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POLITICS

Walmart Workers Will Make History on Friday as America Confronts Growing Inequality

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This Friday, the busiest shopping day of the year, tens of millions of Americans will travel to Walmart stores to look for holiday discounts on computers, toys, and cell phones as well as to buy groceries and basic household items. But at more than 1,500 of Walmart's 4,000 stores, shoppers will be greeted by Walmart employees handing out leaflets and holding picket signs -- "Walmart: Stop Bullying, Stop Firing, Start Paying" and "We're Drawing a Line at the Poverty Line: \$25,000/year" -- protesting the company's abusive labor practices, including poverty-level wages, stingy benefits, and irregular work schedules that make it impossible for their families to make ends meet.

The Black Friday rallies and demonstrations represent a dramatic escalation of the growing protest movement among employees of America's largest private employer. But they also represent the vanguard of a sharp challenge to the nation's widening economic divide and the declining standard of living among the majority of Americans.

National leaders and community groups from every corner of the country will join Walmart workers at protests leading up to and on Black Friday. Members of Congress, including Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN); women's groups including the National Organization for Women, and environmental and consumer organizations such as The Sierra Club and the National Consumers League have all pledged support, saying that the Walmart workers' fight is a fight for all Americans.

It is sometimes difficult to recognize historical events as they unfold, but it is likely that future generations will look at these Walmart protests as a major turning point that helped move the nation in a new direction, similar to the sit-down strikes among Flint auto workers in 1937, the Woolworth lunch counter sit-ins by civil rights activists in 1960, and the first Earth Day in 1970 that jump-started the environmental movement.

The swelling anger over inequality began with the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations in September 2011 and spread quickly from New York City to cities across the country. The Occupiers were soon evicted from the parks and other places they temporarily inhabited, but movement's message has continued to resonate with the American public. Activists as well as many politicians and pundits have embraced its "1% vs. 99%" theme, which has quickly become part of the Americans' everyday conversations.

Public opinion polls reveal that a significant majority of Americans believe that there is too much power in the hands of a few rich people and corporations, that our political and economic system unfairly favors the wealthy, and that wealthy people don't pay their fair share of taxes. Surveys also document that Americans think that people who work full-time should not be trapped in poverty. A July poll conducted Hart Research Associates showed 80 percent of Americans back hiking the federal minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour and adjusting it for the cost of living in future years. Not surprisingly, 92 percent of Democrats voice support for this proposal, but so do 80 percent of independents, 62 percent of Republicans, 75 percent of Southern whites and 79 percent of people with incomes over \$100,000.

But public opinion alone doesn't translate into changes in politics and public policy. For that to occur, people have to take collective action. The past year has witnessed a growing protest movement for social and economic justice. Workers at fast-food chains like McDonalds, Taco Bell, Burger King, and Wendy's have mounted several protest actions, including a one-day strike at more than a thousand restaurants in over 50 cities in August, demanding a base wage of \$15 an hour. A bold grassroots crusade is pushing for comprehensive immigration reform, energized by young activists who call themselves "Dreamers" and embraced by a growing number of business leaders and Republicans.

Environmental activists are waging multi-pronged protests to stop the Keystone pipeline and push universities to divest from major energy corporations that exacerbate global warming. Over the past decade, and particularly during the last year, the campaign for gay and lesbian rights has transformed American culture, shifting public opinion and state laws about same-sex marriage and other issues.

Growing anger over gun violence, restrictions on voting rights, and overseas sweatshops have triggered prayer vigils, rallies, and civil disobedience, like the "Moral Monday" protests in North Carolina and the student sit-in at the Florida governor's office. In Texas, North Carolina, Maine and elsewhere, women's rights activists staged vigils at state capitals to protect women's access to health care and reproductive freedom -- and challenge those who are trying to shut down Planned Parenthood clinics. Across the country, homeowners facing foreclosure due to banks' reckless predatory loans have linked arms and resisted eviction, while their community groups and unions push elected officials to hold major lenders accountable with fines, settlement agreements, and jail time for top executives.

But no institution epitomizes the realities of hyper-capitalism as much as Walmart, and so it isn't surprising that the giant retailer has increasingly become the target of protests, not only by its employees but also by a broad coalition of consumers, community groups, unions, and others.

