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Wal-Mart Mexico scandal has echoes in U.S. operations

By Susan Webb

Wal-Mart conducted a massive, illegal, \$24 million bribery campaign in Mexico to aggressively expand its operations there, and then, when presented with the evidence, moved to cover up its actions, the New York Times reported April 22.

But even as the company was conducting phony internal investigations and citing its record of corporate ethical responsibility, it was conducting a similar campaign, involving lavish use of funds, to force itself into another untapped market: Chicago and in particular its African American communities.

In the Mexico bribery scandal, the Justice Department is looking at charging Wal-Mart with violation of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, which makes it a crime for American corporations and their subsidiaries to bribe foreign officials.

But in this country, says Chicago labor activist James Thindwa, there are no laws to criminalize Wal-Mart's practice of "open bribery," often targeting key community groups and state and local legislators with "donations," to help the company advance its agenda.

In 2006 it set up "Working Families for Wal-Mart," hiring civil rights legend Andrew Young at a reported \$1 million a year, to press support for Wal-Mart and opposition to living wage ordinances and unions in low-income communities. Participants recruited by the group, the New York Times reported at the time, "have, among other things, spoken in favor of Wal-Mart at zoning meetings and testified before a federal agency reviewing



Wal-Mart's application to open a bank."

Thindwa says Young "moved around the country neutralizing African American organizations" who might have supported labor-backed "living wage" bills aimed to protect the community against Wal-Mart's notorious low-wage practices.

On July 20, 2006, prominent South Side black pastor Leon Finney turned out 1,000 community members to rally against a City Council living-wage bill. The Chicago activists say Finney and/or his organizations received \$50,000 worth of donations from Wal-Mart. In fiscal year 20007-8, Charles Holley, a Wal-Mart executive vice pres-

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ident, wrote Finney's community service group the Woodlawn Organization a company check for

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\$25,000, the Chicago Reader reported.

Eventually, backed by then-Mayor Richard M. Daley and other powerful forces, and some of those same clergy, Wal-Mart succeeded in opening its first Chicago store. Subsequently, in opening another store in the Lakeview neighborhood, home to a large gay and lesbian population, the company bestowed donations on a number of well known gay and lesbian community organizations. In Mexico, says the Times, "They targeted mayors and city council members, obscure urban planners, low-level bureaucrats who issued permits - anyone with the power to thwart Wal-Mart's growth." The bribes, a former Wal-Mart de Mexico executive told the Times, "bought zoning approvals, reductions in environmental impact fees and the allegiance of neighborhood leaders."

Chicago Neighborhoods First is a labor, community and small business coalition seeking to "preserve and amplify neighborhood voices in how economic development proceeds in their communities."

On April 25, coalition members and Wal-Mart

workers went to the office of local Wal-Mart board member Linda Wolf to present her with a "D-Day" disciplinary action slip for her negligence as a board member. The group says Wal-Mart's cover-up actions, even promoting the man who was the ringleader of the Mexico bribery, "shows that Wal-Mart doesn't care if its actions are ethically or legally wrong - as long as there are profits."

Bloomberg/AP notes that Wal-Mart's Mexico scandal "follows more than a decade of allegations that the company violated laws on illegal immigrant workers, overtime, gender bias and preservation of evidence in pursuit of larger profits."

In Congress, Reps. Elijah Cummins, D-Md., and Henry Waxman, D-Calif., are investigating Wal-Mart's bribery scandal and the company's possible role in trying to weaken the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. With public pressure, perhaps they will also turn their attention to Wal-Mart's seemingly legal "donations" and influence-purchasing here in the U.S.



Susan Webb is People's World co-editor.

Afghanistan partnership is bad news

By PW Editorial Board

The initialing of a draft strategic partnership agreement between the U.S. and Afghanistan April 22 foreshadows American military involvement stretching at least a decade beyond the Obama administration's projected 2014 withdrawal of combat troops, and perhaps indefinitely.

The reportedly sketchy agreement was concluded ahead of the NATO summit in Chicago next month. There, the U.S.-led military alliance is expected to make decisions about its support for Afghan security forces after 2014.

