

# A Show of Determination on Black Friday

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Global Research, November 22, 2012

[Socialist Worker](#) 21 November 2012

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#)

Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving in the U.S., is traditionally the biggest shopping day of the year as retailers kick off the holiday season. But this year could begin a new tradition – of Black Friday being the biggest labour protest day of the year.



Wal-Mart workers join in a coordinated day of protests and work actions [Marc F. Henning].

Workers at the giant retailer Wal-Mart are preparing for walkouts and rallies at as many as 1,000 stores across the country. The actions are part of a wave of strikes and protests that began at several distribution centers in September and then moved on to Wal-Mart stores in October. The rolling walkouts have continued sporadically since, as workers organize for the call made by their [OUR Walmart](#) campaign for actions on Black Friday around the country.

The scale of the Black Friday walkouts will vary from store to store, involving smaller or larger groups of workers. Wal-Mart, of course, is nonunion, so the ‘associates’ who answer the call for a strike will do so in protest over grievances about management retaliation, harassment and unsafe conditions – this gives them some protection under U.S. labour laws.

Meanwhile, supporters of the Wal-Mart workers are planning to gather alongside them for rallies, pickets and other actions at the stores – to show their solidarity with this long-awaited challenge to a corporate goliath.

## OUR Walmart Campaign

Wal-Mart executives have tried to shrug off the strikes and protests as the actions of “a few associates at a few stores.” But they aren’t fooling anyone. No one misses the importance of workers taking a stand at the world’s largest private employer and the very symbol of Corporate America’s greed and anti-union fanaticism. The OUR Walmart campaign has captured national attention – and fired the imaginations of labour and other activists. Which is why the Beast of Bentonville, Ark., is lashing back – even as it claims the actions are isolated.

Last week, [Wal-Mart filed an unfair labour practices charge](#) with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) – the first such charge in a decade filed by the company rather than against it. Wal-Mart claims the rolling protests can’t go on for longer than 30 days without the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union, as the key backer of OUR Walmart, initiating the process leading to a union representation election. OUR Walmart leaders have stated repeatedly that they are a separate organization from the UFCW – and that their protests aren’t aimed at representation, but at pressuring the company over issues such as unjust

retaliation and poor working conditions.

The NLRB takes months to investigate unfair labour practices charges when they come from unions, but the agency is required to fast-track a decision when a business alleges “illegal picketing” – that’s typical of the bias of U.S. labour law. This could mean OUR Walmart activists will face an injunction against the Black Friday protests. Wal-Mart’s charge is clearly designed to stop a legitimate protest – but it will be a test of the NLRB under the Obama administration to see whether it sides with workers or caves to corporate interests.

Meanwhile, workers involved in the OUR Walmart campaign as well as the union activists supporting them say there has been a clear increase in cases of retaliation at stores where actions have taken place. Management has tried to preserve the image that it follows the law. But at the store level, supervisors are doing everything they can to discourage participation in the Black Friday walkout, including [telling workers they could be fired for taking part](#).

Still, that isn’t stopping OUR Walmart. As Colby Harris, a store worker in Dallas, [told the Los Angeles Times](#), “[N]othing, not even this baseless unfair labour practice charge, will stop us from speaking out. Unfair labour is working full time and living in poverty.”

### Spreading Protest

The walkouts and protests began more than a week before Black Friday with a store in the Bay Area and then Seattle. The actions continued in the following days, spreading from the West Coast through the South to Texas, Oklahoma, Mississippi and Florida, as well across the North, reaching from Chicago to Washington, D.C.

The pre-Black Friday walkouts were typical of the actions that have spread like wildfire to dozens of stores since early October. At the Wal-Mart in San Leandro, Calif., for example, more than 70 workers and their supporters walked single-file in a silent march through the store on November 14. According to a [report by Bay Area labour activist Marc Norton](#):

“Several marchers placed a small memorial to a recently deceased worker outside the employees’ lounge. Management and security, unsure how to react, attempted to block the numerous cameras that had come out, proclaiming ‘No video! No photos!’ This was a useless gesture that demonstrated just how clueless Wal-Mart is about handling the wave of protest that has engulfed them in recent months.”

