Two years ago, United Academics presented to UVM Administration and the Board of Trustees a petition with 2,626 signatures calling on UVM to insist on fair treatment of campus food service workers employed on campus by Sodexo. Not only were food service employees expected to work while sick but they were also facing unilateral reclassification as part-time employees so that Sodexo could cut their benefits.

Two years later, things have not changed very much in how Sodexo treats its workers. Despite Sodexo granting its workers a limited number of sick days, presumably to use at their discretion, the company established a points system that continues to incentivize employees to work while sick. Employees who are absent for any reason may receive points, including for illnesses verified by physicians and affirmed in writing. Upon receipt of seven points within a rolling twelve-month period, regardless of the circumstances facing individuals, Sodexo workers are subject to termination under the Attendance Policy. Sodexo also continues to pay very low wages, and to resist efforts to source our food in a more sustainable manner.

Sodexo’s present actions on workers’ rights and sustainable sourcing stand in direct violation of the Vision and Mission of the University of Vermont as articulated by the President’s Office. Despite provisions in the present contract between UVM and Sodexo that attempt to protect Sodexo workers, and in violation of our institutional commitment to “learning and ethical conduct”, Sodexo continues to mistreat workers in ways that are prohibited in contracts with UVM’s own workers. Additionally and in violation of our shared institutional commitment to “liberal education, environment, health and public service”, Sodexo appears unwilling to pursue more sustainable food sourcing options at levels that are already in place at other area institutions. Accordingly, United Academics opposes any new contract or contract extension between UVM and Sodexo that does not contain enforceable provisions ensuring the following:

1.) Wages: Sodexo, along with all other contractors serving the University of Vermont Community and the University itself, must commit to following the City of Burlington Livable Wage Ordinance, which applies to all contractors and subcontractors to the City of Burlington. At present, these Livable Wage rates are
$13.94 per hour for employees eligible for health insurance and $15.83 per hour for employees not eligible for health insurance.

2.) Sick Leave and other leave: Sodexo must commit to a system of sick and family leave similar to that specified in Articles 26-29 of the Contract between The University of Vermont and The United Electrical Workers Union (similar leave systems cover other University employees). Employees are entitled to a minimum of 12 days of paid sick leave without penalty each year, accumulated from year to year (Article 26 of the UE Contract), in addition to reasonable disability and family leave (Articles 27-29). Sick leave may be used without penalty or unreasonable documentation requirements. The UE contract specifies that a doctor’s note is required only in cases where an employee takes more than five consecutive days of sick leave, or in cases of suspected abuse (with notice to the Union that management will require enhanced documentation).

3.) Sustainable sourcing: Sodexo must commit to a rapid transition (2-3 years) to a minimum of 40% locally or sustainably sourced ingredients, with a further commitment to reach 70% local or sustainable sourcing by the end of this contract (assuming a 10 year contract). Both the University of Vermont Medical Center and Middlebury College are already at or above the 40% level, so it IS attainable within the constraints of an institutional food service.

If Sodexo is unable or unwilling to meet these requirements, it is almost certainly too late to bring in a new food service for the 2015-2016 Academic Year, but Sodexo should receive only a 1 year contract, with provisions 1 and 2 above written into the contract. The new bidding process should ensure that at least one finalist is a company (other than Sodexo or Aramark) that specializes in more sustainable food service options, both from a workers’ rights and an environmental standpoint, and should consider the option of running the food service internally. Non-management Sodexo employees’ jobs must be protected in any transition to a new food service, whether internally run or outsourced.