

Democrats back union-organized Wal-Mart protests

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The Black Friday protests at Wal-Mart stores organized by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and other unions had an even more official air to them yesterday than they have in previous years. Although organizers claimed “strikes” and other protests would take place at 1,600 locations of the giant retailer, the events involved very few workers.

Instead the stage-managed protests were publicity stunts by various union, religious, liberal and pseudo-left organizations affiliated to the Democrats. Their main aim was to boost the credibility of the UFCW—whose decades of betrayed struggles are chiefly responsible for the poverty wages in the retail industry—and the Obama administration. Among this year’s sponsors were the AFL-CIO, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, and New York State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman.

The protests began in 2012, primarily to boost the reelection campaign of President Obama. In January of this year, President Obama endorsed a federal minimum wage raise from the current \$7.25 to \$10.10 an hour. This was a cynical ploy, given that Obama knew fully that this would never pass the Congress. Moreover, even if the wage hike were enacted, it would only bring the minimum rate to the equivalent in real terms to what it was in 1968.

A worker making \$10.10, working 40 hours per week for every week in a calendar year, would make a little more than \$21,000 per year, before taxes. This is less than 200 percent of the federal poverty rate of \$11,600 for a single individual, and in many cases would disqualify workers from receiving food and other state assistance, for which the relative wage raise would not make up.

This year’s protests took place in the midst of a

massive crisis for the Democratic Party, reflected in the record-low voter turnout in the midterm elections. The Democratic Party’s support for the protests comes as the party is desperate to improve their image—with the help of the unions and fake left groups organizing the events—as the expansion of war in the Middle East and the police crackdown in Ferguson, Missouri underscore the class character of the Obama administration.

As the largest retail employer in the United States, Wal-Mart sets the wage and benefits bar for retail work across the country. In addition to offering very low wages and part-time work schedules, the company cut health care benefits for 30,000 part-time employees last month, as part of the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Last year, a holiday food drive for Wal-Mart workers at an Ohio store underscored the fact that Wal-Mart workers have a hard time getting enough to eat on their low wages.

This year Wal-Mart sales jumped to a new record of \$120 billion, and the company has reported earning upwards of \$4 billion in profits in the second quarter of 2014.

The protests were not strikes—no store operations were stopped—nor were they a genuine expression of the opposition of the working class. The determination of workers to win the right to a decent-paying and secure job is entirely correct. However, the organizations behind these protests are opposed to any mobilization of the working class against the gaping social inequality in America, because they are pawns of the Democratic Party, a corporate-controlled party that has overseen the increasing impoverishment and exploitation of the working class. The bulk of the new jobs being created under Obama’s so-called economic recovery are part-time and low-paying. Moreover, the Obama administration has put the reduction of wages

and benefits at the center of its plan to “in-source” jobs to the US.

As part of his re-election campaign, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced on Friday a special session of the City Council, to vote on a minimum wage ordinance for businesses inside the city of Chicago on Tuesday, December 2. The proposal is to raise the minimum wage to \$13 per hour. The Democrats supporting this demand are some of the deepest enemies of the working class. Emanuel, former chief of staff to Barack Obama, has spearheaded the attack on public education in close collaboration with the AFT-affiliated Chicago Teachers Union, closing 50 public schools and expanding privately run charters.

Democratic New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman issued a statement declaring he was “proud to stand with” the protesters. In his statement, Schneiderman acknowledged Wal-Mart has been involved in wage theft.

“Today, as millions of Americans kick off the holiday shopping season, I encourage all of them to consider the enormous injustice suffered by many of the workers who are helping them with their purchases. Across the country, workers are standing up to demand a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work. I’m proud to stand with them as they raise their voices to send an important message: No one who works full-time should have to struggle to feed their families.” Schneiderman’s office claims to have won \$17 million in wage disputes from companies illegally withholding worker pay.

Schneiderman’s boss, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, just won reelection with a record low turnout. The Democratic governor, with close ties to Wall Street, is a widely hated figure having overseen attacks on teachers and other public sector workers.

In some parts of the country, including Ferguson, Missouri, the Wal-Mart protests linked up with so-called Brown Friday protests against the exoneration of the cop who murdered unarmed black teenager Michael Brown. These protests offered no means for the working class to fight the epidemic of police murders and increasingly authoritarian measures of the state.

These too promoted illusions in Obama, suggesting that the US Justice Department, which has coordinated the paramilitary repression of Ferguson protesters, would protect minority youth from further police

violence. It also promoted the interests of a section of African-American businessmen hoping to gain market share from big retailers like Wal-Mart.

Jamal Bryant, a Baltimore area pastor, led Black Friday protests in Chicago. Chanting the slogan “Hands Up, Don’t Spend!” a few hundred protesters called for a shopping boycott to oppose police brutality. On Twitter Bryant encouraged people to patronize African American-owned businesses in Chicago.

Pseudo-left outfits such as the International Socialist Organization and Socialist Alternative have played a significant role in supporting these minimum wage protests over the last three years. In doing so, they have sought to recruit for the discredited trade unions, having consistently collaborated with Democrats. In particular Seattle’s so-called socialist city councilwoman Kshama Sawant, a leader of Socialist Alternative, has boosted this effort in collaboration with the unions and local Democratic officials.

On November 19, Sawant was arrested in a civil disobedience stunt at the Alaska Airlines Seattle headquarters. She was demanding that the airline pay the \$15 minimum wage established for workers in Sea-Tac, the hotel and retail community surrounding the Seattle-Tacoma airport. Last year a judge ruled the wage provision did not apply to airline workers.

Sawant and other pseudo-left groups led the campaign for the passage of the wage hike in Sea-Tac in 2012. The law includes a provision that allows employers to escape paying the minimum wage if they agreed to allow the Service Employees International Union to “represent” and collect union dues from the low-wage hospitality workers.



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