Nearly 100 workers arrested across US in Walmart protests

Nick Barrickman
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Over 100 protestors in over a dozen cities across the US were arrested Thursday as they participated in walkouts against Arkansas-based retail giant Walmart. The protests, organized by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) retail union and its affiliate OUR Walmart (Organization United for Respect at Walmart), represent the largest acts of civil disobedience taken against the retailer since last year's "Black Friday" walkout, which saw several hundred employees protest the stores across the country.

Hundreds of employees walked off their jobs in 15 cities including Los Angeles, Boston, New York, Orlando and Washington D.C. In Los Angeles, three dozen Walmart employees and supporters were arrested for a supposed "suspicion of failure to disperse" near Broadway and Cesar Chavez Avenue, while in New York several protestors were taken into custody as they blocked the entranceway of the investment bank Williams Management Trust, overseen by CEO Chris Williams, who also serves on Walmart's Board of Directors.

The group had been attempting to present Williams with a petition, which contained over 200,000 signatures, calling for better treatment at their jobs.

The protests were intended to pressure the corporation into providing its full-time workers with a guaranteed $25,000 per year "living wage" as well as ceasing disciplinary measures brought against employees for participating in past walkouts. Since last June OUR Walmart has reported that nearly 100 employees have faced disciplinary measures, including firings, for supposed "absences" during days when protests had occurred.

Walmart employees are paid notoriously low wages, sometimes barely above the mandated US minimum wage of $7.25 per hour. "They're setting the standard in the retail industry by having a poverty wage," said Colby Harris, a Walmart worker living in Dallas. Harris said he had been disciplined multiple times by the company since participating in a walkout this past June.

Raymond Bravo, a former employee from California who had been fired after participating in a protest last June, stated that he had become involved after having seen fellow workers nearly starve on the pittance wages given by the company. "Three days before payday I would see people who normally eat not eating," he said to the *Guardian.* Walmart, which in 2012 boasted profits of $120 billion and whose CEO Michael Duke earned $20 million in stock awards, incentives, and pay in the same year, took a dismissive attitude toward the demands. Kory Lundberg, a spokesperson for the company, referred to the actions as "just a show," saying that "many of [the protestors] don't work at Wal-Mart or are affiliated with the company in any way."

Walmart spokespeople stated that nearly a quarter of the company's 1.3 million workers were full-time, and that the average hourly pay rate for such positions was $12.83, roughly equal to the amount which protestors had been demanding.

The actions come nearly a week after fast-food workers walked out in nearly 60 cities protesting similar working conditions and poverty wages. The protests have largely been backed by organizations affiliated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which seeks to obtain a foothold for its organization within the largely nonunionized service sector. (See: "Fast-food workers mount protests across the US".)

The union has backed the so-called "living wage" bill passed in Washington D.C. by its legislative council last July and currently under consideration by the city's

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Democratic Mayor, Vincent C. Gray. The bill, titled the "Living Wage Affordability Act," would require all retailers in the city with over $1 billion in yearly revenue and 75,000 square feet in store floor space to pay their employees a "living wage" of $12.50 per hour.

Walmart, which currently operates several stores within the city, has threatened to pull out of its current Washington D.C. expansion plans should the bill be approved, claiming that such a mandatory wage level would be fatal to "job creation." The company reportedly canceled a deal for one of its franchise stores being constructed in the city this week, saying that the plan had fallen apart.

For his part, Mayor Gray has threatened to veto the bill, stating that he had "serious concerns over the lost jobs and retail opportunities for District residents that the bill will cause."

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