Walmart -- with 1.3 million employees in the U.S. and more than two million around the globe -- has probably confronted more opposition on more different issues than any corporation in history.

- To environmentalists, Walmart is a dirty word. Despite its ballyhooed sustainability work, Walmart's greenhouse gas emissions are growing, not shrinking. In May, the company pleaded guilty to violating the Clean Water Act and had to pay an \$82 million fine for improperly handling hazardous waste, pesticides, and other materials in violation of federal laws. Walmart also finances politicians who fight action to address the climate crisis, including funding the campaigns of some of the most powerful climate change deniers in Congress.
- Women employees filed suit against the company for its long-standing practice of paying women less than men more for the same jobs.
- Labor, faith-based groups, and organizations representing small businesses in dozens of cities have waged successful battles to stop Walmart from opening new stores, warning that the presence of a Walmart outlet drives out locally-owned merchants and depresses wages for employees in unionized grocery stores and other retailers.
- Immigrant rights activists have condemned Walmart for knowingly doing business with contractors who exploit undocumented immigrants to work as Walmart's janitors. On several occasions, federal agents have raided Walmart stores across the nation and searched offices at the company's Bentonville, Arkansas headquarters to investigate its abuses.
- Media exposés last year of Walmart's membership in the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council forced the company (but not the Walton Family Foundation) to withdraw its affiliation. ALEC is now infamous for pushing a conservative legislative agenda, including the notorious "Stand Your Ground" laws, which came out of an ALEC working committee co-chaired by a Walmart executive in 2005, and which contributed to the death of Trayvon Martin last year. Not surprisingly, Walmart is the nation's largest seller of guns and ammunition, earning it the ire of public safety advocates.
- Public education advocates have criticized the Walton family for donating tens of millions of dollars to conservative organizations and political candidates who seek to privatize public schools and promote high-stakes testing and huge subsidies to private education companies.
- Members of Congress have criticized Walmart for paying its employees so little that many are eligible for food stamps and Medicaid, forcing taxpayers to pick up the tab for the company's poverty pay policies. A study released in May by the House Committee on Education and the Workforce examined data received from the State of Wisconsin and found that a single Walmart store could cost taxpayers between \$900,000 and \$1.7 million a year in government subsidies.
- Last year, the *New York Times* uncovered Walmart's massive bribery of Mexican officials, reporting that the company paid more than \$24 million in bribes to gain approvals to expand its operations. Top Walmart executives knew about the bribery scheme, but quickly ended an internal investigation and even promoted one of the company officials involved in the scandal.
- In April, workers at Thai shrimp farms supplying Walmart went on strike, protesting low wages, inadequate toilet access, and substandard housing. Human Rights Watch reported that working conditions were akin to debt bondage.
- Walmart has also recently earned well-deserved negative publicity for its complicity in thwarting safety improvements at Bangladesh sweatshops that make clothes sold in Walmart stores. One of them was the eight-story Rana Plaza factory building near Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, where last April at least 1,100 workers were killed after the building collapsed -- the deadliest garment industry disaster in history.

But beyond these specific offenses, Walmart has become a symbol -- and a major cause -- of the nation's widening gap between the super-rich and the rest. The company's controlling family, the Waltons, have a net worth of more than \$144 billion. This is more than the total wealth of 40 percent of all Americans -- over 125 million people. Wal-Mart CEO Michael Duke received over \$20 million in compensation last year. Last year Wal-Mart made \$17 billion in profits.

Bill Simon, CEO of Wal-Mart's American operations, recently told financial analysts that 475,000 employees make more than \$25,000 a year. In doing so, Simon unwittingly confirmed that more than half and as many as two-thirds of the company's American employees -- as many as 825,000 workers -- make less than that.

In what has become a major embarrassment for the company, the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer* reported that a Wal-Mart store in Canton, Ohio, had organized a food drive, asking its own employees to donate to their hungry coworkers so they could afford a Thanksgiving meal. The store manager no doubt meant to help his employees, but for most Americans the food drive symbolized Walmart's greed rather than its good intentions. The incident quickly became front-page news, an instant sensation on radio talk shows and on the blogosphere, the subject of editorial cartoons, and the butt of jokes by Stephen Colbert and others.

