

Union workers under grave threat from Walmart expansion

A thousand UFCW members could lose jobs if Walmart opens 17 Portland-area stores as planned

By **DON MCINTOSH**
Associate Editor

The story appeared May 3: Walmart is looking to add 17 stores to the four it now has in the Portland area.

Local union officials say that would be a serious threat to workers at unionized grocers like Fred Meyer, Safeway and Albertsons. Walmart is legendary for its opposition to unions: Though it's the largest private employer in the United States, not a single U.S. worker is union-represented. And Walmart has 1.4 million U.S. employees — twice as many as Kroger, Safeway, and SuperValu combined. (Kroger owns Fred Meyer and other regional chains, while SuperValu owns Albertsons and others.)

According to an article in the Oregonian, Walmart hopes to add eight stores in Portland and nine in Clackamas, Washington and Multnomah counties. Of the Portland stores, four would be "neighborhood markets" (the company's term for smaller stores the size of a traditional supermarket), and four would be supercenters (which include grocery) or discount stores like its sole existing Portland store at Eastport Plaza. Outside Portland, Walmart would open four neighborhood markets and five discount stores and supercenters. All told, the new stores would employ 4,300 full- and part-time workers, according to a report prepared for the company by the Vancouver economic analysis firm E.D. Hovee & Co. Walmart currently has 31 stores in Oregon — 17 supercenters and 14 discount stores — according to its 2011 annual report.

The Portland roll-out is part of a nationwide push by Walmart to build in cities that have long resisted the company.

"Walmart really saturated rural and suburban America," explains Jennifer Stapleton, national spokesperson for

Making Change at Walmart, a campaign of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union. "There's nowhere else Walmart can grow in those communities without cannibalizing their own stores. So the top 50 markets in the United States — places like Portland, Seattle, Los Angeles, D.C., and New York are the only places left for Walmart to grow."

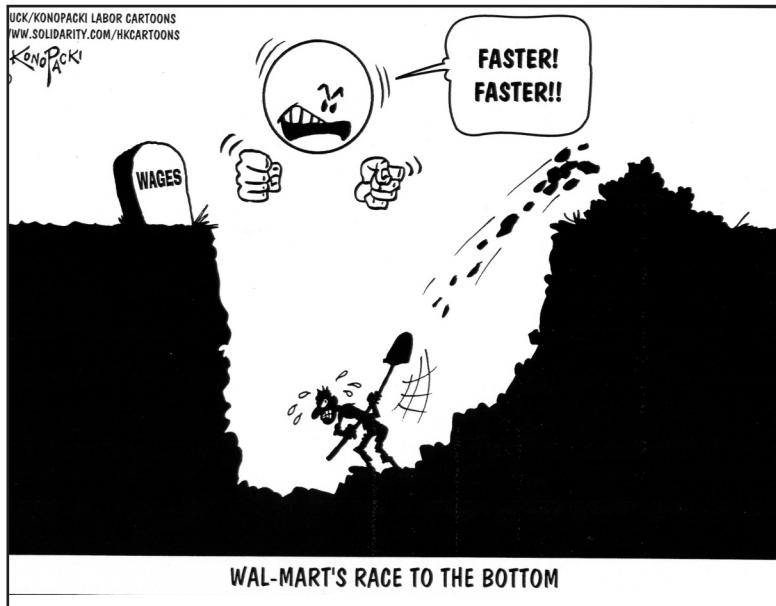
Large coalitions have come together in Washington, D.C. and New York to oppose the Walmart expansion, Stapleton said. Local unions will need to mount a similar response in Portland.

"This is the fight we've been waiting for," said Jeff Anderson, secretary-treasurer of Tigard-headquartered UFCW Local 555. "We're going to use every tool in the tool box to fight these stores."

Local 555 represents grocery workers throughout Oregon and Southwest Washington, and has fought Walmart before. When it loses those fights, its members lose their livelihoods. Two Albertsons stores closed in Salem, and one in North Bend, after Walmart stores opened nearby, Anderson said.

"Retail is a zero sum game," Anderson said. "You can only drink so much milk. More stores means you're taking an existing pie and shrinking it."

Anderson said a conservative guess is that as many as 1,000 UFCW members could lose income and their health benefits if the proposed Portland-area Walmart expansion succeeds.



To oppose Walmart's expansion, Local 555 came up with several options at a May 23 strategy session: an ordinance banning construction of new big box stores; a living wage ordinance; land-use appeals; and community pressure.

Local 555 backed a big box ban to stop a Walmart store in Keizer earlier this year, but the local ballot initiative — barring retail buildings larger than 65,000 square feet except in the Keizer Station development — failed by 34 votes in a March 8, 2011 special election. If a big box ban passed in the Portland area, existing stores including

about 10 unionized Fred Meyer locations would be "grandfathered." But such a ban wouldn't do anything to counter Walmart's plans for "small box" neighborhood markets.

A living wage ordinance, setting a minimum wage and benefit levels for certain kinds of businesses, might be trickier, but it's been tried in other places, like Chicago, Anderson said.

Both strategies rely on politics, which is an attractive route because it allows Walmart critics to make the case to elected officials (or to local voters through an initiative) that the company

is a bad citizen — paying everyday low wages (and thereby reducing the tax base); relying on taxpayers to pick up health care costs for its low-income part-time workforce; skirting wage and hour and gender discrimination laws as alleged in two ongoing multi-state class action lawsuits; selling overwhelmingly foreign-made goods; and causing small business closures and the loss of higher-paying jobs at competing companies.

The third strategy — using the land use appeals process — is indirect, but has often succeeded in halting plans for Walmart stores. Any major development, particularly big-box retail, must get approval of city planners, and citizens normally have avenues to weigh in on such things as traffic impacts, safety, aesthetics, and parking.

But all these campaigns would hinge on community sentiment. And Walmart is a veteran campaigner in these so-called "site fights." In Portland, the company is already campaigning. Ads are airing on conservative talk radio shows, directing listeners to a web site to find out about the company's good deeds — and to sign up to get updates from the "Walmart Oregon Community Action Network."

"We are going to develop a very robust response to Walmart's entry into the Portland market share," Anderson declared. "We're going to be fighting them on the streets."

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