

## **Wal-Mart Is Facing Latest Salvo From Union Group Plans to Demand Management's Attention During Visit to Headquarters**

By MIGUEL BUSTILLO And KRIS MAHER

Wall St Journal

JUNE 16, 2011

A hundred Wal-Mart Stores Inc. workers representing a new, union-financed organization called OUR Walmart are expected to converge at the company's Bentonville, Ark., headquarters Thursday to demand that management pay attention to their concerns.

The Web-based group, started last fall with seed money from the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, is the latest salvo in the long and so far fruitless efforts by U.S. labor unions to organize the 1.4 million U.S. workers at the world's largest retail chain.

The workers' group, which is receiving counsel from a Washington, D.C., political-strategy firm founded by former Obama campaign adviser David Axelrod, claims to have several thousand members who pay \$5 a month to come together via social media to discuss changing workplace conditions at Wal-Mart.

Some of the workers who have joined the group have planned the visit to headquarters, but it wasn't clear Wednesday that the company would meet with the group, which has no collective-bargaining rights.

"In broad brush strokes, we have 100 associates arriving in Bentonville, by car and plane, and they are meeting to write down what they, as representatives of this group, want," said Jason Young, a member of ASGK Public Strategies, the Washington firm advising the workers. "To use union terms, you might say they are writing a platform."

While Wal-Mart has agreed to work with labor unions in some parts of the world, it has fiercely opposed unionization, especially in the U.S. After butchers at a Jacksonville, Texas, Wal-Mart voted to unionize in 2000, Wal-Mart eliminated all U.S. meat-cutting departments. When workers in Canada's Quebec province voted to unionize in 2005, Wal-Mart shut down the store.

OUR Walmart, an acronym for Organization United for Respect at Wal-Mart, hasn't said what changes it will seek from Wal-Mart management. It denies that its goal is to unionize the work force, though some of the workers involved made it clear that they support such an outcome.

"All the workers would be better off with a unionized company," said Ernestine Bassett, a 62-year-old cashier at a Wal-Mart in Maryland. "The low wages are the No. 1 priority for everyone," she added. "All we want is a living wage, and that we are not getting."

As of June, the average wage for regular, full-time hourly Wal-Mart associates in Maryland is \$11.93 an hour. Maryland's minimum wage is \$7.25 an hour.

Wal-Mart spokesman David Tovar said the company sees the group as a Trojan horse assembled by organized labor to lay the groundwork for full-fledged unionizing.

He declined to comment on whether Wal-Mart would meet with the group but noted that the company has an "open-door policy" under which workers can take up complaints with their managers.

"This is just the latest effort by the unions to seek media attention to further their agenda," he added.

Labor experts view the UFCW's latest Wal-Mart campaign as part of a broader movement by unions to find new ways to build close ties to workers that verge on representation.

Marick Masters, the director of labor studies at Wayne State University in Detroit, said the UFCW could use its expertise "behind the scenes" to help workers with potential claims related to safety, wage practices and discrimination.

He said he believes the group might be able to influence Wal-Mart to alter some policies going forward, adding, "There's always the specter of a class-action lawsuit."

Wal-Mart is already a defendant in the largest gender-discrimination class-action suit in U.S. history, a case in which current and former women workers allege they were systematically paid less and promoted more infrequently than male counterparts. The U.S. Supreme Court is weighing whether the lawsuit can proceed as a class action, estimated to include more than a million women. Wal-Mart has repeatedly said that no systematic pattern of discrimination occurred.

Write to Miguel Bustillo at [miguel.bustillo@wsj.com](mailto:miguel.bustillo@wsj.com) and Kris Maher at [kris.maher@wsj.com](mailto:kris.maher@wsj.com)

--

**Bleiweiss Communications Incorporated**

Serving working people since 1946

Post Office Box 8160  
Calabasas, CA 91372  
(818) 591-7480  
(818) 591-0643 (fax)  
[www.BleiComm.com](http://www.BleiComm.com)