

Protests hit Walmart stores

Our reporter
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Protests were held at Walmart stores around the United States on November 23 opposing management abuse, irregular working hours and the poverty wages the giant retailer pays its 1.4 million workers. The protests were timed for Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving and traditionally the busiest shopping day of the year.

It is still not clear how many Walmart workers walked off their jobs and joined the protests. According to Organization United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart), which organized the events, 100 stores in 46 states were hit by the demonstrations. It appears selective groups of striking workers at various stores were joined by demonstrators organized by unions, liberal and religious groups to pass out leaflets to store customers.

Participation in the Black Friday protests ranged from a handful of picketers at some stores to several hundred picketers at Walmarts in the Los Angeles, New York City and Washington, DC areas. In Paramount, outside Los Angeles, organizers said 1,500 workers and supporters demonstrated and nine people, including three striking Walmart workers from area stores, were arrested during a civil disobedience protest.

OUR Walmart, which was set up by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union last year, has publicly called for wage increases to \$13 an hour, full-time and flexible work schedules, health benefits, and the freedom to air grievances without retaliation. In recent months, these demands have gained support and several stores and warehousing contractors, particularly in southern California and Illinois, have been hit by limited job actions. The company responded by reducing the work hours of outspoken workers and threatening them with discipline and termination.

Walmart officials dismissed last week's protests, claiming they involved only 26 stores and no more than 80 actual workers. Nevertheless, the company is clearly

concerned about growing anger and has used both intimidation and professed concern over the rights of its employees to dampen opposition. On the eve of the protests, the company sought but failed to receive an injunction from the National Labor Relations Board to ban the protests. At the same time, it offered its employees an additional 10 percent discount on a basket of goods if they showed up for work.

There are deep grievances motivating Walmart workers. According to IBISWorld, an independent market research group, Walmart's average sale "associate" makes \$8.81 per hour. This is the equivalent of an annual salary of \$15,576, based upon Walmart's full-time status of 34 hours per week—well below the 2010 Federal Poverty Level of \$22,050 for a family of four.

Meanwhile, the company, which made \$15 billion in profits last year, paid its CEO, Mike Duke, \$18.1 million, around 1,200 times the annual income of the average Walmart sales employee. The six members of the Walton family—heirs to the Walmart fortune and near majority owners of the company—have a combined wealth of \$93 billion, more than the bottom 30 percent of Americans combined.

The unions behind the protest neither have the desire nor the ability to wage any serious struggle to improve workers' conditions or living standards. The United Food and Commercial Workers has a decades-long record of isolating and betraying strikes and collaborating with the employers in slashing the wages and benefits of its own members. In large part due to the sweetheart deals signed by the UFCW and other unions, the average wages of retail workers fell a staggering 25 percent in the 1980s.

Major supermarket chains organized by the UFCW—like Albertsons which is currently laying off 2,500 supermarket workers in southern California and Nevada—have been hard hit by the growth of Walmart

and other nonunion “big box” stores, leading to a loss of membership and dues income for the union apparatus. Having previously failed to organize Walmart, the UFCW hopes to at least persuade a section of the company’s 1.4 million workers to pay dues to OUR Walmart. In pursuit of this aim, the UFCW is promoting the bankrupt strategy of appealing to corporate shareholders, the news media and the political establishment to pressure Walmart into corporate “reform.”

An article in the *New York Times* last year 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.” In Florida, newly elected Democratic Congressman Alan Grayson joined protesters at a Walmart in St. Cloud.

Far from opposing poverty wages, however, the Obama administration has made this the centerpiece of its strategy for “economic recovery” and enticing global companies to invest in the US rather than Mexico, China or other low-wage countries. No struggle to defend Walmart workers is possible if it is tied to the very same political forces that defend the exploitation of the working class.

The unification of Walmart and other retail workers to fight for their social rights requires the formation of new organizations, independent of the corporatist unions and the Democratic Party, and the profit system they defend.



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