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Op-Ed

Tim Rutten: Will L.A. County cut from the bottom?

The Board of Supervisors may outsource the janitorial work at its Olive View-UCLA and Harbor-UCLA medical centers to Sodexo, which plans layoffs. That would be an injustice.

Tim Rutten

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These days, the battle for economic justice is fought daily in a thousand obscure skirmishes in boardrooms and executive suites across the country. It's a conflict usually waged under the cover of smugly technocratic euphemisms such as outsourcing, right-sizing and resource rationalization. To the extent they're counted at all, the human casualties are reckoned as collateral damage.

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As early as Tuesday, one of those skirmishes may occur in the Los Angeles County Hall of Administration, where the Board of Supervisors will consider whether to outsource the janitorial work at its Olive View-UCLA and Harbor-UCLA medical centers to Sodexo, a multinational corporation based in France. Olive View currently is cleaned by 122 janitors and Harbor-UCLA by 142. All are members of the Service Employees International Union and earn the hourly minimum under the county's living-wage ordinance — \$9.64 for those who opt for healthcare benefits and \$11.84 for those who don't.

The French firm's bid for the work at the two hospitals is predicated on immediately reducing the number of janitors by 30% at Olive View and by slightly less than 25% at Harbor-UCLA. That means 36 at the former and 34 at the latter would be laid off if Sodexo gets the contract. The company's proposal is being evaluated by county administrative officials, who will make a recommendation to the supervisors.

When you consider a couple of hundred low-wage workers going up against France's second-largest multinational employer, even the rhetorical trope of David and Goliath seems somehow wan and inadequate. Sodexo is the world's 21st-largest employer with 380,000 workers in 80 countries. Last year, its corporate profits exceeded \$1 billion. The company's website proudly describes the firm as "ranked third among the world's leading outsourcing services companies."

A controversy over Sodexo's administration of the food services contract at Loyola Marymount University two years ago suggests just how the company achieved that ranking. When the school's student newspaper raised questions about whether Sodexo was paying its workers the city of Los Angeles' living wage, company executive Lisa Farrell told the newspaper: "The current L.A. living wage is \$10.30 an hour, with health benefits, or \$11.55 an hour if no health benefits are offered. Here at LMU, we have a minimum starting wage of \$9.05 per hour plus one meal per shift valued at \$1.25."

On the other side from a firm willing to conduct itself in that fashion are workers like Haydee Charvet, one of the Olive

View janitors with whom I recently spoke. A widow with two grown children, Charvet is a Cuban American who came to the United States with her family when she was 9. She's worked as a teacher's aide and janitor since her teenage years, when she helped her parents clean L.A.'s office buildings on the weekends.

"I've worked at Olive View for five years and enjoy it very much," she said. When she started at the hospital, Charvet had her own apartment, but to cut expenses she moved in with her daughter and son-in-law, who also are struggling financially. Charvet's wages now help them as well.

Sodexo's plan to cut 36 of her colleagues, Charvet said, "will be horrible. It will be chaos. Worst of all, it will be dangerous for the patients, and they're the ones we all care about most." Many of her co-workers, she said, have been employed at Olive View for 25 years, and many are single mothers.

What does she expect to happen if Sodexo gets the contract? "I believe they'll lay off the ones who are older first," she said. "Then they'll go after the ones who don't speak English."

This is a bleak time for working people, made bleaker still by so many large employers' unilateral abrogation of the reciprocal bonds that once created a sense of commonality between labor and management. When employers turn to an outsourcer, like Sodexo, they're sending more than jobs out the door — they're also outsourcing their sense of responsibility to their workers and, conveniently, the guilt they ought to feel for ignoring it.

The supervisors have an obligation to spend the taxpayers' money prudently, but laying off 70 men and women barely scraping by in these hard times would be something else entirely. It would be a declaration that what we no longer can afford is our collective sense of justice and decency.

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