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Fired warehouse workers hold Walmart accountable

By Blake Deppe

After a Walmart warehouse in Elwood, Ill., violated the “ethics” policy of the big box giant and deprived workers of pay they had earned, the employees sued for wage theft. Walmart, instead of pressing the contractor it hired to run the warehouse to pay its workers, promptly fired all employees.

Determined not to take it lying down, workers showed up Feb. 17 to fight back at a newly opened Chicago Walmart Express. And they brought with them a host of supporters from the public, including community, business, and political leaders.

After working a full shift Dec. 29, 65 warehouse workers were hit with the news that they were fired, effective immediately.

The warehouse operator, Schneider Logistics, cancelled its contract with the temp agency Eclipse Staffing, after the workers filed a lawsuit against Walmart.

Warehouse Workers for Justice, a worker-led organization that has risen up in response to wage theft, and Chicago Neighborhoods First, a coalition of labor, community, and business leaders, stood in front of the West Loop Walmart, together with members of the United Food and Commercial Workers, to deliver an official complaint.

The demonstrators split into two groups: some entered the store where they handed out



leaflets to customers inside while others threw up a picket line outside. Their cries of “Walmart, shame on you” rung out as they paraded in front of the new, well-appointed showcase store.

“We were not getting paid what we were promised when we were hired,” said worker Leticia Rodriguez. “We were fired without notice, so we couldn’t plan ahead.” That added insult to injury, and as a result, she said, she and other workers had nowhere to turn. “We can’t make ends meet now,” she said.

Worker Roberto Gutierrez remarked that the

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group’s reasons for protesting Walmart were more than justified. “I was fired with a check that said ‘\$4.62 an hour.’ It also said that I only worked 12

Workers feel that Walmart's anti-union stance is a constant and strong contributor to the inhumane conditions they have experienced.

and a half hours. I worked at least 28.

"If I'm working my ass off, I want to be able to feed somebody for that! It's like I can't win," he concluded with exasperation. "But we will all win," he added, to the tumultuous applause of those standing around him.

Finally, Rudy Lozano, currently running for State Rep. for the 21st District of Illinois, appeared and declared his support for the protesters. "I'm here today to support the workers at Walmart," he said. "Growing up, I was always taught that an injury to one is an injury to all. As workers, we deserve to be treated with dignity and fairness. In these times, we need strong leadership. We need our unions."

Workers feel that Walmart's anti-union stance is a constant and strong contributor to the inhumane conditions they have experienced.

UFCW member Jared Widjeskog, who was on the picket line, spoke with People's World about that aspect of the problem, and provided some information on what Organization United for Respect at Walmart is doing to change that.

The group, founded in late 2010, serves as a way for workers to organize without unionizing,

essentially acting as a de-facto union. Members are now located in Dallas, Seattle, Southern Calif., and Miami. They make sure the public knows what Walmart is guilty of, including cutting things like premium pay and health care benefits.

"It's a big deal," said Widjeskog, "because it's a new way to hold Walmart accountable." One plan on the horizon, he said, was to "have a delegation go into the store" and practice what he called "stealth leafleting, to spread the word to customers.

"We also want to meet with investors from all over, and with actual workers from around the country" to find further solutions to Walmart's unfair behavior.

After a few of the fired workers emerged from within the Walmart Express, one of them, named Eric, declared, "The cops came and said we had to leave or we'd be arrested. We said - don't arrest us. Go to Elwood and arrest those responsible" for this injustice. And if those responsible aren't held accountable, he noted, "We're gonna be right back here real soon."



Blake Deppe writes for the People's World.

Expect a bitter fight on the budget

By PW Editorial Board

A range of progressive groups are pointing to key positive directions in President Obama's 2013 budget.

Top among them, in our view, are the plan to invest more than \$350 billion in job-creating measures, and the moves to tax the rich to pay for it.

Make no mistake: these are going to be the core battleground issues for the Republican right. Their number one priority is to defend the super-rich, and to oppose any government spending for the public good.

Other important elements include new funding for child care, community college programs, college affordability, and teacher training and compensation.

Tax-the-rich measures include ending the 2001 and 2003 Bush tax cuts for the super-rich.

