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Chartwells Employees Voice Continuing Concerns Over Rights and Safety

Genny Sheara, Staff Reporter

At 6 a.m. every morning, over 10 thousand Chartwells employees begin their shifts in dining halls across the country. Chartwells Higher Education provides food and dining services to colleges, often employing university students. Chartwells identifies itself with a focus on student success and sustainability. Over the past few years of Seattle University's ten-year contracted partnership with Chartwells, concerns have arisen over workplace safety, representation and treatment. Tensions appear to culminate every few years in threats to strike and alleged concessions from the company—in 2013, 2019 and 2021—but every year, workers voice the same frustrations.

Harvard professor Gloria Sorensen, a researcher on food service safety conditions, noted that the nuances of food service work makes attempting to address any issues complicated.

"It might be things like scheduling, supervisor support, worker support and policies that influence their ability to take a break. But it might also be physical conditions. In food service, the physical demand includes working with sharp knives, hot surfaces and cashiers standing for long periods may not be able to move around," Sorensen explained.

Keila Santos, a first-year psychology major and current member of Seattle U's work-study program, has noticed these issues but ultimately conceded to them being part of the job.

"I do feel like we are not as regulated safety-wise as we should be. Sometimes there isn't a manager telling us what to do and we don't know when to check the temperature of the foods, how hot or cold things should be and some things aren't as clean as they could be," Santos said.

Cashiers on campus have echoed these concerns as well, emphasizing their experience standing for hours on end.

"We have to stand for very long periods of time, even if we're not actively doing something," Santos said.

The pandemic has impacted Chartwells, as it has reshaped the way food service operated for the past two years. Globally, restaurants and cafeterias shut down—some even permanently. This left many food service workers suddenly without jobs, as both employers and employees faced uncertainty.

Ethan Garza, a third-year political science major, recounted how he and his co-workers' jobs were suddenly terminated as Seattle U went online in 2020. He states they received no financial compensation or notices.

"They just called us all into a Zoom meeting and basically told us, 'You're fired.' And that was it," Garza recalled.

Sorensen noted that the pandemic poses unique threats to workers' health and has further alienated communication between workers and upper management.

"The food service and hospitality industry have had greater turnover than any other industry in the country," Sorensen said.

There are numerous factors Sorensen cites influencing the heightened turnover rate.

“COVID-19 is taking a toll on the attitudes of so many, and customers may not be as supportive or empathetic towards workers. Individuals may also not be able to make ends meet anymore,” Sorensen said.

Seattle U Resident District Manager Andrew Gaynor explained that the company has continually focused on maintaining a safe and healthy work environment throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

“During the pandemic in 2020, we reaffirmed our commitment to support campus workers by prioritizing safety and offering continued healthcare coverage for all workers regardless of employment status. Our associates are at the heart of our dining program and appreciate the positive experiences they create for students on campus,” Gaynor wrote.

He also reinforced the emphasis that Chartwells places on communication throughout all levels of the company, utilizing pre-service dining meetings that take place twice daily in all dining locations.

Complaints surrounding underpaying and overworking, staffing and scheduling surfaced prior to the pandemic. Garza, who began working for Chartwells in his first year in 2018, experienced the effects of short staffing and increased workload firsthand.

“There was a stress of when and where I was going to work. As time went on, I had more and more responsibilities piled on and realized how chaotic it really was working there,” Garza said. “Because of how schedules and positions were shuffled between workers, there were times when individuals would have to work entire stations or sections of the building alone.”

Garza explained that the regulations that Chartwells had in place at the time required that both a team supervisor—often a fourth-year or graduate student and a manager independent of Seattle U be present at the campus cafeteria throughout all hours of the day. However, because of confusion with scheduling, there would be times when only one or neither management figures would be present.

“Sometimes they wouldn’t show up. I actually had to become a manager because no one else would. I had to take charge of the money and put it in the safes, I had to actually sign who worked which station and who got breaks,” Garza said. “I basically became a manager without getting paid as a manager.”

Garza’s work experience with Chartwells was plagued by concern and confusion regarding fair payment and scheduling. He recalls how his first paycheck shocked him, as it was only half of what he expected to earn.

“The final straw was when COVID-19 hit,” Garza said. “We were told we were all fired and we would receive compensation for paid vacation days and the last few weeks that we hadn’t yet received a paycheck for. I don’t think anyone ever received that payment.”

Ultimately, many individuals—both employees and professionals—believe there are still ways in which Chartwells can make changes for the better. Sorensen noted that when companies pay attention to what influences workers care about, such as advancement within jobs, increasing salary and benefits and safer working conditions, turnover rates go down and employee satisfaction increases.

The Seattle U community waits to see how Chartwells management will respond to mounting concerns from employees over working conditions. Many are hopeful that both the company and Seattle U dining will address these issues.