

Protesters Call for Better Pay at Walmart

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PHOTO BY JIM KNOWLES

Pro-union demonstrators came to the Walmart on Davis Street last Friday to call for better pay and benefits for Walmart employees.

By Jim Knowles

San Leandro Times

Protesters hit the stores just as early as shoppers on Black Friday, including the Walmart on Davis Street.

A group of a dozen or more held signs in support of Walmart workers in front the store in the Westgate shopping center on the day after Thanksgiving, supporting better pay, medical insurance and unionization for Walmart employees.

The demonstrators, joining a nationwide protest of Walmart, said the main point is that Walmart is not only keeping their own employees' wages low, the global company is lowering the wages for everyone.

"When General Motors was the nation's biggest employer, they paid their employees what would be \$50 an hour today. Now Walmart is the biggest employer and their workers make an average of \$8.81 an hour," said Ellen Brotsky.

"Basically, it's depressing employee wages, that's why we're concerned. It affects everybody," Brotsky said.

Fewer workers in the private sector today belong to a union than in the 1950s, so they don't have the bargaining clout to get a bigger piece of the company's profits, they said.

The demonstrators made similar points as those at protests across the country. Walmart made \$16 billion profit last year. The Walton family exceeds the wealth of the bottom 40 percent of American families combined.

"Walmart made \$16 billion in profit last year and their employees make \$8 an hour and their employees are paid so low they depend on the public for their medical care," said Lew Williams, a former teacher at Roosevelt School in San Leandro.

Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration, has said that most new jobs in America are in retail, and the average full-time retail worker makes \$18,000 to \$21,000 per year.

Reich quotes a study that says if the average retail worker's salary was increased to \$25,000 per year it would lift 700,000 out of poverty and cost customers just 1 percent more.

No Walmart workers had joined the protest at the Davis Street store on Friday. Protesters said that workers may be reluctant to talk to them in front of their store where their bosses and cameras are watching. But they just want workers to know that they have a right to unionize and the right to join the United Food & Commercial Workers union (UFCW).

The demonstration was part of a larger protest across the country, but Walmart said very few of their employees took part in it.

“We had our best Black Friday ever...and the large majority of protesters aren’t even Walmart workers,” said David Tovar, Walmart’s vice president, Corporate Communications in a written statement.

“The number of protests being reported by the UFCW are grossly exaggerated. We are aware of a few dozen protests at our stores today. The number of associates that have missed their scheduled shift today is more than 60 percent less than Black Friday last year,” Tovar said.

Walmart said its Black Friday sale was better than last year and it was proud of its 1.3 million employees, which the company calls associates.

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Walmart reported that less than 50 of its employees joined the protests nationwide.