The pact now goes to Presidents Obama and Karzai, and to Congress and the Afghan parliament. A follow-on agreement with details about the U.S. security presence is expected.

Over a decade of U.S. military involvement in the country, many thousands of civilians have been killed by U.S. and NATO forces as well as by insurgents. Masses of civilians have been uprooted from their homes, their livelihoods destroyed. The refugee children who froze to death last winter are symbolic of the situation.

U.S. soldiers have committed crimes, both known and untold, against the Afghan people.

Over 1,900 U.S. soldiers have died in Afghanistan, and many thousands more have been

wounded. And here at home, hundreds of billions of dollars that could have helped jump-start recovery from the economic crisis and aided millions driven into poverty have been drained away to pay for the conflict.

A fightback against the threat of perpetual military engagement in Afghanistan has been under way in Congress and beyond for years. U.S. Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Calif., last year introduced HR 780 to limit military spending there to what's needed to bring all the troops and contractors home. The measure now has 70 co-sponsors.

A bipartisan group of 24 senators last month told President Obama in a letter: "It is time to bring our troops home from Afghanistan."

Last year the Senate passed, and the House of Representatives almost passed, measures requiring a plan to speed up withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

A counter-summit in Chicago, May 18-19, will let all participants in the NATO summit know we demand all U.S. and NATO troops leave Afghanistan speedily.

Now's the time to let our representatives in Congress know we support all these efforts, and to tell President Obama we want U.S. troops home from Afghanistan as soon as possible!

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Communists discuss U.S. path to socialism

By Blake Deppe

The Communist Party USA opened a national conference in New York April 21. The logical assumption is that the 140 delegates present today from all over the country will focus on what they can do to defeat the right wing in this year's elections. And while this is, in fact, very true, the delegates note that they intend to go much, much further.

"This conference will not ignore the elections, to be sure," Sam Webb, the party's chair, declared in his opening remarks. "But it has, at the same time, a grander design. It will connect the dots between our immediate and longer-range political tasks.

One of the things driving their commitment is concern about the growing threat to humanity's future coming from environmental degradation. "Almost daily," he said, "we hear of species extinction, global warming, deforestation, resource depletion, and on and on to the point where we are nearly accustomed to the gathering catastrophe.

The Communists say that capitalism has devolved into a generator of unemployment, inequality, and insecurity. And with that understanding, they don't believe that the future offers a restoration of growth and rising income - that can only come, they feel, with a turn in the balance of class and social forces.

Given their commitment to this goal, the delegates are preparing to discuss the various stages through which they see the struggle for socialism progressing.

Defeating right-wing extremism is seen as simply the first stage of the fight. Webb warned of that stage's critical nature. Assuming an eventual victory over the right wing, the Communists see workers and allies then being able to enter an "anti-corporate" stage of the struggle, where they expect the fight for a peoples' agenda will bring the labor movement at odds with corporate/economic political power.

"This stage of struggle doesn't supplant capi-



talism," Webb remarked. Instead, it "brings the socialist stage closer as tens of millions become convinced in the course of the struggle that capitalism doesn't work for them."

In the next stage (the socialist stage), Communists see a substantial shift to the left among the "core forces" of social change, a deepening of anti-racist consciousness and practice, the consolidation of the anti-corporate alliance, and the growth of the Communist Party and other left organizations. "This stage will culminate in the election of a peoples' government," Webb stated.

Important parts of this stage, he noted, are "steps to control the movement of capital, to institute a tax policy that weighs heavily on the wealthy, and to place under democratic control sectors of the economy, such as finance, that are a threat to the peoples' government and a socialist revolution."

Some of this is still a way off, and so another focus on the part of the Communists is turning their party into a far bigger one than it is.

"We are still too small," Webb acknowledged, "but the good news is that we're growing. A good measure of this is the thousands of people who 'like' us on Facebook. As of last week, 20,000 people liked us on the People's World and 18,000 liked us on the Communist Party page. And in both instances, the number grows week by week."

