



Making Change at Wal-Mart

Editor's Note: Devon Weber works for the United Food & Commercial Workers and is part of their Making Change at Wal-Mart initiative

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of speaking to the Young Democrats of America at the fall convention in Albuquerque, New Mexico about Making Change at Walmart, our campaign to improve the lives of workers at our country's largest private employer.

Why should YDA members care about what happens at Walmart? For starters, Walmart and the Walton family (who founded the company and are its largest shareholders) might as well be the face of inequality in the United States. Walmart is the largest company in the United States, generating more than \$400 billion in revenue in 2010. The Walton family has an estimated combined wealth of nearly \$100 billion. Despite this largess, Walmart and the Waltons do not share the wealth with their employees.

According to IBIS World, the average hourly wage of a Walmart sales associate is just \$8.81. That means the average annual salary of a full-time Walmart sales associate is only \$15,500; that might be slightly above the minimum wage, but it's not nearly enough money to support a family. To make matters worse, Walmart recently announced drastic cuts to employee health insurance. Newly hired part-time employees, who work less than 24 hours a week, will not be eligible for coverage at all and full-time workers will see their premium costs rise by as much as 60 percent.

That's bad enough, but Walmart's business practices have an impact far beyond employees. The low wages and lousy benefits often mean that Walmart workers have to rely on public safety net programs like Medicaid and food stamps. As a result, taxpayers wind up paying the price for Walmart's failure to adequately compensate workers. The retail giant's quest to lower costs also has an impact on other employers. A study by the Economic Policy Institute found that the U.S. lost nearly 200,000 jobs between 2001-2006 because of Walmart's reliance on imports from China.

Walmart and the Walton family combine these problematic business practices with strong support for right-wing politicians and causes. Over the past five years, the Walton Family Foundation has funneled millions of dollars to the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and the anti-union National Right to Work Foundation. They also spend to influence the political process. During the 2010 cycle, Walmart's PAC and the Walton family spent over \$5 million to influence state and federal elections. The donations overwhelmingly went to Republican candidates and the Republican Party.

That's why we're working to change Walmart. We want the company to treat their workers with respect and dignity. That's why we're calling on Walmart to increase wages, restore cuts to benefits, and give workers more hours. You can find out more about our campaign at Making Change at Walmart [<http://makingchangeatwalmart.org/>].