

# University of Miami workers demand higher wages, better working conditions

Annie Johnston and Matthew Taylor  
27 July 2021

Workers at the University of Miami in the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) are demanding higher wages and better working conditions in advance of a new contract at the beginning of September.

There are currently some 650 custodians, food service workers, and groundskeepers employed by the University through their subcontractors ABM Industries and Chartwell. Their average pay is a mere \$10.50 per hour, a poverty-level wage at one of the wealthiest universities in the country, and currently far below the \$15/hour Florida voters approved last fall, but which will not take full effect until 2026.

Workers' demands include increasing pay yearly so that the hourly rate always remains above the projected \$15 hourly minimum wage. They also seek to prevent layoffs for the duration of the pandemic, a stipulation included in the previous contract that workers fear the school will attempt to repeal. In addition, workers want to defend the existing seniority system that determines the order in which the administration can dismiss them.

For the past several months these workers, along with UM students, have engaged in a series of rallies and protests organized by the SEIU. Most recently, a march by custodial workers at the University, intended to deliver a list of demands to the university president, was met with an implicit threat of repression, with university Police Chief David A. Rivero dispatched to receive the workers' petition in the administration's stead.

University President Julio Frenk served as health minister in the right-wing administration of Mexican President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) and was a senior fellow to the Gates Foundation's Global Health Initiative.

Frenk's deployment of his police chief is aimed at intimidating the protesting workers, who are largely

immigrants and minorities, and is an indication of the administration's fear of the growing militancy among its subcontracted employees.

These workers have demonstrated tremendous courage in the recent period. In 2006, 425 of these now-650 workers, subcontracted to the University, conducted a nine-week strike, which included a month-long hunger strike. That strike concluded with the workers signing union cards and becoming members of the SEIU.

Before the conclusion of that strike, wages for all workers stood at an abysmal \$6.40 an hour. Afterwards, they increased in varying degrees, depending on what type of work a given employee did, though none exceeded \$10. The fact that wages have scarcely increased since that struggle demonstrates that the SEIU has done nothing to improve workers' conditions.

The University of Miami has historically subjected its workers to particularly horrendous conditions. Before the 2006 strike, the *Chronicle for Higher Education* found that UM workers had a median salary of \$13,120/year, the second lowest in pay to custodial employees among 195 U.S. universities, earning the school a spot among the publication's "Dirty Dozen" schools.

David Liberman, UM's senior vice president for business and finance, stated at the time, "We don't raise any questions about their business [referring to UNICCO, the subcontractor used at the time], [and] allow them to pay whatever they want to pay as long as they can recruit and retain workers, and still make a buck at the end of the day." In response, the Faculty Senate twice recommended in 2001 to then-President Donna Shalala, who later was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, that the university change its policy

(or lack thereof) for subcontractors

The University of Miami has \$1.05 billion in endowments. Its provost makes \$950,000 per year, and its president earns \$1.7 million per year, along with a house provided by the university. The university has no excuse whatsoever not to pay its workers a decent wage, in the middle of a deadly pandemic, no less.

The subcontractors used by the university also have vast resources. ABM industries is a Fortune 500 company with over 130,000 employees. In 2020 its annual revenue was nearly \$6 billion. Compass Group, the parent company of Chartwells, is also a Fortune 500 company and has over 500,000 employees. In 2020 the company generated over \$27 billion in revenues.

In conducting this struggle, the workers at UM face not only the combined strength of the university and its sub-contractors but also the treachery of the SEIU. The union has limited the struggle to a series of protests and petitions which the administration has simply ignored, while keeping workers on the job.

Last fall, even as hundreds of students and staff at the university were falling sick with coronavirus, the SEIU limited workers to toothless protests, including a “die-in” to protest the lack of personal protective equipment such as gowns and hazmat suits. The union did not, however, call for a halt in the unsafe reopening of schools, which contributed nationwide to millions of new cases.

The SEIU has a long history of betrayals nationwide. Earlier this month the union ended an 18-day strike by nearly two thousand Cook County workers in Chicago after agreeing to raise the premiums workers pay for health care and agreeing to a wage hike at below-inflation rates. The Cook County workers had also demanded that the wage floor for the lowest-paid employees be raised and that that annual pay raise steps be changed based on seniority. The union ignored these demands when it shut down the strike and sent the workers back to work.

Also this month, the SEIU-affiliated Workers United union announced it was imposing a sellout contract on 460 Amcor workers in Terre Haute, Indiana. These workers, who manufacture packaging materials for various industries, had twice voted the contract down. The union prevented a planned strike that the workers had voted to carry out if the contract was rejected for a second time.

In order to defend their interests and achieve higher wages and better working conditions the workers at the University of Miami should follow the example of Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia and form their own rank-and-file committee independent of the SEIU to fight for their own demands.



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