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Seattle Community Raises \$20,000 to Support Laid Off Dining Hall Workers

Logan Gilbert, Investigative Editor

Over the course of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, many businesses have been forced to adapt to changing conditions throughout the country, causing millions of Americans to lose their businesses and livelihoods. This includes a large number of workers at Seattle University's dining hall locations, who were let go due to the absence of the student population.

Those who were lucky were able to receive unemployment or stimulus payments, but not everyone was able to receive that kind of aid. There is a demographic of people who were disqualified for unemployment.

To Seattle U alumna Jessica Piraino, the lack of support for workers was the main reason that she got involved with the campaign—specifically after spending so much time with workers taking care of her and other students on campus.

“Dining hall workers are kind of the core of a student's life,” Piraino said. “We would go every day, say hi to them, get coffee at places around campus, study there...so it's important to recognize who fed us, and give back how we can.”

In an effort to support those workers who were laid off, the Local 8 Union reached out to members of the Seattle U community, including alums and current students, who came together to try and raise funds for them.

In early March, a petition was made for Seattle U to financially support dining hall workers that got laid off, but despite 700 people sending letters and emails to the administration, the effort got little traction with the school, said Jared Fontenette—a fourth-year Social Work and Theology major, who worked with the team advocating for workers.

“So much of the marketing of the university talks about being a school for social justice and creating a more just world. It's a big part of our marketing, and I think a lot of students and faculty come here to do that,” Fontenette said. “Unfortunately I think this exposed their true colors, I don't think that they care about social justice because they couldn't even take the time to respond to this, much less actually help.”

After receiving no word from the university about contributing funds or supporting the campaign, the campaign for laid off workers got a different idea to put together a fundraiser to raise money directly from the community. At this point the fundraiser—which operated through volunteers emailing and calling members of the Seattle U community—they have raised around \$20,000. The money is beginning to be distributed to the workers.

Of that money each applicant is getting anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000 depending on their situation. Sean Donoghue-Neider, a shop steward and former line cook at Seattle U, said that this money is immensely important to the workers that need it, but with the high cost of living in the Seattle area, it is only a drop in the bucket, said Seattle U alumni Fred Seymour.

“What we were able to get will not even cover one month's rent, but what we did with it was to pave the way for something more,” Seymour said. “I hope that we at least planted the seed for the community to continue to support each other and hold those in power accountable.”

The campaign was just the start of a movement to better protect Seattle U food safety workers, said Seymour. The team was hoping that this would lead to the creation of a Student Advocacy group on campus that would help support food service workers in the long term, thus continuing the steps that were started in this fundraiser.

For those struggling with paying for basic human necessities, every bit counts. Most of the donations to the campaign have been small donations of just a few dollars, with a large amount of people donating says Sean Donoghue-Neider, a shop steward and former line cook at Seattle U. He urges anyone who might want to donate to the cause to give anything that they can in these difficult circumstances.

“Especially in the middle of this crisis, there are a lot of people in need across the board,” Donoghue-Neider said. “So helping everyone you can is not possible, but it's important to come together across the board and do what you can, help where you can. That is what is gonna get us through this not with one person coming in and saving everyone, but with us all doing what we can where we can.”