Business Week moans: "Under Obama's plan some taxpayers [meaning those with the top incomes] would pay 43.4 percent in federal taxes on their dividends next year. That's almost triple what they now pay and comes on top of corporate taxes."

We say, "It's about time." But Republicans, ever in the service of the wealthy and corporate CEOs, will be saying, "No way." In the coming

months, as Congress debates the actual appropriations bills that will implement spending for the next year, the Republicans will be fighting tooth-and-nail to block these measures.

There are many other positive aspects of Obama's budget, including measures to promote a green economy - which are also job-creating.

There are also negatives, as others have pointed out. These include cuts in federal workers' pensions, and a 14 percent cut for some important social programs. Such cuts, the president said, were not his preference but an attempt to deal with the budget cutting requirements of the Budget Control Act - a bill passed last year at the height of the right-wing deficit/budget-slashing campaign.

Meanwhile, many of the cuts in military spending are really just cuts in planned increases, not "real" cuts.

Both the positives and the negatives of the budget plan underscore the need for greater organizing and action by working class people to demand that Congress passes funding for these job-creation and tax-the-rich measures, and more; and to defeat the reactionary Republicans at the polls in November.

Tax-the-rich measures include ending the 2001 and 2003 Bush tax cuts for the super-rich.

Republican “Mad Men” infuriate women yet again

By Susan Webb

Foster Friess, the billionaire backer of Rick Santorum’s campaign, stunned MSNBC’s Andrea Mitchell yesterday when he said, “Back in my day, they used Bayer aspirin for contraceptives. The gals put it between their knees and it wasn’t that costly.”

Mitchell responded: “Excuse me, I’m just trying to catch my breath from that, Mr. Friess, frankly.”

She told MSNBC, “As we watch what is happening here on Capitol Hill from a panel of men talking about health care choices for women and the comment on your show yesterday about using aspirin between your knees for contraception, I feel like I’m waking up on a set of the “Mad Men.”

She was referring GOP Rep. Darryl Issa’s hearings on birth control yesterday, where the first five witnesses were all men, including Lutheran and Baptist clergymen, an Orthodox rabbi and a Roman Catholic bishop. Issa refused to let Democrats call any witnesses.

At religiondispatches.org, Sarah Posner reports that Democratic Reps Eleanor Holmes Norton of the District of Columbia and Carolyn Maloney of New York walked out of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee hearing, titled, “Lines Crossed: Separation of Church and State: Has the Obama Administration Trampled on Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Conscience?”

Posner reports, “All of Issa’s witnesses are opposed to the contraception coverage requirement and are testifying about Issa’s framing of the hearing: that it’s about religious freedom, not health care.”

Maloney said, “What I want to know is, where are the women? I look at this panel, and I don’t see one single individual representing the tens of millions of women across the country who want and need insurance coverage for basic preventive health care services, including family planning.



Where are the women?”

Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., the ranking Democratic member of the committee and the son of two Pentecostal ministers, accused Issa of “promoting a conspiracy theory that the federal government is conducting a ‘war’ on religion.” Cummings added, “The pill has had a profound impact on [women’s] wellbeing.”

One of the witnesses Issa refused to allow the Democrats to call was Sandra Fluke, a law student at Georgetown University, a prominent Catholic institution.

Fluke said she would have testified about Georgetown students who are denied birth control coverage, including a woman who lost an ovary because she was denied coverage for a pill needed not for contraception but for medical purposes, Posner reports. As a result the woman, now 32 years old, is experiencing early menopause, threatening her ability to have children.

Issa claimed Fluke was “not qualified” to testify. Fluke commented, “Women impacted by the [policy] are the most qualified to speak.” Those voices, she said, “were silenced today.”

Rep. Gerald Connolly, D-Va., told Issa’s approved witnesses that they were being “used for a political agenda” directed against President Obama. “Today’s hearing is a sham, a shameful exercise,” Connolly said.

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Ohio students form state association

By Stuart McIntyre

In late January, students from across Ohio gathered here for a weekend to form a statewide organization. Despite an untimely snowstorm that kept many from attending, about 100 Ohio college students participated. Between meeting new friends, eating delicious pizza, and talking about politics, we actually got a whole lot done.

