

# Black Friday protests highlight challenges, opportunities for labor

**B**lack Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, is the largest single retail day of the year for U.S. stores. To drive sales, retailers typically offer special deals and early openings. Some of these openings are now extending into Thanksgiving Day.

Activists are using the media attention on Black Friday to highlight the poor working conditions and poverty-level pay associated with many retail jobs.

“These protests present large challenges, but also large opportunities for organized labor,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said. “As U.S. jobs become more and more retail- and service-based, labor must find a way to improve the conditions for these American workers.”

To highlight the plight of retail and other low-wage workers, Walmart workers organized protests at 1,500 store locations across the country on Black Friday, Nov. 29. The protests were organized by OUR (Organization United for Respect) Walmart, a group backed by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW).

The workers had a number of straight-forward demands from Walmart that included a minimum wage of \$25,000 a year, more full-time positions, and an end to retaliations against workers for speaking out against workplace conditions. Recent revelations from Walmart’s CEO, Mike Duke, indicate that up to 825,000 of the company’s 1.4 million workers are making below \$25,000, while Walmart made \$16.6 billion in net income for Fiscal Year 2013.

These protests were spurred by a trend toward more low-paying jobs in the U.S. Many of these workers are feeling the pinch of not being able to support their families on such low pay, and the lack of unionization of these workers means that many of them do not have a voice on the job and are subject to the whims of managers.



Photo by: People Power

**Black Friday protestors in Chicago raise awareness about working conditions.**

The protestors’ goals were magnified by a news story about a Walmart store in Ohio hosting a food bank in which associates would contribute to help their fellow poverty-level workers. “Walmart is the largest employer of low-wage workers in the country, and they set the terms of this debate,” Judy Conti of the National Employment Law Project told National Public Radio. “Don’t add insult to injury and ask low-paid workers to help those even worse off.”

“I think we got our message across, and people listened,” Isaiah Beamon, a 21-year-old Walmart worker from Landover, MD, told *The Guardian*, a British newspaper. Beamon joined approximately 200 protestors at a Walmart store in Alexandria, VA. “All we want is for Walmart to give us a living wage and show us some respect—that’s not too much to ask from a multibillion dollar company.”

## Gray Thursday

Walmart workers also joined a successful campaign by some Whole Foods employees to not be forced to work on Thanksgiving Day. Ten workers at two Chicago Whole Foods stores walked out and joined other fast food workers, Walmart workers and supporters at an afternoon rally. These protests came in the wake of a protest by workers at a Whole Foods supplier, Amy’s Bread, who went public with allegations of unpaid wages, management disrespect and abhorrent working conditions.

“I think it will be disruptive, but that’s kind of the point: to disrupt the flow of things,” Matthew Camp, a Whole Foods employee and member of the Workers Organizing Committee of Chicago (WOCC), told *Salon*. “Causing a disruption also provides us with a platform—you know, we have to make some noise to get our point across.”

The tenacity of the Whole Foods workers paid off. Several hours after the strike

# Engaging faith-based allies

**A**t the AFL-CIO National Convention in September, the leaders of the nation's largest labor federation vowed to form better and more permanent partnerships with progressive allies who could help labor's cause. One group of potential allies is faith-based activists, and a workshop was held at the convention on the best practices for forming those partnerships. NALC's AFL-CIO delegate **Stephen Hanna** of York, PA Branch 509 sent us this report from the workshop.

One of the main themes of the 2013 AFL-CIO Convention was the importance of broadening the definition of the labor movement. We must move from being comprised exclusively of those union workers within a government-defined bargaining unit to all workers as well as community and faith groups that share our values.

As a part of that effort, this workshop focused on deepening our engagement with the faith community. The goal is to awaken in workers, through their faiths, a realization of what is happening in the world economy to workers and what the possibilities are to do something to improve their lot.

Unions at both the local and national levels often have mostly transactional relationships with community and faith groups. Within the NALC, our food drive creates a specific relationship for a single purpose. However, the AFL-CIO and the NALC are committed to engaging these faith-based organizations beyond these transactional relationships.

