

Wal-Mart bullying employees to vote against Obama

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — The AFL-CIO and Change to Win labor federations have asked the government to probe and punish Wal-Mart for its order to managers and supervisors to vote against Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), because of his support of the Employee Free Choice Act.

They called the order illegal under federal election law.

Their request to the Federal Election Commission on Aug. 14 said the retail giant broke federal election law with mandatory meetings with its store managers and department supervisors in seven states to push its threat.

The meetings were first reported in the Wall Street Journal.

The labor groups' request may not get very far. The FEC is known as a toothless tiger in enforcing election law violations. Its decisions, when they come at all, are years after the law-breaking occurs and its fines are usually small.

The meetings were confirmed by other Wal-Mart workers, who spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing retaliation, but who nevertheless called another organization, Wal-Mart Watch, to discuss the sessions.

Wal-Mart, the Journal story said, specifically warned managers and su-

perisors that working and voting for Obama for president is a vote for the Employee Free Choice Act. The act, beaten by a Republican filibuster in the Senate (that included Oregon Sen. Gordon Smith) this year, will come up again in the next Congress.

Federal law lets corporations "communicate express advocacy about federal candidates," such as Obama "only to a restricted class" of employees, the labor groups' complaint says. That class has to be salaried, not hourly, and it is only "employees who have policymaking, managerial, professional or supervisory responsibilities."

The Wal-Mart store managers and department supervisors, summoned to the meetings about Obama and EFCA, are hourly workers. Even Wal-Mart's spokesman calls them "associates" — the retailer's name for rank-and-file workers.

The Employee Free Choice Act, which Wal-Mart hates, would level the playing field between workers and bosses in organizing and bargaining.

The act would require card-check recognition of unions as an option for workers to choose, and set stiffer penalties for employers who retaliate illegally against employees who support a union, which Wal-Mart is notorious for.

Wal-Mart, with 1.4 million workers, is the world's largest private company. It says it talks with workers about EFCA but does not pressure them how to vote on candidates who are for or against the legislation. The workers who called Wal-Mart Watch say that's ridiculous, given the firm's history.

So does AFL-CIO Organizing Director Stewart Acuff. He called Wal-Mart "guilty of trying to bully" its workers and the U.S. political system,

reported a Canadian union federation allied with the United Food and Commercial Workers — which has been trying to organize the company.

Wal-Mart Watch said the Journal story "demonstrates once again Wal-Mart intimidates its workers." The story was consistent with many reports it got from Wal-Mart workers in the last week, the organization added.

One Missouri supervisor who called flatly said Wal-Mart was ordering them how to vote.

"Some reports we received were even more egregious than what was described in (the Journal) story. In one case, a worker said they were shown a slide that said 'Obama = union' and then were told why unions were bad... All of these tactics seem to be designed to keep workers from demanding better wages, decent benefits or fairer working conditions," Wal-Mart Watch said.

What Wal-Mart is doing for November's election is what it, and hun-

dreds of other anti-union companies, do all the time when workers say they want a union: Intimidating them to go against their own self-interests.

But while the FEC may be a toothless tiger, Wal-Mart faces a more real threat north of the border. Next year, the Canadian Supreme Court will hear arguments by two workers in a Wal-Mart store in Jonquiere, Quebec, that the firm broke provincial labor law and freedom of association by union-busting.

Wal-Mart closed the Jonquiere store in April 2005, after workers voted to unionize with UFCW Canada and when Quebec law required Wal-Mart to bargain to a first contract. Wal-Mart called Jonquiere "unprofitable" and fired all 190 workers. Few believed that explanation.

"When the Supreme Court accepts to hear you, it's because the case is of national interest," said Louis Bolduc, executive assistant to UFCW Canada's president.

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