

# On Black Friday, Americans Confront the Walmart 1%: Pay Employees a Living Wage

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Pickets, strikes, and protests are slated to sweep across the United States on Black Friday. (Photo: [TwitPic/@WorkingAmerica](#))

*“Last year Walmart made \$16 billion in profits. The company’s controlling family, the Waltons, is the richest family in America with nearly \$150 billion in wealth. That is more than the total wealth of 43% of American families combined.”*

Walmart won’t pay its employees enough to afford Thanksgiving dinner, so they’re holding food drives for their employees. Seriously. It’s been reported that an Oklahoma City Walmart set up bins for underpaid associates to donate canned goods to other underpaid associates.

Walmart workers have a better idea: Pay us enough to put food on the table.

If you agree, please join Walmart workers in their fight for \$15 and full-time work. Click on [Black Friday Protests](#) to find a rally near you. There will be protests at over 1,600 Walmart stores. Just plug in your zip code and you’ll find one or more protests in your area.

On Black Friday, the busiest shopping day of the year, tens of millions of Americans will travel to Walmart stores to look for holiday discounts on computers, toys, and cell phones as well as to buy groceries and basic household items. But at more than 1,600 of Walmart’s 4,000 stores, shoppers will be greeted by Walmart employees handing out leaflets and holding picket signs—“Walmart: Stop Bullying, Stop Firing, Start Paying” and “We’re Drawing a Line at the Poverty Line: \$25,000/year”—protesting the company’s abusive labor practices, including poverty-level wages, stingy benefits, and irregular work schedules that make it impossible for their families to make ends meet.

The Black Friday rallies and demonstrations represent a dramatic escalation of the growing protest movement among employees of America’s largest private employer. But they also represent the vanguard of a sharp challenge to the nation’s widening economic divide and the [declining standard of living](#) among the majority of Americans.

National leaders and community groups from every corner of the country will join Walmart workers at the Black Friday protests. Members of Congress, women’s groups, and environmental and consumer organizations have all pledged support, saying that the Walmart workers’ fight is a fight for all Americans. This week, 226 organizations — including the National Organization for Women, the NAACP, the Sierra Club, MoveOn.Org, the U.S. Student Association, Dream Defenders, and the AFL-CIO — sent a [letter](#) to Walmart

chairman and owner Rob Walton calling for Walmart to raise pay to \$15 an hour and provide consistent, full-time work for its workers; provide working women with good jobs that pay decent wages; and create a workplace that fosters inclusivity, appreciation and understanding.

Last week, U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Congressman George Miller (D-CA) spoke at a [Congressional briefing](#) to discuss a business model that some are calling the “Walmart Economy,” defined as “where a few profit significantly on the backs of the working poor and a diminishing middle class.” Joined by Walmart workers, Warren [said](#): “It is good to hear workers’ voices in the halls of Congress. No one in this country should work full-time and still live in poverty, and that’s what raising the minimum wage is all about.”

It is sometimes difficult to recognize historical events as they unfold, but it is likely that future generations will look at these Walmart protests as a major turning point that helped move the nation in a new direction, similar to the sit-down strikes among Flint auto workers in 1937, the Woolworth lunch counter sit-ins by civil rights activists in 1960, and the first Earth Day in 1970 that jump-started the environmental movement.

The swelling anger over inequality began with the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations in September 2011 and spread quickly from New York City to cities across the country. The Occupiers were soon evicted from the parks and other places they temporarily inhabited, but movement’s message has continued to resonate with the American public. Activists as well as many politicians and pundits have embraced its “1% vs. 99%” theme, which has quickly become part of the Americans’ everyday conversations.

Public opinion [polls](#) reveal that a significant majority of Americans believe that there is too much power in the hands of a few rich people and corporations, that our political and economic system unfairly favors the wealthy, and that wealthy people don’t pay their fair share of taxes. Surveys also document that Americans think that people who work full-time should not be trapped in poverty. A [Pew survey](#) conducted earlier this year found that 73% of Americans — including 90% of Democrats, 71% of independents, and 53% of Republicans — favors raising the federal minimum wage from its current level of \$7.25 an hour to \$10.10 an hour. Many think it should be higher.

But public opinion alone doesn’t translate into changes in politics and public policy. For that to occur, people have to take collective action. The past year has witnessed a growing protest movement for social and economic justice. Workers at fast-food chains like McDonalds, Taco Bell, Burger King, and Wendy’s have mounted several protest actions, including one-day strikes at more than a thousand restaurants in cities around the country, demanding a base wage of \$15 an hour. Earlier this year, Seattle adopted a citywide \$15 an hour minimum wage — part of a [growing wave](#) of municipal minimum wage laws.

From the police and prosecutors in Ferguson to Walmart and its owners, abuse of power by the few is keeping many Americans living in fear. Every day average Americans must worry about police violence, the possibility of being unjustly fired, and being unable to find the next meal for their children.

Our communities cannot thrive when they are held back from earning a decent living by the biggest corporation in our country.

No institution epitomizes the realities of hyper-capitalism as much as Walmart, and so it

isn't surprising that the giant retailer has increasingly become the target of protests, not only by its employees but also by a broad coalition of consumers, community groups, unions, and others.



I stand with the  
**#WalmartStrikers**  
because

'The Black Friday rallies and demonstrations represent a dramatic escalation of the growing protest movement among employees of America's largest private employer. But they also represent the vanguard of a sharp challenge to the nation's widening economic divide and the [declining standard of living](#) among the majority of Americans.' (Image: workingamerica.org)

Walmart — with 1.3 million employees in the U.S. and more than two million around the globe — has probably confronted more opposition on more different issues than any corporation in history.

- To environmentalists, Walmart is a dirty word. Despite its ballyhooed sustainability work, Walmart's greenhouse gas emissions are growing, not shrinking. Walmart's heavily-promoted sustainability initiatives have done more to improve the company's image than to help the environment, according to a [new report](#) by the nonprofit Institute for Local Self-Reliance. Last year, the company pleaded guilty to violating the Clean Water Act and had to pay an \$82 million fine for improperly handling hazardous waste, pesticides, and other materials in violation of federal laws. Walmart also finances politicians who fight action to address the climate crisis, including funding the campaigns of some of the most powerful climate change deniers in Congress.
- Women employees [filed suit](#) against the company for its long-standing practice of paying women less than men more for the same jobs.
- Labor, faith-based groups, and organizations representing small businesses in dozens of cities have waged successful battles to stop Walmart from opening new stores, warning that the presence of a Walmart outlet drives out locally-owned merchants and depresses wages for employees in unionized grocery stores and other retailers.
- Immigrant rights activists have condemned Walmart for knowingly doing business with contractors who exploit undocumented immigrants to work as

Walmart's janitors. On several occasions, federal agents have raided Walmart stores across the nation and searched offices at the company's Bentonville, Arkansas headquarters to investigate its abuses.

- Public safety advocates have criticized Walmart for being the nation's [largest seller](#) of guns and ammunition. Media exposés of Walmart's membership in the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council forced the company (but not the Walton Family Foundation) to withdraw its affiliation. ALEC is now infamous for pushing a conservative legislative agenda, including the notorious "Stand Your Ground" (as called "shoot first") laws, which came out of an ALEC working committee co-chaired by a Walmart executive in 2005, and which contributed to the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012.
- Public education advocates have criticized the Walton family for [donating tens of millions of dollars](#) to conservative organizations and political candidates who seek to privatize public schools and promote high-stakes testing and huge subsidies to private education companies.
- Members of Congress have criticized Walmart for paying its employees so little that many are eligible for food stamps and Medicaid, forcing taxpayers to pick up the tab for the company's poverty pay policies. A [report](#) by the House Committee on Education and the Workforce examined data received from the State of Wisconsin and found that a single Walmart store could cost taxpayers between \$900,000 and \$1.7 million a year in government subsidies.
- The New York Times uncovered Walmart's massive bribery of Mexican officials, reporting that the company paid more than \$24 million in bribes to gain approvals to expand its operations. Top Walmart executives knew about the bribery scheme, but quickly ended an internal investigation and even promoted one of the company officials involved in the scandal.
- Last year, workers at Thai shrimp farms supplying Walmart went on strike, protesting low wages, inadequate toilet access, and substandard housing. [Human Rights Watch](#) reported that working conditions were akin to debt bondage.
- Walmart has also recently earned well-deserved negative publicity for its complicity in [thwarting safety improvements](#) at Bangladesh sweatshops that make clothes sold in Walmart stores. One of them was the eight-story Rana Plaza factory building near Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, where last year at least 1,134 workers were killed after the building collapsed — the deadliest garment industry disaster in history. To make matters worse, Walmart has [refused to sign](#) a Bangladesh fire and building safety accord drawn up by human rights groups and signed by many other global retailers.

But beyond these specific offenses, Walmart has become a symbol—and a major cause—of the nation's widening gap between the super-rich and the rest.

Last year Walmart made \$16 billion in profits. The company's controlling family, the Waltons, is the richest family in America with nearly \$150 billion in wealth. That is more than the total wealth of 43% of American families combined. And yet, most Walmart workers make less than just \$25,000 a year.

The Waltons can afford to pay all of their employees \$15 an hour and provide full-time work—enough to live with dignity and raise a family. But they won't—not unless people speak up.

In what became a major embarrassment for the company, the Cleveland Plain-Dealer reported that a Wal-Mart store in Canton, Ohio, had organized a food drive, asking its own employees to donate to their hungry coworkers so they could afford a Thanksgiving meal. The store manager no doubt meant to help his employees, but for most Americans the food drive symbolized Walmart's greed rather than its good intentions. The incident quickly became front-page news, an instant sensation on radio talk shows and on the blogosphere, the subject of editorial cartoons, and the butt of jokes by [Stephen Colbert](#) and others.

Economists note that if Walmart paid its employees at least \$25,000 a year, a million and a half workers would be lifted out of poverty. That would mean more money staying in communities to support local businesses, helping to create at least 100,000 new jobs. [Demos](#), a nonprofit research group, released a report finding that Walmart could easily pay every employee \$14.89 without raising prices by simply not buying its own stock to further enrich the Walton family.

Not surprisingly, a growing coalition of Americans have rallied behind Walmart workers not only to help them win better conditions at work but also to challenge Walmart's and the Walton family's political influence.

Over the past year, protests against the company have escalated, led by Organization United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart), a nationwide network of Wal-Mart workers.

This crescendo of conscience has put Walmart on the defensive. Its [television ads](#) aren't pushing consumer goods but instead seek to persuade viewers that Walmart is an [ideal employer](#). In recent years, the company has spent hundreds of millions of dollars in philanthropy, hoping that its charitable giving to food banks, homeless shelters and various nonprofit groups will cleanse its image as a corporate predator.

But Walmart's propaganda campaign doesn't seem to be working. Calls for change at Walmart continue to grow louder. Many unlikely suspects have jumped aboard the anti-Walmart train. Even [Fortune](#) magazine—hardly a radical rag—recently observed that “Wal-Mart can afford to give its workers a 50% raise,” without hurting its stock value. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, [Al Lewis](#) chided Walmart for paying its employees “always low wages,” in turn “creating a growing class of working poor.”

Walmart pays attention to these protests. We've already seen recent successes, like when Walmart changed its policy on pregnant women after workers submitted a resolution to the company or when the retailer created a system that gives workers better access to hours by allowing them to sign up for open shifts online.

Walmart workers have escalated their online organizing and community outreach ahead of Black Friday, allowing customers and community members to join the fight for \$25,000 and an end to illegal retaliation against employees who raise their voices against company practices.

This year, the day after Thanksgiving will be remembered not as the biggest shopping day of the year, but as the day Americans took action to demand that Walmart, the country's largest employer, pay workers livable wages and play a part in improving our economy.

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