A prime example of the importance of this bond is the United Mine Workers (UMW) war with Peabody Energy and Arch Coal companies. Thousands of UMW retirees and their families were threatened with the loss of their health care benefits.

For decades, Peabody and Arch signed agreements to provide lifetime health care for retirees. Recently, Peabody and Arch sought to get out of their liabilities by spinning off separate coal companies and assigning their retiree health care liabilities to these new entities that were designed to fail. These new companies soon filed for bankruptcy due to this enormous debt load.

The UMW turned to its faith partners with whom it had built a solid relationship over the years to make its fight a community fight. This action also made this a fight about moral behavior, not just contractual obligations.

Hundreds of faith leaders, Interfaith Worker Justice and the Religious Leaders for Coalfield Justice all signed on to help. These religious leaders chastised the companies' actions. They also urged all religious communities to not only support the mine workers but to support reform of corporate bankruptcy laws, support the Senate's Coalfield Accountability and Retired Employee Act, divest in Arch and Peabody stock, recognize the degree to which corporate policies against workers are leading to similar bad public policies, and to lift up worker issues to their own congregations.

This is the type of relationship that all unions should have with their faith communities. Faith leaders at the AFL-CIO convention made it clear that they and labor have the same constituencies: working families. We share many of the same values of family, hard work and community. Unfortunately, all too often it's the wealthy donors whom the clergy are hearing from. We can't let a donation for a playground from Walmart be an excuse to ignore the poverty level wages it provides.

Building solid relationships with faith communities first requires a message that is worthy of any pulpit. Our message is social and economic justice for working families. A Catholic priest attending the workshop noted that Pope Francis wasn't just appalled by the loss of life to garment workers in Bangladesh as result of a factory fire; he was appalled they were working for \$2 a day in such horrid conditions.

We must take the time to learn our members' faith affiliations and then utilize our members' strong ties to their faiths to get our union involved with local clergy. Get a worker to engage these faith leaders. Work on shared fights to address injustices, disparities and inequalities faced by specific communities or groups of people in your area. And remember, affirm the work these faith leaders and organizations already do within the community.

Faith leaders have built relationships throughout their communities and they bring a moral authority to our message that the media can't ignore. They also are a source of inspiration for all workers, union and non-union alike.

But to get these leaders to engage in our struggle, we have to first build relationships, and that takes time and continuous commitment. Now is the time to get started, because the next struggle is not just around the bend, it's already here. **PR**

was initiated, Whole Foods claimed that its Thanksgiving policy had been misrepresented, as employees have the option to not work on the holiday. Protestors maintain that the company caved to their demands, as the policy of optional work did not exist prior to the strike.

## Always low wages

The protests of low-wage workers have put a spotlight on deep problems with the U.S. labor market. A once-prosperous industrial base has been decimated in the race-to-the-bottom mentality of global capitalism and free-trade agreements. Companies increasingly are moving to low-wage areas of the world to increase profits. Industrial jobs are frequently replaced by low-wage service-sector jobs, and as a result, overall wages have declined.

This shift from a large manufacturing base to a service-oriented economy is accelerating. According to the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, from 1981 to 1999 the number of manufacturing jobs decreased 0.5 percent a year. From 2000 to 2011, this decline increased six-fold to 3.1 percent a year. According to *The Huffington Post*, good jobs such as in manufacturing accounted for 60 percent of all the job losses in the Great Recession of 2009, and conversely, 58 percent of added jobs since the recession have been low-wage positions, largely associated with retail. Workers who at one time would have had the benefit of a unionized manufacturing job are now finding their options limited in the Walmart economy.

The growth of a non-unionized low-wage workforce provides both opportunities and challenges for the labor movement. In one sense, the nature of these jobs provides fertile ground for organizing and activism. Retail work often is low in pay and benefits. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, retail salespersons have a median wage of \$10.15 an hour, or \$21,112 a year in before-tax income. Due to the fact that many retail

workers are part-time employees, this level of income is often unattainable.

For example, although Walmart maintains that it provides a “comprehensive benefits package” for its employees, the reality is that many workers do not have access to the most basic safety net, and increasingly have to rely on federal and state programs for assistance.