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Philly school plan meets opposition

By Ben Sears

As this city's School Reform Commission prepares to roll out a plan for the radical "restructuring" of one of the nation's largest school districts, resistance and apprehension are building among education activists and supporters. The plan calls for the closing of 64 of the district's 249 schools over the next five years; it would increase the number of charter schools in the district and decrease the number of schools directly under the supervision of the central office.

In fact the central office would be virtually dismantled and much of the district's operation would be conducted by local "achievement networks" of 20 or 25 schools, which could be run by private contractors, universities, or local groups.

The district's plan is not winning wide approval. Teachers' union president Jerry Jordan branded the proposal a "cynical right-wing, market-driven" attempt by the SRC to hand off the main responsibilities of running a public school system. Two active student organizations - Youth United for Change and the Philadelphia Student Union - issued a statement expressing their "deep concern about the direction the district is taking," and about the possibility of recycling the now-discredited privatization plan of a decade ago.

The school district's proposal is being driven by its inability to fund the program currently in place. In March, the district put forward a \$2.5 billion budget with a projected shortfall of between \$185 and \$218 million. The origins of the district's financial problems lie, in part, in a decade of state management.

In 2001, the state legislature eliminated the local nine-member school board and replaced it with the five-member School Reform Commission, appointed by the governor. Republican Tom Ridge, governor at the time, claimed that the action would cure the district's fiscal and educational problems.

Debate por posible inclusión de Cuba cimbra Cumbre de Américas

Por Frank Bajak and Vivian Sequera

La pregunta de si esta reunión de 31 líderes de Estado podría ser la última Cumbre de las Américas sigue en el aire antes de que la partida de los mandatarios ponga fin al encuentro el domingo.

Washington se opuso rápidamente a la presencia de Cuba en futuros encuentros, lo que generó incertidumbre sobre la declaratoria final de la reunión. Los ministros del Exterior de Venezuela, Argentina y Uruguay indicaron que sus presidentes no firmarán tal declaratoria a menos que Estados Unidos y Canadá permitan la futura participación de autoridades cubanas.

Bolivia se encuentra entre los países que han insistido en que la VI Cumbre de las Américas, que se realiza este fin de semana en el puerto colonial de Cartagena, Colombia, será la última a menos que Cuba sea invitada en el futuro.

"Aquí todos los países de América Latina y el Caribe quieren que esté presente Cuba, pero Estados Unidos no acepta", dijo el presidente boliviano Evo Morales el sábado al final de la jornada en una rueda de prensa en el centro de medios de la cumbre. "Es como una dictadura".

En 2008, Morales expulsó de Bolivia al embajador de Estados Unidos en el país por presuntamente incitar a los opositores del gobierno boliviano. Las negociaciones para el regreso de los embajadores se encuentran estancadas actualmente.

El tema de Cuba llevó al presidente ecuatoriano Rafael Correa a boicotear la cumbre mientras que

mandatarios más mesurados como el colombiano Juan Manuel Santos y la brasileña Dilma Rousseff dijeron que no deberían organizarse más cumbres de las Américas sin la presencia de las autoridades de la isla comunista.

Los homólogos del presidente estadounidense Barack Obama le recriminaron el sábado su sostenida oposición a la participación de Cuba que Estados Unidos defiende al subrayar la ausencia de democracia en la isla caribeña.

Obama también fue criticado por negarse a abandonar una guerra contra el narcotráfico que ha cobrado la vida de decenas de miles de personas y ha socavado a los gobiernos, si bien el mandatario estadounidense se dijo abierto a escuchar los argumentos de las otras partes.

El presidente colombiano y anfitrión de la cumbre exhortó a reconsiderar la guerra contra el narcotráfico al citar la ironía del éxito en Colombia: Mientras extradita a cientos de presuntos traficantes de la droga para que enfrenten juicio en Estados Unidos, los contrabandistas recurren a otros países en los que la aplicación de ley es más débil. Centroamérica y México, en particular, se desangran mientras los narcotraficantes se trasladan a países en los que enfrentan menor resistencia de las autoridades.

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