



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on November 20, 2012

Union Threatens to Paralyze Walmart Stores on Black Friday

A spokesman for the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union [said](#) on November 16 that it will stage 1,000 protests around the country on Black Friday, including “flash mobs” and other forms of “creative protest” designed to “educate” Walmart shoppers on how poorly the company treats its workers.



According to Dan Schlederman, UFCW’s director in charge of the protests, “We’re seeing unprecedented support. In my 20 years of organizing I’ve never seen this kind of activity.” Black Friday, he says, is “going to be a very creative day.”

The union’s complaints against the giant retailer [go back many years](#) and include complaints about wages, hours, working conditions, and alleged retaliation by managers against associates promoting union membership during working hours.

In those years it has had precious little success. Not a single one of the more than 4,500 Walmart stores and warehouses is unionized, while in Canada it succeeded in unionizing only three, and two of them voted to decertify while decertification is continuing at the third.

Such abject failure has done little to dampen the union’s enthusiasm. On November 15, at the union’s urging, some workers at a Walmart store in Seattle walked off the job, while others in San Leandro and Riverdale went on strike.

The initial effort to strike Walmart stores started in early October and to date about 160 associates have struck their workplaces. The union is hoping that its media campaign and [online petition](#) will galvanize sufficient numbers of Walmart employees to man the barricades and support the “creative protests” planned by the union.

That petition intones various grievances, opening with:

We are not treated with the respect we deserve. The fundamental desire to be shown respect is what led us to join together as OUR Walmart — an organization of Walmart Associates, by Walmart Associates, for Walmart Associates. We are one Organization United for Respect at Walmart.

For instance:

Walmart publicly claims that pay for full-time Associates averages more than \$13 per hour in some communities, when in truth most of us work for less than \$10 per hour and are only scheduled for part-time hours, making it difficult to support our families. Walmart should follow through on its public statements and pay at least \$13 per hour and expand the percentage of full-time workers....

Our schedules are often irregular and inflexible making it difficult to care for our families. Walmart should make scheduling more predictable and dependable....



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Too many of us are unable to access Walmart's health care because it is too expensive or we lack the hours to qualify. Walmart should expand health care coverage....

Far too many of us have to rely on government assistance for our basic needs. Walmart should provide wages and benefits that ensure that no Associate has to rely on government assistance.

Sounding more like whining than attempting to promote a reasonable and sensible dialogue with Walmart management, the petition has garnered fewer than 1,500 signatures from Walmart's 1,400,000 employees.

Walmart's patience with the union's protests is growing thin. David Tovar, the company's vice president of communications, said:

We do surveys and our associate satisfaction scores have been improving over the past couple of years, which runs counter to what a few workers who show up at events that the unions put them up to would say.

We have an open-door policy. If you have any kind of issue you should bring it forward to your manager and if it isn't resolved to your satisfaction you can go to the next level of management.

The union is fighting a losing battle. [It separated from the AFL-CIO in 2005](#) over organizing strategies and joined three other much more militant unions in the new Change to Win Federation, headed up by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU,) and the United Farm Workers (UFW). But the number of union workers as a percentage of the total workforce in the United States [continues to decline](#). It peaked in 1954 at about 35 percent and has been on a steady decline ever since, with union membership in the private sector currently at about seven percent.

Unions' popularity among the public also continues to decline, with public approval dropping below 50 percent of those polled for the first time in 2009, coinciding with the start of the Great Recession. A Gallup poll in September reported that more than half of Americans believed that labor unions will continue to decline, while 42 percent of those polled want unions to have even less influence than they do now — the highest since 2009.

But the real problem is that workers at Walmart, by and large, like their jobs, and they like shopping there as well. Zev Eigen, an expert in labor relations at Northwestern University's School of Law, [said](#):

Shoppers in the parking lot will say "Oh, that's terrible — OK, [so] where do I [go to] get my discounted electronics?"

That's one of the big challenges for the labor movement. [They'll] sign online petitions, but [they] won't vote with [their] wallets.

Walmart isn't expecting any significant disruptions, according to the retailer's chief financial officer. But just to make sure that the union knows what it's up against, Walmart has filed a complaint against the union with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), accusing it of violating federal labor laws by picketing, demonstrating, and trespassing on company property and intimidating customers and employees, or making threats to do so.

Said Tovar:

We are taking this action now because we cannot allow the UFCW to continue to intentionally seek to create an environment that could directly and adversely impact our customers and associates. If



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they do, they will be held accountable.

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) is expected to review the complaint and respond to it in the next day or so — in time to blunt further the feeble attempt by the UFCW to intimidate the company.

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