

American Workers Stand Up to Walmart

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When a torrent hits an obstacle that refuses to give, it either flows around or over the obstruction. When workers' needs for a living wage, fair treatment, and a voice are damned up by an oppressive employer, it is only a matter of time before they find a way of asserting their strength.

Testament to this truth are the strikes at Walmart, the first such actions against the retail behemoth in its 50 year history. The movement began in June when guest workers went on strike to expose forced labor at Walmart's supplier C.J.'s Seafood in Louisiana. Walmart was fined \$250,000 and compelled to suspend its contract with the company. This was followed in September by a strike at a similar warehouse in Inland Empire, California. On this actions' heels came a three week strike at a warehouse in Elwood, Illinois that receives 70 percent of the chains' imports. Thirty-eight workers walked out over the retaliatory firing of their co-workers for organizing activity as well as concerns over safety. Standing strong together got results. All workers were reinstated with three weeks back pay and safety concerns finally began to be acted on.

Encouraged by this unprecedented victory, the chink in Walmart's armor began to rapidly expand. At several stores in Pica Rivera, California, workers walked out over management's attempts to silence them with retaliatory actions against those who spoke up for better conditions. This quickly spread to 28 stores across 12 states.

Walmart's public reaction to these developments has been to dismiss them as "publicity stunts." However, an October 8th internal memo, intended only for salaried employees, reveals a very different attitude. It advises management on how to discourage workers from taking collective action while also telling them to avoid disciplinary action against employees who engage in walkouts, sit-ins, or sick-outs because of its legal consequences. Since Walmart employees have filed 20 unfair labor practice charges with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) within the last 8 weeks because of retaliatory practices, and that striking against such retaliation is legally protected, it is clear that the company's tops are attempting to adjust their anti-worker tactics. They are, for the moment, feeling compelled to advocate a more cautious approach to recent developments rather than encourage the arrogant manner of dealing with workers that Walmart management is known for.

The strikes against Walmart's treatment of workers have been a long time coming. Because pay and hours are so bad, employees rely on \$2.66 billion in government help every year, or about \$240,000 per store. Eighty percent of Walmart store workers are using food stamps. They are subject to unpredictable schedules and having their hours cut in order to avoid being paid benefits. In addition, employees have numerous safety concerns and are frequently treated disrespectfully by management higher ups.

So resolute is the company's hatred of Labor that when a store's employees in Quebec Canada voted to join a union, Walmart closed it down. The main issue for these workers was not wages and benefits, but only to have regular predictable work schedules.

While the majority of Walmart's employees live in poverty, six members of Sam Walton's (the founder of Walmart) family are worth more financially than the bottom 30 percent of the U.S. population. Sam Walton alone makes more than all Walmart's wage employees combined and Walmart is the nation's biggest employer.

It was this kind of inequality and conditions faced by workers that spurred the creation of the union movement. However, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and others have so far been unable to organize Walmart's workforce.

Initial attempts went by the letter of the law. Once a majority of the employees signed cards to join a union, the NLRB would take six weeks to set up elections so that the workers would be forced to vote again for joining a union. This six week period allowed management to go on an anti-union offensive, holding captive meetings and finding other ways to intimidate the workforce.

Consequently, playing by the rules of this game rigged in favor of the employers has failed repeatedly. In addition, organizing on a one-store-at-a-time basis was a shaky strategy because Walmart has already demonstrated that it would rather shut a store down than have it go union. The company is large enough to afford such a sacrifice.

The UFCW went on a campaign with other community groups in an attempt to block the building of Walmart stores in various cities. The hope was that by making such trouble for the corporation, its owners would rather allow unionization than deal with the UFCW as an opponent to its expansion efforts. While there was some limited success, this strategy left Walmart's workers powerless and did not amount to much more than a nuisance in the face of the corporation's massive funds.

It became clear that a new approach was necessary to take on a giant like Walmart. Consequently, the UFCW helped to found "Organization United for Respect at Walmart" (OUR Walmart) and the United Electrical Workers formed "Warehouse Workers for Justice" (WWJ). The unions provide advice and material support for these loose networks composed both of current Walmart workers and their supporters. However, it is up to the membership to determine their own activity. Unlike unions, they do not have the right to bargain with the employers on the employees' behalf.

On the other hand, they are not subject to the NLRB's election laws that favor corporations. A minority at a workforce can take concerted collective action as long as this action is over an unfair labor practice such as retaliation by the employer.

There are great limits to what this form of organization can accomplish on its own. Taking action over wages and benefits, for instance, is off limits. Even more important, it becomes more difficult to take strike action that shuts off the spigot of profits for an employer since that requires shutting down operations by the involvement of the entire workforce, and organizing community supporters in massive picket lines. Without this option for workers, employers are less likely to give in.

But the example of strong wins by organizations such as OUR Walmart and WWJ help to

pave the way towards wider unity among the workforce and unionization. They help to chip away at the fear workers have in standing united against an employer like Walmart. For instance, WWJ organizer Leah Fried reported that after receiving back pay for their strike in Elwood, Illinois an envious co-worker who had not gone out said he now wished he had done so.

Because OUR Walmart and WWJ are organized on a national basis, they can also open up the road for a union drive on a national scale. Walmart has shown that it is willing to close a store rather than have it go union. However, it cannot afford to do this if a majority of workers from dozens of its stores are signing up.

The conditions and wages that Walmart workers currently are subjected to have created a downward pressure for retail employees and the entire working class. The recent actions of these workers in defense of their own interests, on the other hand, can reverse this pressure and lift the living standard up for all.

To see how you can contribute to this development visit OUR Walmart at <http://forrespect.org/> and Warehouse Workers for Justice at <http://www.warehouseworker.org/> and be prepared to take action on Black Friday, November 23, 2012.

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