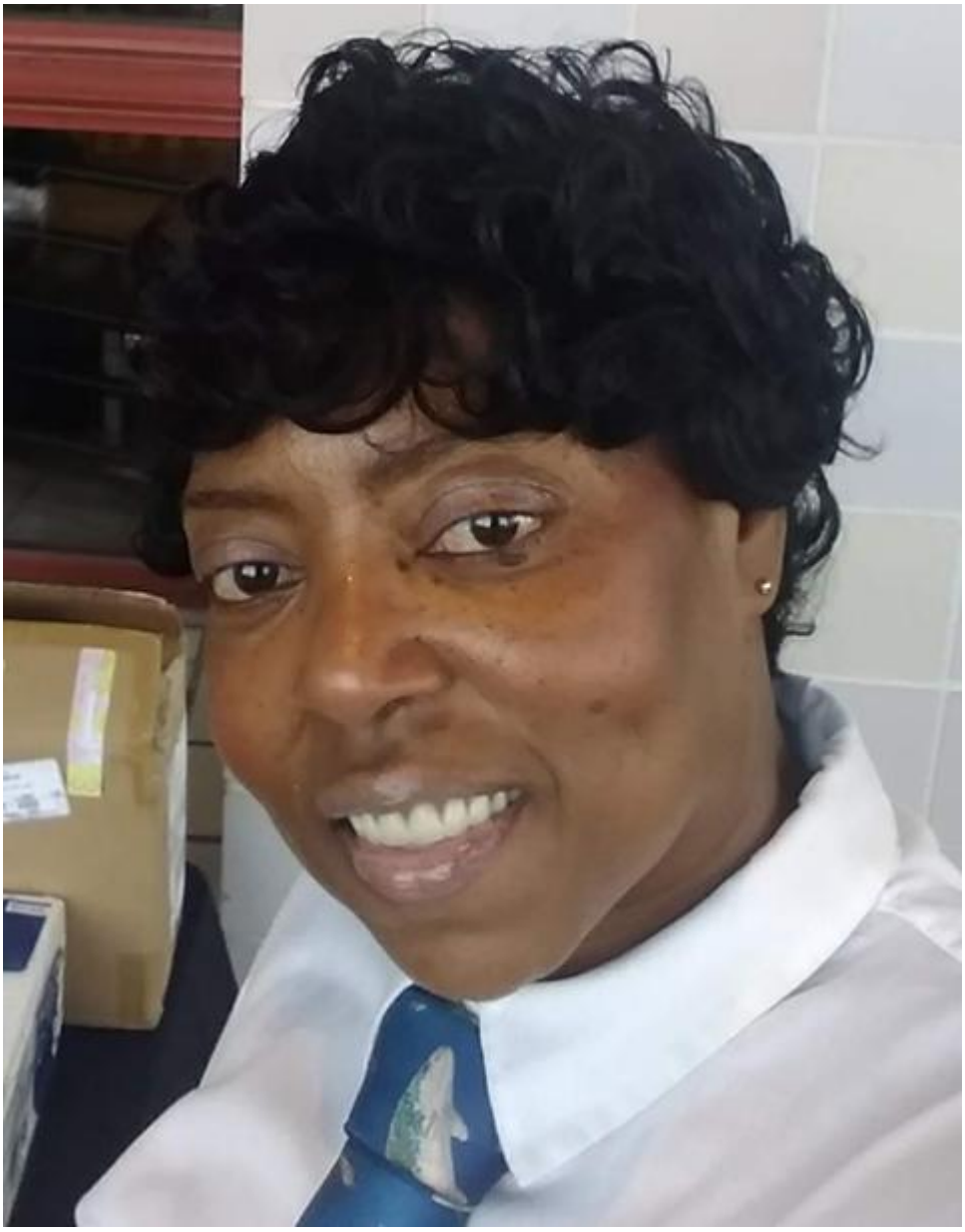
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As summer ends, Jacqui Harrison will button up her crisp white shirt and return to a job in food service at Loyola University New Orleans, just as she's done for the past decade. This year, though, she'll step into the kitchen as a union member.

"I enjoy seeing the students each fall — the new ones and the old ones," said the 61-year-old cook and dining staff team leader. "But thinking about this year feels really wonderful."

After a monthslong campaign garnering support from Loyola students and faculty and the Catholic Labor Network, on April 28 food service workers at the Jesuit school won union representation with the local affiliate of Unite Here, a labor union representing 300,000 people in food service, transportation and hotel industries. Contract negotiations are expected to begin soon.



Jacqui Harrison, a cook and dining staff team leader, said it meant a great deal to have support from students, but she wasn't surprised by it. "I just love them," she said. (Courtesy of Jacqui Harrison)

"This is about more than just getting a raise, which is really important so you can take care of your family," said Harrison. "It's about getting better health insurance, vacation time with our family, being able to move forward and move up."

Loyola contracts with Sodexo, a multinational food service contract company that operates cafeterias in government buildings, corporate offices and college dining halls. The organizing at Loyola was part of a nationwide effort by Sodexo employees,

including those at Catholic institutions, to unionize or negotiate contracts with higher wages and lower-cost benefits in an industry known for low wages.

While Sodexo — which reported increased profitability last year — pays $12-14 per hour, according to Unite Here, the living wage in New Orleans is more than $15, says the Data Center, a New Orleans nonprofit research organization.

The Catholic Labor Network sent a letter to Sodexo last fall signed by Catholic priests and allies from other religious traditions urging the company to remain neutral as their employees considered union membership.

Over the past year, around 2,000 Sodexo workers have joined Unite Here, including employees who work at a Maryknoll Sisters cafeteria in New York. In March, Sodexo workers at St. Mary's College of California secured a new contract with higher wages.

Akilah Toney, a psychology major, was involved in the unionizing effort at Loyola. She said for months students strengthened their relationship with workers, wore buttons and stickers showing solidarity, and helped organize a teach-in with Unite Here Local 23 and the Catholic Labor Network.

Attended by more than 100 students, faculty and dining hall workers, the November event included prayer, an overview of Catholic social teaching and workers' right to unionize and earn a living wage, and testimonies from workers themselves.

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"It's especially important that we see workers' rights upheld at Catholic institutions," Clayton Sinyai, executive director of the network, told NCR. "It is one of the ways we evangelize the world — by showing we believe and live out the tenets of Catholic social teaching."

Students experienced some pushback from administrators and professors regarding their involvement in unionizing, according to Toney. "Some said: 'Students shouldn't be doing this on campus.' " But overall, their involvement was supported, Toney said, adding that a number of professors "were really passionate about workers' rights and the history of organizing."

Rachel Hoormann, vice president of marketing and communications at Loyola, said the unionization decision was between Sodexo workers and their corporate leadership.

"Loyola University neither encouraged nor discouraged Sodexo workers from discussing unionization with their management and supported the rights of the employees and Sodexo management to negotiate in good faith," Hoormann said in an email to NCR.

Toney feels her involvement in the unionizing work has been a pivotal part of her time at Loyola.

"It was something beyond college academics," she said. "It was a way to learn about political advocacy and it was something really special. It's been a beautiful thing to know how far community love and community caring for people goes."

A version of this story appeared in the **June 23-July 6, 2023** print issue under the headline: Food service workers at Loyola New Orleans win union, with student support.