In January 2012, Walmart announced that it no longer would provide health benefits for employees who work fewer than 24 hours a week, while it would raise premiums for employees by 120 percent. Moreover, Walmart has forced many of its associates to have a “flexible” work schedule, effectively trimming work hours.

By forcing its employees to work shorter hours, Walmart can push many of its associates into part-time status and thereby save money on benefits. This also leads to a sharp decrease in income for workers.

Introducing such harsh measures reveals the lack of voice that these employees have on the job. The work culture and structure of many of these retailers compels workers to either comply with management or risk being fired. Workers often complain at their own risk. For labor, the growing population of disenfranchised, non-union and non-exportable workers presents an excellent opportunity to increase membership and build a stronger movement.

### Struggle to organize

But the challenges for unions are immense. One of the biggest problems is the hostility of many low-wage employers to labor unions. There is evidence that corporations such as Walmart seek to create an environment that is not conducive to unions, and thereby keep wages low. (Walmart recently opposed a living wage ordinance in the District of Columbia that did not pass the DC Council. However, in early December, the council approved an increase in the minimum wage to \$11.50 an hour, one of the highest in the nation).

To keep unions out, some employers have used methods such as managerial surveillance, elimination of departments, and firings of workers involved in organizing activities.

Walmart’s elimination of associates engaged in organizing activity has been criticized by OUR Walmart. The organization maintains that the firing of five employees who were heavily involved in organizing activities in 2012 points to a strategy of worker intimidation and control. One of the associates fired was Girshrelia Green, a national organizer for OUR Walmart and an outspoken critic of the corporation who was fired five days after addressing a large anti-Walmart rally in Los Angeles.

“These sorts of firings are the most familiar violation seen in labor arbitration,” William Gould, professor of labor law at Stanford University and former chairman of the National Labor Relations Board, told the *Guardian*. “The idea is to put the fear of God into others so that an interest in union activity will be chilled. Highly visible companies like Walmart succeed in not only getting this message to their employees, but also to society at large.”

The nature of retail work itself poses many challenges to labor. Unlike workers in a factory setting, retail workers often are part-time employees. Work schedules can differ from week to week, making it difficult for an organizer to speak to all the employees at once. Compounding this problem is the fact that many of these workers are temporary. This lack of permanence makes it difficult to build union membership. Workers also may be fearful that interaction with an organizer will put them and their families at risk, either by a loss of income, homes or green cards.

### Labor responds

Given these challenges and opportunities, the labor movement and other organizations are attempting to ally themselves with non-unionized, low-wage workers

struggling for respect in the workplace. The UFCW’s backing of the Black Friday protests is one of the many encouraging signs of a labor movement that is lending its support to various types of workers.

A parallel can easily be drawn between retail workers in today’s economy and manufacturing jobs at the beginning of the 20th century. Workers in manufacturing plants at that time were poorly paid, lacked benefits, and often worked in dangerous conditions. But as unions organized these plants, pay and conditions drastically improved. The same can happen in retail. There is nothing inherent in the nature of retail work that commands a lower wage than an auto mechanic, for example. The key is the organization of the workers.

At the AFL-CIO national convention in September, a major theme was repositioning member unions to support the cause of all workers, and not just dues-paying members, as well as finding community allies to help us with our cause (see sidebar at left on how to engage faith-based groups). This marks a shift in the AFL-CIO’s outlook and may be a prologue to a new era of organizing and activism. The recent re-affiliation of the UFCW with the AFL-CIO has brought the interests of low-wage workers to the forefront, especially given the UFCW’s “Making Change at Walmart” campaign.

The AFL-CIO also has been active with other affiliated organizations such as Working America, which helps build alliances among non-union working people. Working America allows these workers to contribute to the AFL-CIO’s efforts and goals, and also to be involved in grassroots activism through letter-writing and phone banks.

“Labor must connect to the struggle of all working people, and not just those already organized,” President Rolando said. “The AFL-CIO is making great strides in that direction, and I know letter carriers will stand with those who need to have their voices heard.” **PR**