

Walmart 'Black Friday' protests spread coast-to-coast

From Portland to Seattle, Miami to Washington, D.C., Chicago to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Walmart workers and their allies held job actions Nov. 23 — Black Friday — to protest against the world's largest retailer's low wages, lousy benefits, and retaliation against workers who speak out.

How widespread were the protests? Try even Seguin, Texas.

"We went to the Seguin Walmart about 8:30 this morning. Myself, my sister and my two nieces ages 13 and 16," one woman wrote to *changewalmart.org*, one of the groups organizing the protests. "We had our homemade signs — 'WalMart Always Low Wages.' We read the prayer and sang some songs and engaged in a few conversations with customers who were

curious. But then Walmart called the police and made us leave.

"The officers refused to arrest us, much to the manager's dismay. There was another manager — who looked like security — who copied down each of our sign messages. It was scary and intimidating. There were only four of us, all small women/girls. A local newspaper reporter saw us and took down all the information. I hope we made a difference even though we were there less than 40 minutes. I hope this army of four makes a headline in our small town!"

That "army of four" in a town of 22,000 east of San Antonio was duplicated on a much larger scale in 1,000 protests nationwide that drew tens of thousands of people.

Nearly 200 people rallied in pouring rain outside the Walmart store at Eastport Plaza in Southeast Portland. Among the protesters were Portland City Commissioner Amanda Fritz and Commissioner-elect Steve Novick. Walmart has opened three new stand-alone grocery stores in the Portland metro area, with the possibility of 14 more in years to come.

Five hundred people protested in Miami. An "OurWalmart" rally in Paramount, Calif., attracted more than 1,000 people. OurWalmart is a group of company workers organized last year to work for change from the inside.

Other Walmart workers staged walkouts in St. Paul, Minn., Milwaukee and Kenosha, Wis., Lancaster, Texas, Albuquerque and Clovis, N.M., and Chicago.

Unions and union members, notably the United Food and Commercial Workers, supported the protests, but did not organize them.

At every rally protesters demanded justice, living wages, and decent benefits for the retailer's 1.4 million workers. They also demanded respect, a voice on the job, and no retaliation for speaking out.

At the same time workers were

protesting on Black Friday, Walmart executives took time out to announce that the next Walmart dividend will go out on Dec. 27 instead of Jan. 2. Why the switch? According to veteran labor journalist Sam Pizzigati, who edits the online blog Too Much, the Bush tax cut for dividends expires at year-end. Switching the date will save the billionaire heirs of Walmart founder Sam Walton as much as \$180 million. That amount is enough to give 72,000 Walmart workers now making \$8 an hour (barely over the federal minimum wage of \$7.25) a 20 percent annual pay hike. [That would still leave them under the poverty line for a family of three.]

At the same time, the family of the late founder Sam Walton have a net worth of \$102.7 billion — more wealth than the bottom 40 percent of America.

Six members of the Walton family appear on the Forbes 400 list of the wealthiest Americans. Christy Walton, widow of John Walton, leads the clan at No. 6 with a net worth of \$25.3 billion as of March 2012. She is also the richest woman in the world for the seventh year in a row, according to Forbes. The other five are: No. 9: Jim Walton, \$23.7 billion; No. 10: Alice Walton, \$23.3 billion; No. 11: S. Robson Walton, oldest son of Sam Walton, \$23.1

billion; No. 103: Ann Walton Kroenke, \$3.9 billion; and No. 139: Nancy Walton Laurie, \$3.4 billion.

"I'm standing up for all Walmart workers around the country so Walmart will give us a living wage and so Walmart will stop retaliating against us when we speak up," Charmaine Givens-Thomas told *In These Times* after she spoke at a rally at a Walmart in the Chicago suburbs. That rally drew around 250 people. "I want them (Walmart) to understand we just want to be able to pay our bills from one paycheck to the next and for them to respect us," she said.

(Editor's Note: Press Associates Inc. contributed to this report.)