We formed a number of committees, agreed on a plan to make March 1 a national day of action for education and set up a statewide network. On Saturday morning, we wiped the snow off our shoes, hung up our coats and sat down to hammer out details. It wasn't easy, yet, Sunday when we left after a short rally, we were the Ohio Student Association! We had formed a union for Ohio students!

From our numerous discussions, it became clear that the issues students face are tied to the corporate power structure that runs our state and that we cannot build student power without working together across the state, as well as forming coalitions with others with similar problems. Our main goals include more democracy in our university settings and taking on the outrageous costs of education for ordinary families.

The Ohio Student Association came about because a group of passionate students decided that they were tired of searching for individual solutions for collective problems. It was difficult at times, but mostly it was just really exciting. Organize your campus. Build coalitions, and work together. Talk about what unites you rather than what divides you.

Honduras está de luto

Por Prensa Latina

Un incendio en una cárcel causó la muerte de por lo menos 300 presos, muchos de los cuales quedaron atrapados en sus celdas y fueron envueltos por las llamas mientras pedían ayuda a gritos, informaron autoridades el miércoles.

El siniestro se registró el martes por la noche en Comayagua, ciudad a unos 140 kilómetros al norte de Tegucigalpa.

El vocero de los bomberos de Comayagua, Josué García calificó de "dantescas" las escenas que observó en el lugar, cuando participo en las labores para extinguir el fuego. Relató que muchos reclusos perecieron en medio de la desesperación al no poder salir de sus celdas.

"Unos 100 prisioneros murieron calcinados o asfixiados por los gases provocadas por las llamas en el interior de sus celdas, que estaban aseguradas con candados. Lamentablemente no pudimos sacarlos por no tener las llaves a mano y no hallar al guardia que las portaba", añadió.

Lucy Marder, directora del Departamento de Medicina Forense del Ministerio Público, dijo que "la cifra de muertos podría ser superior a los 300 prisioneros".

En una rueda de prensa transmitida por la radio nacional, Marder indicó que un equipo de médicos de la fiscalía se ha trasladado a Comayagua a realizar las tareas de identificación.

"Tenemos un gran trabajo por delante, que podría durar dos semanas", para identificar los cadáveres, dijo.

"La mayoría de ellos podría haber muerto, y otros resultaron con quemaduras, escaparon o sobrevivieron", dijo a The Associated Press Ramón Custodio, comisionado nacional de Derechos Humanos..

Marder añadió que nueve reclusos con quemaduras graves recibían asistencia médica en el Hospital Escuela de Tegucigalpa, y otros 12 en el Hospital Santa Teresa de Comayagua. Así, sumaban 21 los hospitalizados.

Las autoridades investigaban si el incendio fue provocado por reos amotinados o por un cortocircuito, dijo Danilo Orellana, jefe del sistema nacional de prisiones.

Uno de los prisioneros, que se identificó como Silverio Aguilar, declaró a la emisora HRN, que desconocía cómo se originó.

"De repente alguien gritó: Fuego, fuego, fuego... y sentí miedo y comencé a pedir auxilio junto a mis compañeros de celda", relató.

"Por un rato nadie nos hizo caso, pero después de unos minutos, que se nos hicieron eternos, un guardia apareció y nos abrió el portón de la celda, que estaba con candado".

El ministro de Seguridad, Pompeyo Bonilla, dijo en rueda de prensa en Comayagua que "Honduras está de luto".

Anunció que el gobierno adoptará medidas para mejorar los centros penitenciarios del país, que permanecen en malas condiciones estructurales desde hace 40 años en Honduras y no han sido mejorados por falta de recursos por el gobierno.

"Es un problema que existe desde hace mucho tiempo y no se han adoptado los correctivos del caso, pero ahora debemos hacerlo aunque no dispongamos de fondos. Es una decisión de Estado", añadió.

En julio de 2010, el presidente Porfirio Lobo declaró un estado de emergencia en nueve de las 24 prisiones de Honduras. Su ministro de seguridad consideró en esas fechas que las prisiones eran desbordadas por la sobrepoblación.

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