At a later rally outside the store, workers talked about the issues at stake in this struggle – and their determination to win changes. “Wal-Mart will learn to treat us with respect – either by choice or by whatever it takes,” said one worker. As has been the practice at previous walkouts, the strikers then returned to work together, accompanied by their supporters.

Also on [strike last week were warehouse workers](#) at a Wal-Mart distribution center in Southern California. Their two-day action began over retaliation for a previous walkout in September. The warehouse workers have been organizing around their own issues, often related to health and safety – conditions in the facility have led to an epidemic of injuries and sickness, they say. And in a warehouse where temperatures often reach into the triple digits, drinking water for workers comes from a hose.

Like the warehouse workers in Elwood, Ill., southwest of Chicago – who also [went on strike in](#)

[September](#) and returned to their jobs victorious after winning concessions from management and full pay for the weeks they were on the picket line – the workers in Mira Loma, Calif., are officially employed by a subcontractor. Wal-Mart therefore claims it has nothing to do with workplace conditions or allegations of wage theft. But the workers aren't fooled. "All of us who work for Wal-Mart, either on the retail end of it, or on the warehouse end of it, have the same issues," [one store worker from Wisconsin told the Nation](#).

That's why the wave of walkouts at stores in 12 states in early October, coming on the heels of the two warehouse strikes, got so much attention. Strikes are nearly unprecedented in the company's 50-year history – and exactly the kind of resistance that Wal-Mart management has been hell-bent on squelching.

The initial walkouts in early October at stores in 12 states were designed to coincide with the annual shareholders' meeting in Bentonville. About 100 Wal-Mart workers and supporters from around the U.S. converged on the Arkansas city to protest and present their grievances. Despite their small size – at least in relation to the giant Wal-Mart chain with its thousands of stores – the early walkouts struck a nerve generally among working people facing a dreary economy where unemployment is stuck at a high level and even profitable corporations are driving down wages and benefits.

Just as importantly, leaders of OUR Walmart say the walkouts galvanized more support among co-workers. As Barbara Collins Andridge, one of four workers to strike at a Wal-Mart in Placerville, Calif., [told Josh Eidelson of the Nation](#):

"I had a lot of co-workers come up to me and say, 'You're so brave, that's so amazing,' And I just let them know that it's covered by federal law. I have the right to do this, and so do you. It's just a matter of us standing up and doing it together."

Get Up, Stand Up For Our Rights...

WAL-MART workers certainly have a lot to stand up against. The retail giant is notorious for its low wages – [the average 'associate' makes just \\$8.81 an hour](#), which adds up to less than \$16,000 a year at the Wal-Mart full-time standard of 34 hours a week. That's not always enough to afford rent or a home. As one worker said in a video made by OUR Walmart, "I'm 52 years old, and I can't afford my own apartment based on what I make at Wal-Mart."

The situation is no better at Wal-Mart warehouses, despite the long shifts and exhausting work. [According to the Guardian](#), at the Elwood warehouse outside Chicago, one worker sleeps at a Catholic hostel in a nearby town, another squats in abandoned houses, and a third has set up a tent in the woods to sleep in between shifts.

The company is equally stingy with benefits – and getting worse: Earlier this week, [Wal-Mart informed employees](#) that the number of hours required to qualify for insurance would rise from 24 to 30, and their share of premiums would jump by anywhere from 8 to 36 per cent.

Wal-Mart treats its workers with similar contempt on the job – every 'associate' can tell stories of manipulation of hours and irregular schedules, unsafe working conditions, disrespect and abuse from management, gender discrimination and more.

Charlene Fletcher and her husband Greg both work at the Wal-Mart in Duarte Calif. As she explained in a statement from OUR Walmart:

“We just found out that we are both scheduled to work on Thanksgiving Day instead of being home with our kids. It’s heartbreaking to miss the holiday with them, and it’s just one more way that Wal-Mart is showing its disregard for our families. But when our co-workers speak out about problems like these, Wal-Mart turns their schedules upside down, cuts their hours and even fires people.”

In stark contrast to its employees, Wal-Mart the corporation is raking it in. Last year, the company’s global sales were past the \$400-billion mark. Profits alone were more than \$15-billion. At \$200-billion, the total value of the company’s stock has rebounded from the financial crisis and stands at all-time highs.

And then there’s the [Walton family](#) at the top of the Wal-Mart heap. It’s the richest family in the U.S., with more wealth between its members than the bottom 42 per cent of U.S. families combined. So it’s no wonder that the OUR Walmart campaign has found so much support among store workers who want to raise their voices about the conditions they face, despite the fear that management will retaliate.

## Union Support

At the same time, however, it’s important to remember that the actions on Black Friday are the product of systematic organizing that has gone on for years. Several unions have put crucial resources behind the fight at Wal-Mart. Among warehouse workers, the strikers at the Elwood distribution center outside Chicago were part of the Warehouse Workers Organizing Committee, which is supported by the United Electrical Workers union. In Southern California, the lead has been taken by Warehouse Workers for Justice, sponsored by the Change to Win federation. And in the stores, OUR Walmart has been backed by the UFCW.

OUR Walmart is only two years old, but has signed up thousands of members in stores around the country. Around a hundred of these members have met at national meetings to draw up a “Declaration of Respect” and to plan strategy for the struggle. This group made the call for the first wave of rolling walkouts in October and the Black Friday actions this month.

On the ground, the pace of activity has picked up, especially this fall. In Dallas, for example, a September 22 demonstration under the name “Stand Up, Live Better: Rally for Respect at Walmart” drew some 100 workers, union activists and community supporters to kick off organizing toward the first walkouts.

On October 9, more than 30 Dallas Wal-Mart workers at nine stores participated in the national call for walkouts. They led a rally of workers and supporters outside a store in South Dallas. Around the country, [the strikes involved hundreds of workers](#) in at least 12 states.

Black Friday was the next big day for OUR Walmart, but important actions have continued to break out on a local level during the weeks in between. For example, on November 8, seven workers walked off the job on the night shift in Ennis, Texas, south of Dallas, to picket in solidarity with a co-worker who was unjustly fired. The fired worker was an OUR Walmart organizer and the victim of on-the-job harassment from a co-worker – but when she filed several complaints about this with management, it was her position that was terminated. In addition to the strike on the night shift later on, around 40 workers and supporters gathered for a picket during the day. Despite being forced off Wal-Mart property after threats from

police, the picketers kept their spirits high with chanting that drew honks from passing cars.

A little over a week later, six workers at a Wal-Mart in Lancaster, between Dallas and Ennis, went on strike against retaliation by management. Members of Interfaith Workers Justice organized a prayer vigil in front of the Lancaster store, where, like in Ennis, they were confronted by managers and police who threatened them with arrest.

Such walkouts are important in giving confidence to Wal-Mart workers worried about retaliation if they take action. If workers strike to protest unfair labour practices, it is technically illegal for employers to replace them. But to make sure the law is enforced, we need to build a strong movement that stands in solidarity with the Wal-Mart workers who are putting their jobs on the line.

### Black Friday, And Beyond

The first place to put that solidarity into action is on Black Friday. Activists in Dallas and other cities are planning to start picketing during the evening on Thanksgiving, since Wal-Mart intends to start its Black Friday sale earlier. Then, it's bright and early on the picket line in cities across the country – find out from fellow labour activists in your area where the meeting points are.

Another way to support the Wal-Mart workers is financial. Wal-Mart 'associates' are lucky if they can stay above the poverty line on the wages the company pays, so missing a day of work, and especially a holiday with additional pay, is a big sacrifice. Supporters have organized a "[Stand Up, Live Better](#)" fund to take donations that will be used to purchase grocery gift cards for Wal-Mart workers who take part in the walkout.

After Black Friday, local actions will continue. Meanwhile, unions representing Wal-Mart workers in other countries are planning for two global days of solidarity with U.S. workers on December 14-15 – actions are being planned from Argentina and Chile to [Canada](#), and from Britain to Turkey to Zambia to Bangladesh and Japan.

Wal-Mart's Black Friday sales will ruin the Thanksgiving holiday for hundreds of thousands of workers. The strikes and protests that day will be an important way for Wal-Mart workers to demonstrate against the theft of their time with their families. But even more, they will be the next step in a brewing challenge to one of the world's biggest, most powerful and most profitable corporations. •

*Alan Maass, Elizabeth Clinton and Natalie Johnson are activists and write for [Socialist Worker](#) where this article first appeared.*

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