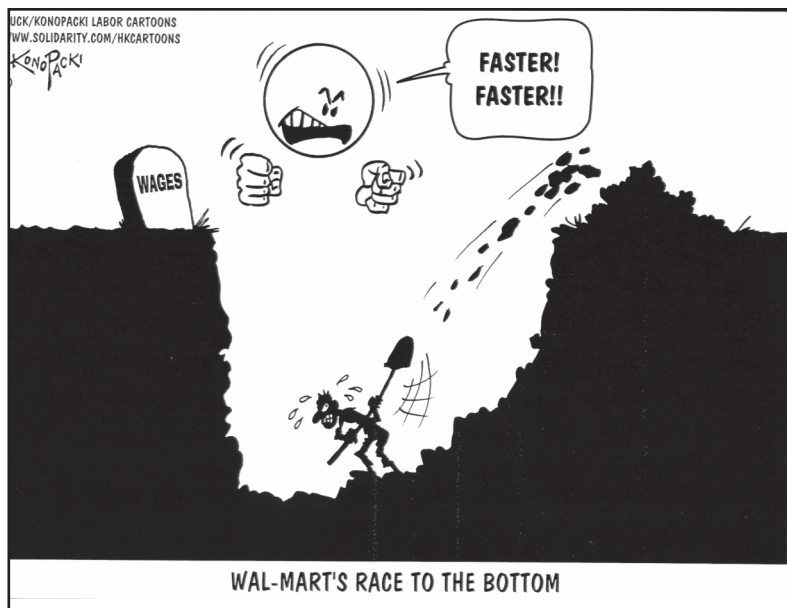




Walmart to roll back employee health care

The clan of Walmart founder Sam Walton is the richest family in America, according to the latest Forbes 400 list. The six Walton heirs hold a combined fortune of \$93 billion. As the Institute for Policy Studies points out, if that \$93 billion all sat in an investment returning 3 percent, the six would average \$465 million each this year in income.

So it must have come as quite a shock to “associates” of the nation’s largest private employer (more than 1.4 million workers) when the company announced that it was dramatically raising health insurance premiums for full time workers and rolling back the eligibility of health care insurance for recently-hired and newly-hired part-time employees.

Walmart said the changes were forced by rising health care costs. According to reports, starting January 2012 all part-time employees working less than 24 hours a week, on average, will not be covered under the plan. Premiums for most existing workers will rise, and Walmart will reduce by half the amount it contributes for each worker to help pay for health care expenses not covered under their plan.

“Walmart’s plan to roll back health care coverage for part-time workers and raise premiums for full-time employees should set off alarm bells for American workers,” UFCW International President Joe Hansen said in a press release. “This lowering of working standards will have repercussions throughout the retail industry — particularly for part-time workers.”

Hansen said retail jobs are the jobs of the future in America. “Much like manufacturing once did, retail jobs will define how it is to live and work in America in the 21st Century,” he said. “It’s critically important that retail employers compensate their workers with pay and benefits that allow them to live in the middle class.”

Drew Altman, president and CEO of the Kaiser Family Foundation, told Associated Press that a big package of cuts from one company is unusual.

“While we do see increases in cost sharing, this is unusual and is outside the bounds,” Altman said. “I don’t think this will have a major impact on those who tend to do a little bit of everything to control costs, but it could provide more cover for other employers who are looking to move in that direction.”

Hansen pointed out that a large number of Walmart employees nationwide are already in government-assisted health insurance programs because they can’t afford the premium in the company plan or did not qualify to be on it.

In 2008 and 2009, Walmart topped a list of Oregon employers with the most employees receiving state-subsidized medical coverage and/or food stamps (468 employees in 2009 and 875 employees in 2008). The list was compiled by the Oregon Department of Human Services.

During that time, Walmart reported a profit of \$14.4 billion on sales of \$405 billion — an 8.8 percent jump from 2008 and 2009.

“It looks like Walmart is once again succumbing to corporate greed, and putting profits ahead of people,” Hansen said. “The Waltons are one of the wealthiest families in the country; they own the largest corporation in America, and that means they have a responsibility to provide good jobs and help shore up our middle class — not take advantage of the economic crisis. We at UFCW call on the Waltons and Walmart to provide good jobs with affordable health care benefits for part-timers and full-timers alike. It’s the right thing to do for the future of our economy, our country, and our communities.”

(Editor’s Note: Currently there are 10,600 Walmart employees in Oregon at 31 stores. According to Tigard-based UFCW Local 555, the company wants to add 17 new stores in the Portland metro area. If successful, as many as 1,000 UFCW members could lose income and their health insurance benefits.)

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