

# Always Low Wages, Anti-Union, More Pollution: The Obama Administration Does the Bidding of Wal-Mart

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Democrats in labor unions and figures like former Labor Secretary Robert Reich and others were justly outraged at Barack Obama's latest wet kiss to Wal-Mart earlier this month. But First Lady Michelle Obama has been in bed with the giant retailer for years. Is this a nasty bug in the Obama presidency, or a corrupt core feature?

Earlier this month President Obama visited a Bay Area Wal-Mart to praise the world's largest and most anti-union retailer for its supposed environmental responsibility. The fact is that Wal-Mart's maintenance of diesel-fueled supply chains between its stores and wherever on the planet wages are lowest and environmental restrictions are totally absent make it a major ongoing contributor to runaway climate change. The president's appearance therefore, was simply a hypocritical exercise in [greenwashing for Wal-Mart](#).

Though it was an insult to working people and to many of his abject and fervent supporters, it should have been no surprise. It wasn't President Obama's first wet kiss to Wal-Mart and with almost three more years in office to go it won't be his last. Still the willingness of the Obama Administration to do the bidding of Wal-Mart shows just how hollow has become the pretense of elected black Democrats to representing the poor and oppressed.

There was a time when Democrats in the White House did not dare openly shill for the giant retailer. Hillary Clinton served on Wal-Mart's board of directors through most of the 1980s, while her husband Bill was governor of Arkansas. Even then, Wal-Mart was notorious for overworking and underpaying its workers, violating labor laws to thwart unions, and sopping up prodigious amounts of corporate welfare in the forms of tax breaks and subsidies of all kinds. Being in bed with those crooks wasn't just an embarrassment, it was a hypocritical affront to Democratic voters, so somewhere on the 1992 road to the White House, Hillary resigned from Wal-Mart's board. Similarly in 2007 with her husband on the way to the White House, Michelle Obama felt [compelled to resign from the board of TreeHouse Foods](#), a major Wal-Mart vendor. "I won't shop there," said presidential candidate Barack Obama when questioned about Wal-Mart at an AFL-CIO labor forum.

Of course labor audiences in 2007 and 2008 were where Obama pledged to renegotiate NAFTA, and [immediately raise the minimum wage](#) as soon as he took office. The president never mentioned raising the minimum wage again till about 2012 when Republicans were safely in control of the House of Representatives, and [instead of renegotiating NAFTA](#), President Obama is engaged in secret negotiations to extend it across the [Atlantic](#) and [Pacific](#) Oceans. Evidently the Obama that promises is a different guy, and far less powerful, than the Obama that acts.

Safely in office, Michelle and Barack Obama have enthusiastically embraced Wal-Mart. [The first lady allowed the unscrupulous retailer to leverage her personal image](#) as an advocate of exercise and healthy eating in her “Let’s Move” initiative, and spouting the company line that the best solution to urban “food deserts” is opening more Wal-Mart neighborhood grocery stores. Michelle Obama’s many appearances at and pronouncements around Wal-Mart have done the retailer more good than she and Hillary could ever have done in another decade or two apiece on its board of directors.

Right now Wal-Mart is approaching 30% of the US retail grocery market, with far lower wages, fewer hours, skimpier benefits, and longer and dirtier supply chains than its major competitors. As I said a couple years ago in an article about Michelle Obama’s cynical embrace of Wal-Mart:

Wal-Mart’s business model of corrupting public officials, lying about job creation numbers, rampant sex and race discrimination, relentlessly low wage and benefit levels, and aspirations to monopoly control of local markets across the country make it a bad neighbor, a worse boss, an unfair competitor and sometimes a criminal enterprise.

Wal-Mart has been a leader in the corporate practice of [weaponizing its charitable giving](#), turning it into a lever to open new markets in urban America, to neutralize and isolate opposition, and to curry favor with local political figures. Wal-Mart made it rain on selected charities and ministries in areas like Newark and Chicago when it needed to colonize those new markets. President Obama recognized this “achievement” in the corruption of Democratic party politics in March 2014 by [nominating Wal-Mart’s chief of charitable giving to head up his Office of Management and Budget](#).

Wal-Mart was even allowed, along with McDonalds and other large, low-wage employers, to shape the drafting of regulations governing Obamacare, in ways that exempted the retailer from having to ensure large numbers of its workers for the first several years.

The fiction that elected Democrats represent poor and working people and stand for safeguarding the environment is just that – a fiction. There is a new neoliberal paradigm that allows Democrats to mumble a few words about raising the minimum wage when the other party controls Congress, that claims the moment they took office was the day the oceans stopped rising. If these were curable bugs in the political system, votes and advocacy would wake enough people up to change them. But what if they’re not bugs in the system at all. What if these are its core and immutable features? What then? Isn’t it time to step outside their two-party, capitalist box, to dream and begin to build something else?

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