

Walmart worker in New York fired for redeeming cans worth \$2

Josh Varlin
30 November 2015

In a case that has garnered broader attention for what it reveals about life in America, a Wal-Mart in East Greenbush, New York fired 52-year-old worker Thomas Smith for redeeming \$2 in cans and bottles left in the store on November 2. He was officially let go for “gross misconduct” on November 6.

Smith, who earned \$9 an hour collecting shopping carts in the store’s parking lot, had redeemed the cans after they were left near the recycling machines for over an hour. According to Wal-Mart spokesman Aaron Mullins, Smith was fired for “taking property inside the store.”

“I didn’t know you couldn’t take empties left behind. They were garbage,” Smith, a formerly homeless father of two, said. “I didn’t even get a chance to explain myself. They told me to turn in my badge.”

According to Smith, he was interrogated by three security guards and intimidated into signing a statement admitting to the “theft” which he could not read, as he did not have his glasses. He was reportedly concerned that arguing with the security guards would risk a parole violation.

Many bottles and cans in New York State have a 5-cent deposit, meaning that Smith was fired for redeeming 40 recyclables, thereby “stealing” \$2 from Wal-Mart, whose CEO Doug McMillon “earned” \$25.6 million in 2014.

Smith had earlier redeemed \$3.10 in cans and bottles left in the parking lot, which, according to Mullins, did not factor into his termination. Previous articles, including in the *Times Union*, which broke the story, stated that Smith was therefore fired for the \$5.10 redemption.

Wal-Mart has since changed its official line on Smith’s termination. When the story first broke on

November 19, Mullins said that he could not disclose the reasoning. In a November 21 story by the *Washington Post*, Mullins admitted that it was for redeeming recyclables, but claimed that they were left at the customer service desk.

This should be treated with suspicion, however. As the *Times Union* points out, “The service desk is inside the store and is used mostly for merchandise returns and does not handle empty bottles, which are redeemed at automated machines in the breezeway outside the store proper.”

Most recently, Wal-Mart spokeswoman Michelle Malashock claimed in an email that Smith was fired because he “did not disclose certain serious criminal convictions during the application process.” This claim was previously advanced by Mullins as an excuse for why Wal-Mart could not rehire Smith after his story received national attention.

Smith was released from prison in May and was nearing the end of his 90-day “probationary period” at Wal-Mart, after which he would be considered a regular employee. Wal-Mart euphemistically terms its employees “associates.”

Smith has maintained that he disclosed his prior conviction in his application, and that Wal-Mart performed a background check after hiring him.

Wal-Mart refused to release the statement which he was coerced into signing by security to Smith, his legal representatives or the *Times Union*, but eventually released it to the *Washington Post*. The statement makes no mention of Smith’s prior conviction, instead disciplining Smith for redeeming the cans for the \$2 deposit.

Smith has received widespread sympathy after his story went viral on social media. It has been covered extensively in national and international media,

including by the BBC.

An Illinois resident created a crowdfunding page on GoFundMe, which has raised over \$21,000 in less than a week. The page description says, “I know we can stand up to these corrupt corporations that have no empathy [for] people like Thomas [Smith]—all they care about are their dollars at the end of the day.”

Most of the donations on the crowdfunding site have been modest, about \$5 to \$30, indicating that working people across the country sympathize deeply with Smith’s desperate situation. Indeed, Smith’s case is illustrative of the plight that workers across the United States face.

In response to the widespread attention that Smith’s case has received, the AFL-CIO and sections of the Democratic Party have jumped to exploit the situation for their own ends, posturing as critics of Wal-Mart. Mary Sullivan, the president of the Capital District Area Labor Federation, AFL-CIO, called for Wal-Mart “to do better by their workers, [as] they can certainly afford to.”

Another union-organized group, OUR Walmart, organized a protest outside of the East Greenbush Wal-Mart store on November 27, attracting about 50 people.

The protests called for a \$15 hourly minimum wage and unionization, which dovetails with efforts by Democratic Party politicians and union bureaucrats across the country to channel workers’ justifiable anger at low wages back into the safety valves of the two-party political system, and behind the Democratic Party in the upcoming 2016 elections.

In fact, President Barack Obama, a Democrat, has presided over an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the working class to the ruling class. Chief among the policies facilitating this transfer is the trillion-dollar bailout of the financial industry and the “restructuring” of the auto industry, which cut pay for new hires by half.

The Obama “recovery” has been tepid at best. Even jobs reports hailed as “stellar” only note employment increases in low-wage sectors. For example, October’s jobs report, which was coupled with mass layoffs in several sectors, reported a net zero increase in relatively well-paying manufacturing jobs.

Millions of workers like Smith labor in low-wage jobs, with no rights or job security. As the Stanford Center on Poverty & Inequality’s 2015 report notes:

“The post-recession recovery has not brought about a reduction in poverty (relative to the pre-recession baseline) *in any state*. In only six states have poverty rates returned to their pre-recession levels” (emphasis added).

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, there are 16 million children in the United States that live in families under the federal poverty line. Double this number—32 million children—live in low-income families, defined as having an income level at or below double the federal poverty line.

According to recent data from the Social Security Administration, more than half of Americans earn less than \$30,000 a year, putting them at or just above the insultingly low federal poverty line for a small family of four.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact