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Walmart protesters demonstrate for better wages, benefits

Laura Seitz, Deseret News



SALT LAKE CITY — Demonstrators gathered outside a Salt Lake Walmart store and Walmart stores across the nation Friday to protest what they believe are low wages, poor benefits and bad treatment of employees.

"They don't get full-time hours, they don't get any benefits, they don't get decent wages, they can't live on their wages. ... I mean it's miserable conditions," said Michael Broumas, a member of the Campaign for a Mass Party of Labor.

He was among about 30 people who protested outside of a Salt Lake Walmart near 300 W. 1300 South, in conjunction with a union-backed group called OUR Walmart. The Utah chapters of the Campaign for a Mass Party of Labor and the Industrial Workers of the World also attended the protest.

CMPL in the News in Utah

Written by Laura Seitz, Deseret News
Thursday, 06 December 2012 19:06

OUR Walmart claimed it was holding an estimated 1,000 protests in 46 states. The exact number was unclear. Walmart refuted that estimate, saying the figure was grossly exaggerated and that the protests involved few of its own employees.

The efforts seemed to do little to keep shoppers away in Salt Lake City or elsewhere, however. Walmart Stores Inc. said it experienced its best Black Friday ever.

Walmart employees and supporters held the strikes across the nation, specifically targeting one of the busiest shopping days of the year.

In Paramount, Calif., authorities arrested a small group of protesters Friday outside a Walmart. Elizabeth Brennan of Warehouse Workers United said nine people, including three employees, were arrested shortly after noon for blocking the street outside the store in Paramount. At one point, however, police said more than 1,000 people blocked traffic outside the store.

In Salt Lake City, there didn't appear to be any employees who walked out on their jobs in support of the demonstration, but Broumas said he doesn't blame them for not showing support.

"The thing with walking out in a state like Utah is there is no network of support whatsoever," he said. "When workers go on strike they go on strike with unions. You have not only a network of support, but you have a huge strike fund, a place to go, a leadership that's been elected. We have nothing like that here."

Aren Hansen with Industrial Workers of the World said that he was there to support those walking out in other states.

"We as fellow workers realize that we all need better wages, we all need better working conditions," Hansen said, "and the people of Walmart are especially oppressed and exploited by the corporation they work with."

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Liam Moore along with his wife, son and cousin brought cookies for the protesters.

"We just felt we'd come down and hand out some cookies to people to show our support," Moore said. "We're very supportive of the people that are doing these demonstrations."

A number of demonstrations and walk-outs occurred last week at stores but were scheduled to culminate Friday on one of the year's busiest shopping days.

OUR Walmart, made up of current and former Walmart employees, was formed in 2010 to press the company for better working conditions.

The retailer filed an unfair labor practice charge with the National Labor Relations Board last week against the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union. The company said that the demonstrations organized by OUR Walmart threatened to disrupt its business and intimidate customers and associates.

Walmart said roughly 50 employees participated in the events Thursday and a "few dozen" employees Friday. Company spokesman Dan Fogleman said that the number of associates who missed their shifts during the two days of events is 60 percent lower than last year.

"It was proven last night — and again today — that the OUR Walmart group doesn't speak for the 1.3 million Walmart associates," the company said in a statement.

The union group estimated that "hundreds" of employees participated nationwide.

Walmart for many years has faced intense scrutiny over its wage and benefit policies and treatment of its workers. Fogleman says that the company provides some of the best jobs in the retail industry and that its wages and benefits typically meet or exceed those of competitors. The retailer maintains that it has many long-term employees and that its turnover rate is below the industry average.

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The company, based in Bentonville, Ark., operates 10,400 stores in 27 countries.

Original source: <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865567413/Walmart-protestors-demonstrate-for-better-wages-benefits.html>