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# Wal-Mart Workers Try the Nonunion Route

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

After numerous failed attempts to unionize [Wal-Mart](#) stores, the nation's main union for retail workers has decided to try a different approach: it has helped create a new, nonunion group of Wal-Mart employees that intends to press for better pay, benefits and most of all, more respect at work.

The group, Organization United for Respect at Walmart, or OUR Walmart for short, says it has quietly signed up thousands of members in recent months, and it is going public this week with a Web site, [ourwalmart.org](http://ourwalmart.org), and a [Facebook page](#). Organizers say they have more than 50 members at some stores, and they hope to soon have tens of thousands of members. Wal-Mart has nearly 1.4 million workers nationwide.

Although the Web site of OUR Walmart depicts the organization as a grass-roots effort by Wal-Mart workers, the [United Food and Commercial Workers](#) has provided a sizable sum — the union will not say how much — to help the group get started. The union has also paid hundreds of its members to go door to door to urge Wal-Mart workers to join the group.

In addition, the organizers are receiving help from ASGK Public Strategies, a consulting firm long associated with David Axelrod, President Obama's top political strategist.

In recent weeks, OUR Walmart has organized gatherings of 10 to 80 workers in Dallas, Seattle, Los

Angeles and other cities, meeting inside churches, fast-food restaurants and employees' homes, where the workers chewed over how they would like to improve Wal-Mart. One big concern, they said, was low wages.

"I'm hoping that OUR Walmart will make a difference in the long run," said Margaret Van Ness, an overnight stocker at a Wal-Mart store in Lancaster, Calif., about 60 miles north of Los Angeles. Ms. Van Ness earns \$11.40 an hour after four years of working there.

"The managers at our store and others are running over their associates as if they didn't exist," she said. "They treat them like cattle. They don't seem to care about respect for the individuals. We need to bring back respect."

Unlike a union, the group will not negotiate contracts on behalf of workers. But its members could benefit from federal labor laws that protect workers from retaliation for engaging in collective discussion and action.

Wal-Mart officials say that the new organization is essentially a stalking horse for eventual unionization, and they say the retail union is intent on pushing up Wal-Mart's wages and slowing its expansion to help protect the union's members at other retailers from competition.

"There's nothing new about the fact that labor unions want to unionize Wal-Mart," said David Tovar, a Wal-Mart spokesman. "This is an effort to attract media attention to further their political agenda."

The new group is the latest iteration of worker groups aimed at pressuring Wal-Mart. Earlier groups included Walmart Watch and Wake-Up Wal-Mart, both backed by unions, as well as the Wal-Mart Workers Association, a short-lived and foundation-backed group composed of Florida Wal-Mart employees.

Officials from the United Food and Commercial Workers are vowing that the new organization will be bigger and better than previous Wal-Mart groups.

“We’ve got Wal-Mart associates in large numbers coming to us and saying, ‘We need a voice. This company is mistreating us. We want to stay here, but we need to be able to change the way we’re being treated,’ ” said Dan Schlademan, director of Making Change at Wal-Mart, a division of the union. “The best thing the U.F.C.W. can be is a catalyst to help associates build an organization.”

OUR Walmart does not go out of its way to disclose its ties to the union or to Mr. Axelrod’s former firm, although officials at the union and the consulting firm say they disclose their roles if asked.

Wal-Mart employees say that store managers around the country have made clear at meetings that OUR Walmart has no affiliation with the company, the world’s largest retailer.

Mr. Tovar, the Wal-Mart spokesman, said the company “provides associates with a work environment based on respect, dignity and future partnership in the business.”

“The fact is our wages and benefits typically exceed those provided by the majority of our competition,” Mr. Tovar added. “As a result, our associates have concluded time and again that they are better off with the pay, benefits package and opportunities for advancement provided by Wal-Mart and have chosen to reject unions.”

Union officials say they hope OUR Walmart will embolden workers and someday pave the way for successful unionization drives at Wal-Mart.

“The mission of the U.F.C.W. is to raise standards for workers in the retail and grocery industry,” said Jennifer Stapleton, assistant director of Making Change at Wal-Mart. “You cannot change the standards in the retail and grocery industry unless you also change Wal-Mart.”

Mr. Schlademan said Wal-Mart employees should not have to wait until Wal-Mart someday recognizes the union through an organizing drive before they have a voice on the job.

Wal-Mart has aggressively battled organizing drives at its stores — it even closed a Canadian store after its workers voted to unionize. Mr. Schlademan acknowledged that it was hard to get a majority of

workers at a particular Wal-Mart store to vote in support of a union.

Kent Wong, director of Center for Labor Research and Education at the University of California, Los Angeles, said OUR Walmart was a smart approach for a union movement that is on the defensive. “Given the circumstances,” he said, “unions need to explore creative ways of organizing that will provide some opportunity for workers to have a voice to improve wages and working conditions.”

OUR Walmart has been inspired by a handful of groups that unions formed when they recognized it would be too difficult to unionize a company.

The foremost model is the Alliance at I.B.M., a group with several hundred dues-paying members and some 5,000 supporters that has backed several shareholder actions and has often spoken out to the news media on workplace safety issues and the outsourcing of high-tech jobs. The Alliance once mounted a protest that helped persuade I.B.M. to revise a pension overhaul that had hurt many older workers.

“It’s very difficult to win a union election in the United States, especially at sophisticated companies like I.B.M. and Wal-Mart,” said Lee Conrad, the Alliance’s national coordinator. “But these groups show you can raise issues that help workers.”

In recent months, the food and commercial workers union has paid most of the salary of several hundred members, on leave from their jobs, to knock on doors and otherwise reach out to Wal-Mart employees to urge them to join OUR Walmart. Those who join are being asked to pay dues of \$5 a month. The new organization plans to draft recommendations to improve working conditions, and hopes to meet soon with Wal-Mart’s top management.

“Someone has to stand up to say something,” said Deondra Thomas, a shoe department employee at a Dallas Wal-Mart, who earns \$8.90 an hour after three years there. “So many people have been quiet for so long. A lot of us think Wal-Mart is an awesome company, but as far as the employees, they treat us like dirt.”



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