
CSU food workers are worried about the fall semester

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Dining hall workers at four regional state universities — including Eastern Connecticut State University in Willimantic — say they are being left out of the administration’s planning for the fall semester.

They fear they will not be hired back if classes are held online because of the COVID-19 crisis.

The employees, who work for private contractors Sodexo and the Compass Group, said at an online press conference recently they are as integral to campus life as other employees and deserve to know their employment status.

They are among 343 members of Local 217 Unite Here working at the four universities.

“I don’t like being up in the air. I like being settled,” said Pamela Gray, a 29-year worker at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, which is served by Compass Group. “I’m on a budget right now.”

Gray said she underwent a heart and kidney transplant a year ago and that the medications are expensive. She fears losing her health insurance.

“The main thing we really want is respect. I’m trying not to get frantic from everything that’s going on,” Gray said.

While the employees work for the private dining service providers, they stay at their university when a new company comes in at the end of a contract, the workers

CSU FOOD WORKERS, Page 4

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Continued from Page 1

said.

“It’s been our experience that food service workers get left behind,” said Isadora Milanez, an organizer for Local 217.

She said a petition was signed March 20 by 70 percent of the cafeteria workers asking to meet with Mark Ojakian, president of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities.

Ken Blair, president of Local 217 and a lead cook at ECSU, contacted the Board of Regents, which oversees the system and puts out bids for the food service contracts.

He was told “the universities have no employment relationship with cafeteria workers since they’re sub-contracted,” Milanez said.

Eastern also is served by Compass Group.

Western and Central Connecticut state universities, located in Danbury and New Britain, respectively, are served by Sodexo.

“The regents and these leaders, they’re the ones that are going to decide,” Milanez said. “They actually do have a relationship with us that is meaningful and is a two-way street. So it is just not true that they have no responsibility.”

The workers are laid off each spring when the semester ends and go on unem-

ployment.

This year, because the universities closed campuses early, the employees are concerned about running out of unemployment benefits, Milanez said.

Blair, who has worked at Eastern for 17 years, said “you get to meet a lot of people, meet a lot of kids, and you form a relationship with these kids. We’re told we’re part of the community by the company; we’re told we’re part of the community by the universities.”

Comparing cafeteria workers to faculty and other employees of the universities, Blair said “we are equal to them ... but we don’t feel that way. The colleges and the companies need to stand up and take care of the workers.”

Trish DeCastro of Danbury, who works at WCSU, said her three children have all gone to state colleges.

“In this unpredictable time, many people are worried,” she said. “We don’t know if we have our health insurance. If we don’t come back in August, that’s going to be a problem for our health insurance. And nobody gives us answers.”

Representatives for Sodexo and Compass Group could not be reached for comment.

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