

Retail Employment and the Wal-Mart Effect

I remember one of my first jobs. I was a senior in high school in Mount Vernon, N.Y., a suburb of New York City, and I got a job at a sporting goods store. The pay seemed decent, at least that is how I remember it. But what was noteworthy was that older adults worked in the store and had worked in the store for some time. No, I don't mean retirees who are forced to work because their Social Security is not enough; I mean non-retirees who had made a life for themselves in the retail industry.

It was not uncommon to go to major stores and find employees who had made a career in the retail industry. But it was not just major stores. There were plenty of smaller stores like the sporting goods store that employed me that held onto employees.

Like many other industries in the USA, retail underwent changes that have produced an entirely different work environment and work force. In efforts to secure greater profits, salaries



TRANS AFRICA

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have been reduced, hours altered (and in many cases sliced), and the target workforce has become either younger adults or senior citizens. In either case, the employers do not have or promote the expectation of employment longevity. The bottom line is that it has become less and less possible for a worker to make a living working retail. This is the portion of the workforce that has been described as being the underemployed, i.e., those who have a job (whether part-time or full-time) that simply cannot sustain their living standard.

We have been hearing more and more about the horrendous work-

ing conditions at Wal-Mart. While Wal-Mart is a leader in the new retail industry—with a very vulnerable workforce—it is not standing alone. They have succeeded in promoting a precarious employment environment for their workers and, in doing so, have helped to set a pattern for the rest of the industry. As opposed to unionized retail workers of days gone by who might have had pensions and healthcare, with

they have attempted to keep the salaries/wages of retail workers low. They are even prepared to accept a transitory workforce where it is not expected that a worker will stay for long. The problem, at least from the standpoint of the worker, is that you may sicken of a particular employer but rather than social mobility up, you as a retail worker live the life of the lateral pass, going from employer to employer, but rarely

workers will not only be pitted against one another but will find themselves caught in an employment maelstrom, whirling around and around, eventually sinking.

As consumers we are being taught to close our eyes to the conditions of retail workers, only looking for the best bargains, but here's my question, to paraphrase the words of the late president of the United Auto Worker, Walter Reuther: If we keep letting the condition of retail workers sink so that there are alleged bargains for the consumers, who will be in a position to buy the products?

I don't see this question asked and answered on the business pages of my local newspapers. How about you?

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Retail employers are failing to invest in their workforce

Wal-Mart you have no unions, few benefits, and an excessive amount of vulnerability.

I wish that Wal-Mart was the only such employer. Retail employers are failing to invest in their workforce. Claiming that they will not be able to compete,

rising to a respectable living standard.

The reality is that this situation will not change until and unless retail workers win unionization. As long as employers can compete against one another on the basis of who offers the lowest wages, retail

Lincoln, the Movie: What's Missing? Black History

Carter G. Woodson was right when he essentially said that Black history is the missing page of world history. Never was such so true than in the movie, "Lincoln." While I, as a "weekend historian," was impressed by Daniel Day Lewis' portrayal of the 16th president of the United States, my knowledge of history begged questions: Why were Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman not portrayed or mentioned? Why was the ancient Egyptian mathematical formula attributed to the Greek mathematician, Euclid?

The movie, Lincoln, is politically presidential, yet porous on people who influenced the end of the American Civil War. The holes in the Steven Spielberg's epic film are rooted in Hollywood's tendency to omit key historical personalities and events



BLACK LEADERSHIP

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same wages as those paid to White soldiers. Second, Colored soldiers ought to receive the same protection when taken prisoner. Third, when Colored soldiers perform great and uncommon service on the battlefield they should be rewarded by distinction and promotion as White soldiers are rewarded."

Moreover, Douglass relieved public pressure on President Lincoln regarding the Civil War in his speech in Philadelphia three weeks after the president dedicated the federal cemetery at Gettysburg, Pa. Douglass did so by saying, "We are not to be saved by the captain, but by the crew. We are not to be saved by Abraham Lincoln but by the power of the throne, greater than the throne itself, the

supreme testing of 'government of the people...' of which the President spoke at Gettysburg. The 'Abolition War' and ensuing peace will never be completed until the Black men of the South and the Black men of the North shall have been admitted, fully and completely into the body politic of America."

Likewise, in October 1864, Sojourner Truth was invited to the White House to meet with President Lincoln. Following her "Ain't I a Woman" speech at a women's convention in 1853, she was a renowned abolitionist. The meeting of Truth and President Lincoln at the White House is documented in Berry Horton's famous painting depicting the

president showing Truth his Bible.

Another omission of the movie Lincoln involves Harriet Tubman. Her many trips delivering enslaved Black people from bondage to freedom provided her with knowledge of the terrain of the Confederate states. As such, Tubman contributed mightily to Union strategy in the Civil War. According to Benjamin Brawley's "Harriet Tubman," President Lincoln listened to the ideas of Harriet Tubman. And yet, neither of these significant Black historical figures was portrayed or even

mentioned in the movie.

At one critical point in the movie Lincoln justifies his position on passing the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which would outlaw slavery on the basis that "all men are created equal..." cited the Greek mathematician Euclid's theorem that "things equal to the same are equal to one another."

What was omitted in the movie is that Euclid did not originate the theorem; a Black Egyptian mathematician at the Library of Alexandria, Egypt trained him in 300 B.C.

When people erroneously condemn "Black History" as a separatist scholarly pursuit, we need to look no further than movies made by Steven Spielberg, Clint Eastwood, and other Hollywood directors who—consciously or unconsciously—omit the contributions of Black people to world history and, thus, give unearned credit to White scholars as the progenitors of higher thought.

We must re-insert Black History in the pages of world history.

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"'Negro History' is the missing segment of world history"

—Carter G. Woodson

from biopics. History reminds us that Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth all played significant roles in the American Civil War, and thus in the decisions of President Lincoln.

For example, in the summer of 1863, Frederick Douglass was invited to the White House and introduced to President Lincoln by Secretary of State William Henry Seward and Sen. Samuel Pomeroy (Kan.). According to David Blight's "Race and Reunion: Civil War in American Memory," Douglass said, "I told him I was assisting to raise Colored troops to enlist in the Union Army but was troubled that the United States government would not treat them fairly in three ways. First, Colored troops ought to receive the

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