Economists note that if Walmart paid its employees at least \$25,000 a year, a million and a half workers would be lifted out of poverty. That would mean more money staying in communities to support local businesses, helping to create at least 100,000 new jobs.

Not surprisingly, a growing coalition of Americans have rallied behind Walmart workers not only to help them win better conditions at work but also to challenge Walmart's and the Walton family's political influence.

Over the past year, protests against the company have escalated, led by Organization United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart), a nationwide network of Wal-Mart workers. Last fall, the group announced that it would hold rallies outside Wal-Mart stores in dozens of cities on Black Friday. In response, Wal-Mart executives threatened disciplinary action against workers who participated in rallies and strikes, even though they are perfectly legal.

Speaking on national television, Wal-Mart spokesperson David Tovar threatened workers, saying that "there could be consequences" for employees who did not come to work for scheduled shifts on Black Friday. Despite the threats, several hundred Wal-Mart workers joined tens of thousands of supporters at the Black Friday protests around the country.

In June, over 100 striking Wal-Mart workers, along with allies from labor, community and faith-based groups, trekked to Wal-Mart's annual shareholder meeting in Bentonville, Arkansas, the company headquarters, to tell shareholders about the company's abusive practices. When these workers returned to work, Wal-Mart -- hoping to knock the wind out of the sails of the growing movement -- systematically fired at least 23 workers and disciplined another 43 employees despite their legally recognized, protected absences.

Earlier this month Walmart workers won a big victory when the National Labor Relations Board ruled that the retail giant had broken the law by firing and harassing employees who spoke out. The federal agency will prosecute Wal-Mart's illegal firings and disciplinary actions involving more than 117 workers.

The ruling couldn't have come at a better time, just as Our Walmart was gearing up for another -- and much larger -- wave of protests this Friday in what is likely to be one of the largest mobilizations of working families in American history. In anticipation of Friday's actions, workers and community supporters recently staged a two-day strike that culminated in the largest-ever act of civil disobedience against Walmart. Last week, Walmart workers in Seattle, Chicago, Ohio and Dallas walked off their jobs in solidarity. This week, they were joined by Walmart workers in Washington, D.C., Miami, Tampa, and Minneapolis.

Walmart workers have escalated their online organizing and community outreach ahead of Black Friday, allowing customers and community members to join the fight for \$25,000 and an end to illegal retaliation against employees who raise their voices against company practices. Chicago worker Charmaine Givens-Thomas launched an online petition asking President Obama to meet with Walmart workers, which currently has more than 100,000 signers. Individuals can sponsor a Walmart striker online.

Friday's rallies by Walmart workers and their community allies are planned for more than 1,500 stores in dozens of cities, suburbs, and small towns. Those interested in joining them can find out the location of the nearest demonstration at BlackFridayProtests.org.

This crescendo of conscience has put Walmart on the defensive. Its latest television ads aren't pushing consumer goods but instead seek to persuade viewers that Walmart is an ideal employer. In recent years, the company has spent hundreds of millions of dollars in philanthropy, hoping that its charitable giving to food banks, homeless shelters and various nonprofit groups will cleanse its image as a corporate predator.

But Walmart's propaganda campaign doesn't seem to be working. As Black Friday approaches, calls for change at Walmart continue to grow louder. Many unlikely suspects have jumped aboard the anti-Walmart train. Demos, a nonprofit research group, released a report this week finding that Walmart could easily pay every employee \$14.89 without raising prices by simply not buying its own stock to further enrich the Walton family. Even *Fortune* magazine -- hardly a radical rag -- recently observed that "Wal-Mart can afford to give its workers a 50% raise," without hurting its stock value. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* on Sunday, Al Lewis chided Walmart for paying its employees "always low wages," in turn "creating a growing class of working poor."

This year, the day after Thanksgiving will be remembered not as the biggest shopping day of the year, but as the day Americans took action to demand that Walmart, the country's largest employer, pay workers livable wages and play a part in improving our economy.

Peter Dreier teaches politics and chairs the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His most recent book is *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* (Nation Books, 2012).

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