Bangladeshi factory fire echos late 19th century U.S.

A deadly fire in a Bangladesh garment factory that killed at least 112 workers has been linked to Walmart, Disney, and Sears.

Photos from the scene of the fire at the Tazreen Fashion garment factory show Faded Glory-brand clothing — an exclusive Walmart label it sells in stores. An accounts book discovered by an AP reporter on the scene also showed that Disney and Sears were among the U.S. companies who had products produced at the plant. Walmart and Sears have both alleged that they knew of problems at the factory and had believed that no products that they carry were being produced there.

Josh Eidelson of The Nation spoke with Scott Nova, executive director of the Worker Rights Consortium, who said Walmart is creating an industry in Bangladesh where extremely low wages and dangerous working conditions are the norm.

"So Walmart is supporting, is incentivizing, an industry strategy in Bangladesh: extreme low wages, non-existent regulation, brutal suppression of any attempt by workers to act collectively to improve wages and conditions," Nova told The Nation. "This factory is a product of that strategy that Walmart invites, supports, and perpetuates."

Survivors of the Tazreen Fashion garment factory fire said the fire extinguishers didn't work and the exit door was locked.

Newsday reported that "...When the fire alarm went off, workers were told to go back to their sewing machines. Victims were trapped or jumped to their deaths from the eight-story building, which had no emergency exits."

In a statement released by U.S. Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis, she said: "Just over a century ago, in March 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City burned to the ground, killing 146 people, mainly young women. That fire was our call to action. It galvanized support for stronger

worker protections and institutions to enforce them, from workplace health and safety to workers' right to organize and bargain collectively.

"The Tazreen Fashion factory fire is a similar call to action for Bangladesh and also for the many international buyers supplied by the country's garment factories. Investigations should be conducted and the perpetrators punished, but things cannot then return to business as usual. I know that change is not easy," Solis said.

There are no local unions at Tazreen Fashion. In fact, Bangladeshi garment workers struggling to gain safe working conditions and decent pay face huge opposition. Earlier this year, union activist Aminul Islam, a leader of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF), was tortured and murdered.

According to Clean Clothes Campaign, a Netherland-based garment industry watchdog, more than 500 workers have died in Bangladesh factory fires over the last six years.

The AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center reported that Bangladesh is now the world's second-largest clothes exporter, with overseas garment sales topping \$19 billion last year, or 80 percent of total national exports. Yet the base pay for a garment worker in Bangladesh is the equivalent of \$37 a month — the same monthly amount it costs to buy food for one person. The Solidarity Center is a non-profit organization that assists workers around the world who are struggling to build democratic and independent trade unions.

"The U.S. Department of Labor stands ready to help, with technical assistance and expertise, to work with the government of Bangladesh to ensure that this horrific tragedy becomes a watershed moment for Bangladeshi workers' rights," Solis said.

(Editor's Note: Jackie Tortora of the *AFL-CIO NOW* blog contributed to this report.)

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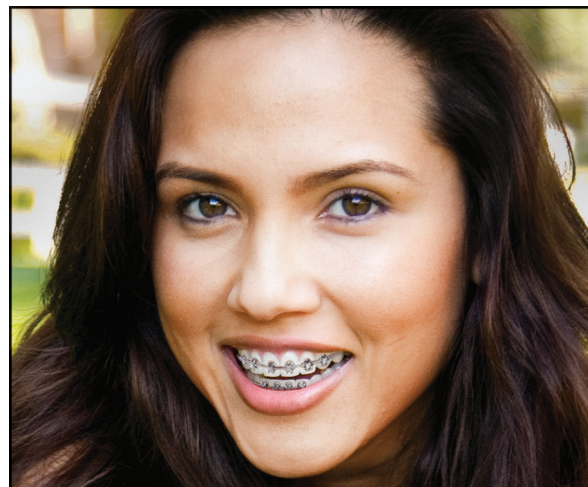
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