

California warehouse workers return to work

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Warehouse workers in the Inland Empire region of California, west of Los Angeles, have returned to work last Friday after engaging in a series of protests against brutal working conditions in the last month. At a warehouse in Mira Loma which services Wal-Mart Stores, at least three dozen workers walked off the job to protest unsafe and unhealthy conditions. A 50-mile march from Riverside to Los Angeles was also organized last week by a union called Warehouse Workers United (WWU), which is affiliated with the Change to Win coalition.

The protest in Mira Loma occurred at a warehouse owned by NFI Industries, a New Jersey company that operates warehouses and distribution centers in southern California for major retail companies, including Wal-Mart. The walkout was the result of poor conditions on the job, including loading and unloading trucks in temperatures of 120 degrees Fahrenheit, broken equipment, lack of basic necessities such as drinking water, cooling fans, safety equipment, and employer retaliation for raising these concerns.

Negotiations between NFI and a temp labor agency, Warestaff, have been going on for at least a year. The employers have responded to workers' complaints with threats and intimidations, prompting the WWU to file complaints to the regional office of the National Labor Relations Board.

The Inland Empire region of southern California, which includes Riverside and San Bernardino counties, is home to the largest concentration of warehouse space on the planet. When goods are shipped from Asia to the United States they pass through the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and make their way to warehouses in the Inland Empire where they are unloaded then reloaded onto trucks and trains before they reach their destinations on the West Coast.

An estimated 85,000 workers toil in these warehouses, lifting heavy boxes (some weigh up to 200

pounds) from shipping containers on a piece rate system for minimum wage, with no benefits or consistent work schedules. Up to 450 boxes per hour have to be moved by hand this way resulting in inhuman work speeds and intolerable conditions, often causing serious injuries on the job. In 2011, a report by the UCLA Labor Occupational Safety and Health Program entitled "Broken Bodies and Shattered Lives" found that the majority of warehouse workers knew of and experienced serious workplace injuries and illnesses but were systematically discouraged by their bosses from reporting such hazards.

In October 2011, California Labor Commissioner Julie Su investigated the largest warehouse in the region, run by Schneider Logistics and contracted by Wal-Mart, citing more than \$1 million in violations. On May 1, 2012, Wal-Mart was ordered to pay \$4.8 million in back wages and damages after workers filed a lawsuit in federal court against three Wal-Mart contractors for stealing from workers' wages over the last 10 years.

Last January, the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health issued more than \$250,000 in citations during an inspection of warehouses in Chino which included violations for extreme heat, dangerous forklifts, unsafe machinery, unstable stacking of boxes, and little health and safety training. In June, a study by the National Employment Law Project said that Wal-Mart deliberately strove to drive down wages and benefits for US warehouse workers in order to cut down the costs of logistics. Two subsidiary companies at the Mira Loma warehouse were fined \$499,000 and \$600,000 last year for wage and hour violations.

One worker at a warehouse in Riverside, told *The Daily Titan* of the conditions he faced, saying, "When I began working there, I was under the impression that we'd be working there for 90 days. There are people there that have been working for years, without benefits

or vacation time.” He described retaliation from his boss when he joined the WWU: “From the first day I wore this [WWU] shirt, I was told to go home early, despite the large amounts of work to be done. We’re asked to [load or unload] 250 boxes per hour in our shift, and it must be done within the shift. They do not allow you to work overtime.”

In response to these allegations, Dan Fogelman, spokesman for Wal-Mart, told the *Los Angeles Times* that “Workers’ claims were either unfounded, or if they are legitimate, have been addressed.” However, a worker has recently leaked a company checklist with Wal-Mart’s logo that documents a lot of equipment as being broken and dangerous. The document was dated August 8, but workers report that the problems have not been fixed.

A September 12 walkout at the Mira Loma warehouse was followed the next day by a 50-mile protest march from the Inland Empire to Los Angeles organized by WWU. The march took 6 days to complete and saw workers deliver a letter with more than 37,000 signatures to the downtown LA office of Wal-Mart. Speakers at a subsequent rally included various Democratic party politicians and trade union bureaucrats.

While WWU is not the official representative of the workers, they have to pay \$5 a month to join. According to their official web site, the group was started in 2009 to organize warehouse workers in the Inland Empire and were helped by academics like Professor Juan de Lara at the University of Southern California who specializes in American Studies and Ethnicity and provides ideological support, blending identity politics with trade unionism.

WWU is affiliated to the Change to Win Coalition and associated to the Food Chain Workers Alliance, the National Day Labor Organizing Network, the Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice and the United Farm Workers (UFW). The organization is sympathetic to the AFL-CIO. In fact, the march from Oxnard to Los Angeles was modeled after a similar “pilgrimage” by the United Farm Workers last year from the Central Valley to Sacramento to urge Governor Jerry Brown to sign legislation to make it easier for farm workers to unionize. UFW President Arturo Rodriguez addressed the start of the WWU march in Ontario, California. The UFW has provided crucial support for the election of

Brown.

There should be no illusions in what the unions are preparing for warehouse workers, namely isolation and defeat. The WWU appeals to other unions not out of solidarity, but to make sure workers are immobilized from all sides. In this context, the workers’ return to work was prepared consciously and on the basis of empty and utterly vague promises.

Wal-Mart’s spokesperson Dan Fogelman stated his company “is developing a protocol of random inspections by third-party organizations and conducting contract reviews with our service providers with an eye towards implementing specific health and safety requirements.” The WWU promotes a belief in the very employer responsible for subhuman conditions in the first place.

This process has a direct correlation with President Obama’s policy of “insourcing,” whereby the living and working standards of American workers are reduced to the brutal conditions that prevail in China and India.

The emphasis being placed on Wal-Mart in the demonstrations also serves to obscure the role being played the Democrats and the unions in this process. Wal-Mart, like all multinational corporations, is involved in super exploitation of its workforce. However, Wal-Mart is not the only guilty party involved. The regulations Wal-Mart is forced on paper to abide by are sanctioned by the state of California, which is controlled by a Democratic governor and a Democratic majority in the state congress.

Warehouse workers should therefore place no confidence in the trade unions and Democrats to improve their situation. On the WWU’s own web site they declare that their mission is “ensuring that major retailers like Wal-Mart and its subcontractors follow the law,” that is, the law as written by the two big business parties. The purpose of the WWU is not to defend workers and their rights but to subordinate them to the demands of capitalism.



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