

## Walmart raises suspicions after closing 5 stores for 'plumbing' problems

Walmart once again stands accused of the most extreme measures to squash its workers union rights. On April 13, it announced the sudden and extended closure of five stores — on the pretext of a sudden national plumbing emergency.

The closures put 2,200 employees out of work — notably including 530 at the Pico Rivera, California store, the first Walmart store in the United States to take part in strike activity. Since that October 2012 strike, the Pico Rivera store, east of Los Angeles, has been a "hotbed" for labor activity, says United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). Workers there have participated in strikes, civil disobedience, and delegations that have spoken to Walmart workers elsewhere.

Now, the Pico Rivera store will be closed six to 12 months, Walmart says, along with stores

in Midland and Livingston, Texas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Brandon, Florida. And incredibly, Walmart cites plumbing problems as the reason for the closures, though without showing any evidence.

What kind of plumbing problems could have caused the complete closure of five stores overnight? The Pico Rivera store was built just 13 years ago, renovated eight years ago to become a Supercenter, and again renovated just last year. The Midland, Texas store — one of the busiest in the country — just had 70 plumbing fixtures replaced three years ago, and stayed open during the work, as you'd expect.

Walmart corporate officials visited each location, called a meeting, and told employees that the stores would be closing that evening. Stores stocked with perishables were closed with just

hours notice. And the layoffs were so sudden that under federal law the company is on the hook for two months of pay for the laid-off workers. And yet, two weeks after the closures, the company hadn't applied for a single plumbing construction permit at any of the five jurisdictions. That's because it still is assessing what needs to be done, a Walmart spokesman told the Associated Press.

To believe that, you'd have to think the world's biggest company can't get contractors to fix plumbing while stores stay open or get the job done in less than half a year, and that the company would close five stores for two weeks before figuring out what work needed to be done.

Or, you could conclude, as UFCW did, that the closure was meant to punish the Pico Rivera workers and hide it by firing 1,700 other workers at four other

stores. It's not the first time the company has applied scorched earth tactics when a union made headway. In 2000, after 10 meat cutters at a supercenter in Jacksonville, Texas, voted to join UFCW Local 540, the company closed meat-cutting operations in 180 stores and switched to prepackaged meats. In 2004, workers at a Walmart store in Jonquière, Quebec, became the first full store in North America to unionize. The following year,

Walmart closed the store, laying off close to 200 workers. Last June, the Canadian Supreme Court ruled that the closure violated labor laws.

On April 20, charges were filed with the National Labor Relations Board, calling for an injunction to compel Walmart to rehire all of the workers who were terminated in all five stores and reinstate them to their own stores or transfer them until they can be reinstated to their stores.

## Citing political hostility, Machinists cancel Boeing vote

NORTH CHARLESTON, S.C. (PAI)—Citing toxic political hostility and threats of violence against their organizers, the Machinists Union reluctantly withdrew its petition for a union recognition election at the Boeing 787 Dreamliner plant here.

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) had scheduled the vote for April 22, on a petition filed March 16. The election will be postponed for at least six months, the union said.

Boeing organizers had made home visits to more than 1,700 workers, out of some 3,000 eligible voters at the plant. They launched the organizing drive after Boeing workers there reached out to the union — which represents tens of thousands of Boeing workers in the Pacific Northwest and in Kansas — over issues such as forced overtime, rising health care costs and lack of respect on the job.

"After speaking with Boeing workers who we were previously unable to reach, we've determined now is not the right time for an election," said lead organizer Mike Evans. "An atmosphere of threats, harassment and unprecedented political interference has intimidated workers to the point we don't believe a free and fair election is possible."

The interference and the danger — including two organizers threatened at gunpoint and other

near-violent confrontations — resulted in the Machinists filing unfair labor practices complaints against Boeing.

"The right to organize is a legally protected civil right and no one who chooses to exercise that right in North Charleston

should fear for their life or safety," said Evans. "I hold Boeing, South Carolina governor Nikki Haley, and their surrogates responsible for creating an atmosphere of state-sanctioned hostility toward unions and union organizers."

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