Wal-Mart Workers
Stand Up for Their Rights

Black Friday, the start of the traditional holiday retail season, hit a major public relations’ snare for Wal-Mart last year as the company scrambled to deal with over 1,000 store protests from striking workers who bravely took to the streets across the country to speak out for better jobs at America’s largest retailer. On Thanksgiving Day (2012) and sporadically throughout the night and next day, Wal-Mart customers were greeted by energetic worker rallies, entertaining flash mobs, and creative picket signs before heading into the stores for the so-called “door busting” sales.

These Wal-Mart worker-led strikes were the first of their kind in the company’s 50-year history. And it wasn’t just the typical Wal-Mart greeters and cashiers who joined in the actions. Warehouse workers from Southern California walked off the job two days earlier and even warehouse workers in the Chicago area had instituted a strike demonstration several weeks before that brought out the state police in riot gear to diffuse the massive crowd of peaceful labor supporters.

While the holiday strikes garnered national media attention, many Wal-Mart workers have been speaking out for quite some time about the company’s manipulation of hours and benefits; efforts to try to keep people from working full-time to avoid future health care costs; and their discrimination against women and people of color. Some of the employees who have spoken out have faced a range of attempts to silence them including having their hours cut and having their schedules turned upside down. Some have even been fired for voicing their concerns.

With so many Americans struggling to make ends meet and Wal-Mart taking in $16 billion in annual profits and compensating its executives $10 million each, workers and community leaders took advantage of this opportunity on Black Friday to publicly call on Wal-Mart and Chairman Rob Walton to address the wage gap the company is creating.

While Wal-Mart would like to hide this story, silence its outspoken workers, and claim that the strikes were a publicity stunt of the UFCW’s attempt to organize the workers, the facts remain that momentum is building among the store’s workers.

In fact, in just one year, OUR Wal-Mart, the workers’ organization founded by Wal-Mart Associates, has grown from a group of 100 Wal-Mart workers to thousands of Associates in hundreds of stores across 43 states. While they have focused much of their attention to the average low wages of the company, they have also exposed extremely unsafe working conditions of warehouse workers, brought forth allegations of wage theft and other labor violations by the company and its temporary agencies, and defended against any type of company retaliation against its own workers.

Despite the fact that the historic strikes on Black Friday didn’t necessarily put a huge dent in Wal-Mart’s pre-holiday sales, they did seem to change the national debate about retail workers in this country and the importance of improving their wages to help rebuild the middle class. The Wal-Mart strikes also brought together a host of new allies who are committed to informing shoppers about the struggles that its company workers are facing on a daily basis.

(continued on page 9)