

Union-organized Walmart protests seek to pressure Democratic Party

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3 December 2013

Last week, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and the union-backed Organization United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart) organized “Black Friday” protests at Walmart locations in nine US cities. Hundreds of other protests also reportedly took place.

The protests--which were accompanied by staged acts of civil disobedience and arrests--were heavily promoted by the media. While the issue of the extreme exploitation of Walmart and other service workers is very real, the campaign organized by the unions was a stunt aimed at bolstering their own credibility and promoting the Democratic Party, which is overseeing a coordinated assault on the working class.

The protests were deliberately carried out in a way that minimized the effects on the company. There were no strikes, and participation of actual Walmart employees was very limited. Arrests of more than 100 people at eight protests were reported. In Roseville, an affluent suburb of Sacramento, 25 were arrested. In a similarly wealthy neighborhood of Chicago, ten people were arrested after blocking a thoroughfare. Ten were arrested in Ontario, California for blocking an intersection.

Walmart, the multi-billion-dollar international retail conglomerate infamous for low wages, poor working conditions, and illegal labor practices, is the largest private employer in the United States and Mexico, employing 1.4 million in the US, and 2.2 million worldwide, at more than 11,000 locations. Last year, the company reported revenue of \$469.16 billion.

On November 18, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that Walmart had illegally “threatened, disciplined and/or terminated employees” in thirteen states for striking and protesting their working conditions, affecting 66 employees involved in the OUR Walmart campaign. The NLRB did not make an official charge.

Walmart sales workers, referred to by the company as “associates,” currently make on average \$8.87 per hour,

and cashiers average \$8.48 per hour, according to Glassdoor.com. Department managers average \$11.22 per hour. These poverty wages are so low that workers generally qualify for federal and state benefits, including Medicaid, supplemental nutritional assistance (food stamps), home heating and cooling subsidies and free lunches in public schools.

The union-backed campaign was endorsed by sections of the Democratic Party. Seven Democratic senators and representatives--including Sherrod Brown, Ed Markey, and Jan Schakowsky--issued a statement of support that highlighted the impact of the low wages on the federal budget. Referring to the federal and state benefits low-paid workers rely on, they wrote, “With as many as 825,000 Walmart workers making less than \$25,000 a year and a single Walmart store costing taxpayers nearly \$1 million in public assistance, the need for change is clear. Taxpayers should not have to pick up the tab because Walmart refuses to pay workers a living wage.”

The demands raised by the UFCW and its subsidiaries--for \$25,000 per year, and elsewhere for \$12 and \$15 per hour wages--are entirely inadequate for meeting the needs of working people in a modern society. Practically speaking, \$12 or \$15 per hour wage would leave many workers impoverished, while raising their incomes just beyond cut-off points to receive needed assistance.

While a sharp improvement of the living conditions of Walmart and other service workers is needed, this requires a struggle to mobilize the working class against the corporation and the entire political establishment. The unions and the organizations around them are absolutely opposed to such a struggle. The unions, after an agreement with the NLRB, have even repudiated any aim of organizing the workers.

The notoriously terrible working conditions at Walmart are being used a prop in a nationwide campaign to bolster

the credibility of the pro-corporate trade unions and sections of the Democratic Party, which have been discredited over the last several decades, and particularly since the election of Barack Obama.

In seeking to use the campaign to create a new trap for the working class, the unions have been joined by a host of pseudo-left organizations, including Socialist Alternative and the International Socialist Organization. These organizations have heavily promoted the \$15 per/hour minimum wage as part of a political regroupment aimed at preventing an independent political struggle against the corporations and their political representatives.

At makingchangeatwalmart.org, also backed by the UFCW, President Barack Obama is quoted as saying, “I don’t mind standing up for workers and letting Walmart know they need to pay a decent wage and let folks organize...”. It goes on to say, “Join Chicago Walmart worker Charmaine Givens-Thomas in calling on President Obama to make good on that promise.”

In fact, the Obama administration--which itself has raised the possibility of increasing the federal minimum wage--has presided over a systematic attack on the wages and living standards of the working class, beginning with the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry. The share of national income going to workers has declined sharply over the past five years.

Thus, the union-backed campaign, while nominally appealing to the very real grievances of workers, is aimed at promoting a party that is thoroughly hostile to the working class, as are the unions themselves. It is for this reason that the protests were given broad positive media coverage. Had the Black Friday protests been led by Walmart workers fighting for the formation of independent organizations of struggle, the media coverage and comments from leading Democrats would have been far different.



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