The "Black Friday" protests at WalMart

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A series of pickets and other protests are scheduled throughout the US against the giant retailer WalMart for "Black Friday"—the day after Thanksgiving and traditionally the busiest shopping day of the year.

OUR WalMart (Organization United for Respect at WalMart), launched by the United Food and Commercial Workers last year, is behind the protests, along with a coalition of unions, liberal organizations and church groups.

While it is not clear how many WalMart workers the protests will attract, there is deep and growing dissatisfaction over management abuse, irregular hours and the poverty level wages paid by the company that netted $15 billion in profits last year. The exploitation of the company's 1.4 million so-called associates has provided vast riches for the Walton family, with the top six heirs of founder Sam Walton accumulating a fortune greater than the bottom 30 percent of all Americans.

Retail workers at WalMart are particularly angered over being forced to give up time with their families on the Thanksgiving holiday in order to stock shelves and prepare stores for Black Friday sales. Over the last few years, as the economic crisis has cut into consumer spending, WalMart has led the drive by the big retailers to open their stores ever earlier to get an edge on the holiday sales season.

Last year, workers at Target delivered petitions with 190,000 signatures protesting the company's decision to open stores just after midnight on Black Friday. This year, WalMart plans to open its stores as early as 8 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day.

Over the last several months these and other indignities have sparked growing opposition and the call by OUR WalMart for wage increases to $13 an hour, full-time and flexible work schedules, health benefits, and the freedom to air grievances has gained some support.

On October 4, a group of 60 WalMart workers walked off the job in Los Angeles, California to protest the company's poverty wages and unfair treatment. The following week a group of 88 workers at 28 WalMart stories nationwide walked off the job in solidarity.

The protests have spread to stores in Dallas, Miami, Seattle, Maryland, Oklahoma, and California. Most have been one day actions and demonstrations, including a protest outside company headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas. Riot police armed with a sound cannon were deployed against non-violent protestors in the latter case.

WalMart has responded with intimidation, victimizations and threatened firings. Earlier this week the company sought, but failed to receive, an injunction from the National Labor Relations Board, charging that its workers were not members of the United Food and Commercial Workers and therefore any picketing would be "illegal."

One of the strikers at a Pico Rivera WalMart in Los Angeles, Monique Velasquez, told *Huffington Post* that after being involved in protests she had her hours reduced from 30 hours a week to 8.

Velasquez, a single mom with five children said without her regular pay she "can't even pay one bill. It's very, very hard." She added, "Anyone who goes against management, you're pretty much putting a target on your back. They intimidate you by cutting

hours or picking on you in any way they can."

Despite these conditions, the UFCW and other unions have failed to make any headway in unionizing workers. The decades-long record of isolated and betrayed strikes—from Kroger to Farmer Jack, and Albertson to Von and many others—plus the collaboration with the employers in slashing jobs, wages and benefits of retail workers has not made the UFCW or any other union a pole of attraction.

Nevertheless, the UFCW is concerned that WalMart, Target and other "big box" retailers have undercut much of supermarket business, driving major unionized chains into bankruptcy or near-bankruptcy. Traditional supermarkets now account for only 51 percent of grocery sales, down from 66 percent in 2000, according to UBS Investment Research.

This has led to a sharp decline in membership and dues income for the labor apparatus making WalMart's million-plus workers all the more attractive. The UFCW and other unions, however, have basically given up any hope of actually unionizing these workers and are simply seeking to get a portion of the workforce to sign up as dues-paying members. At the same time, they are also seeking to gain a measure of influence with corporate management and offer their services for the more efficient exploitation of the labor force.

The model for the UFCW's efforts, according to an article in the *New York Times* last year, is "Alliance at I.B.M., a group with several hundred dues-paying members and some 5,000 supporters that has backed several shareholder actions and has often spoken out to the news media on workplace safety issues and the outsourcing of high-tech jobs."

"In recent months," the article continued, "the food and commercial workers union has paid most of the salary of several hundred members, on leave from their jobs, to knock on doors and otherwise reach out to Wal-Mart employees to urge them to join OUR Walmart. Those who join are being asked to pay dues of $5 a month. The new organization plans to draft recommendations to improve working conditions, and hopes to meet soon with Wal-Mart's top management."

The article also noted that OUR WalMart organizers "are receiving help from ASGK Public Strategies, a consulting firm long associated with David Axelrod, President Obama's top political strategist."

Any effort guided by the unions and other organizations tied to the Democratic Party cannot result in anything but a trap for workers. Uniting WalMart workers and other retail employees on the basis of a genuine struggle to defense of their jobs, living standards and other social rights will require the formation of new organizations, which are independent of the corporatist trade unions, the two big business parties and the profit system they defend.

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