

NATIONAL

Breaking point

Wal-Mart workers in Washington State say they're battling anti-union pressure in effort to organize

BY CYDNEY GILLIS
 STREET NEWS SERVICE

SEATTLE, USA -

Keya Jerris didn't think she could afford Wal-Mart's health plan on the wages she earned at the company's Federal Way store. Now her story is left for other workers to tell.

In March, Jerris called the store before the start of her shift and asked for a sick day, but was told to come in. The 61-year-old suffered from excruciating headaches, a co-worker says, and hadn't even clocked in at the store when she collapsed.

On March 10, after undergoing two surgeries for an aneurism, Jerris died. She might be alive today, says friend and co-worker Mary Watkins, if the store had given Jerris a sick day - one of many reasons that Watkins and other Wal-Mart workers are stepping forward to unionize the world's largest retailer.

It's an ongoing effort that hasn't gotten very far in recent years. But Barack Obama's presidency and his promise to sign legislation - the Employee Free Choice Act - would make it easier for workers to join a union and change that, three Wal-Mart associates said June 4 at a news conference outside the Renton (Wash.) Wal-Mart. The event was part of a local union organizing drive launched in February at the store, and a national Wal-Mart Workers for Change campaign backed by the United Food and Commercial Workers, which held similar

events in more than 20 cities prior to Wal-Mart's June 5 shareholders meeting.

Out of the 400 workers at the Renton Wal-Mart, 300 want to sign up for a union, says Kenny James, an associate who has worked at the store nearly eight years, but they fear for their jobs - with good reason, says Barbara Holland, a greeter who has worked at the store nine years.

Between March and April, Holland says, store managers held daily employee meetings aimed at convincing workers not to join UFCW Local 21. Executives from Wal-Mart's home office in Bentonville, Ark., came to the store, showed anti-union films and "told (us) how bad it was," she says.

"We've been told that if you speak up, if you vote for the union, your job could be in jeopardy or the store can close," Holland says.

As a result, she says, many workers have steered clear of union meetings, but Mary Nguyen, an organizer with UFCW Local 21, says some have signed union authorization cards. If Congress were to pass the Employee Free Choice Act, Wal-Mart and other employers would have to recognize a union without holding a vote when a majority of workers sign authorization cards.

Holland says she wants a union so that workers can have a voice and do their jobs better. For example, managers are very strict about employees going to lunch precisely at the five-hour mark in a shift, she says. "If you're helping a customer and you



PHOTO BY CYDNEY GILLIS
 Barbara Holland calls on fellow workers at the Renton Wal-Mart to join UFCW Local 21 at a June 4 news conference held in front of the store. The union started an organizing drive at the store in January as part of a national Wal-Mart Workers for Change campaign.

miss it, you get in trouble," Holland says. But, "If you want customer satisfaction, then why are you penalizing people?"

With Wal-Mart's profits reaching nearly \$13 billion last year, Holland, who makes \$12.28 an hour after nine years, also asks why the company can't pay more and provide health insurance, which she says half of Wal-Mart's workers forego today due to premium costs.

"Some (workers) have to be on state Medicaid," says Kim Quartimon, an associate at the Federal Way Wal-Mart in Washington. "We shouldn't have to, not when we work for such a profitable company."

Michelle Bradford, a Wal-Mart spokesperson, declined to comment on the

Renton store's union-related meetings, but said that most of the company's workers feel their wages and benefits are fine without a union.

"The large majority tells us they enjoy and value their jobs," Bradford says. "Some of the things they cite are that Wal-Mart jobs are good jobs with competitive wages and benefits and real opportunities to advance that are based on merit and not seniority."

Quartimon says she doesn't buy it. "Wal-Mart has dominated their employees for so long with nobody to challenge it," she says. "Well, I'm here to challenge Wal-Mart and I'm here to say I'm tired of Wal-Mart stepping on us."

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