What does ARA stand for?

Local 26 of Hotel, Restaurant, Institutional Employees, and Bartenders Union is now at war with the corporation of ARA, that huge amorphous chunks that MIT has hired to manage the institute's cafeterias. I would like to step back for a moment and call upon every MIT student to join in the battle. Our cause is obvious: ARA lies to students.

My argument will continue itself to the Lobdell dining hall, which remains the worst place on campus to eat. It is true that symptoms of ARA's treachery can be seen at a moment's glance at every Institute dining facility, with the exception of the faculty club. But faculty members who frequent Lobdell and Walker Memorial will surely be sympathetic to any call. ARA spent the summer "renovating" Lobdell. What did they actually do to it? ARA installed fancy glass display cabinets. ARA planted mason jars containing macaroni and other dried goods on the counter tops. ARA hung huge signs with inviting photographs to advertise the selection of food (which hasn't changed). Each one of these actions should mean another lie to students.

We've all seen the glass cabinets: they are beautiful. They are filled with all the upkeep foods we love to consume, like toasted bread of turkey, a wheel of cheddar cheese and "garnish," (whenever that is). The only catch is that nothing in glass cabinets is for sale; it's all for show.

Last weekend, I went to Lobdell to get a sandwich for lunch. There were two highly trained sandwich makers constructing sandwiches to order behind the fancy counters. After 25 minutes of patiently waiting, I got to place my order:

"I'd like a tuna fish sandwich with cheddar cheese, please."

"We don't have cheddar cheese. We only have American, swiss and muenster. Which would you like?"

Even after I pointed out to the sandwich expert that there was cheddar cheese in the glass cabinet, she wasn't supposed to go onto the glass cabinet. I asked to speak with the manager, but he wasn't around. Before ARA arrived, a manager was always around.

Indeed, the only way to tell the difference between Lobdell's unattractive sandwiches and the egg salad sandwiches on the counter is by texture: there are evenly tasty sandwiches. They are the same fillings that were served before ARA came. ARA hasn't improved the food, just the atmosphere. I guess people buy more stuff if it is purchased in a pleasant place.

There are other lies. Like the macaroni in the mason jars on the counter tops. Why are they there? Why are there barrels of fruit hanging when the fruit isn't for sale?

Of course, ARA's "Big Lie" is the signs they've hung over every counter. There are the same signs, with the same photographs, that ARA hangs in many major airports. The only difference is that in airports the pictures look something like the food they advertise. Not so in Lobdell. So you have to ask yourself, again: Why are these signs here? I don't see how it could possibly improve sales. ARA has spent a lot of money. Where does the money come from? It comes from MIT. Where does the money go to? Part of it goes to the companies that sell the signs and the glass counters, which appear to be the same ones that ARA uses in counteirs airports across the United States.

ARA gets paid a fixed fee for providing managerial oversight of the MIT dining facilities. This means that if ARA makes too much money it goes back to MIT, and if ARA loses money it gets subsidized. MIT brought in ARA with the hope that ARA could manage the cafeterias more economically than MIT could manage them itself. It now seems clear that one way ARA saves money is by not paying for its employees' pension plans.

So be fair, ARA has made a few minor improvements to Lobdell. Lobdell now sells thick french fries cut from real potatoes. Students can purchase fruit cups. Fresh juices are available in convenient glass bottles. ARA posts comment boards to which they seem to be paying attention. Have these minor improvements been worth the cost, a cost which includes the loss of a pension plan to the workers and ARA's continued insistence to the intelligence of MIT students? I don't think so.

Before we run ARA out of town, I just have one question for them:

What does ARA stand for?