

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Wal-Mart pays everyone but employees

Every other day we see photos in our daily newspaper of Wal-Mart officials contributing checks to various charities in the community.

This week started out with a photo of a check being presented to the Abingdon Historical Society, which, as a charity, is a bit of a stretch. This whole campaign is beginning to smell like Governor Ryan's "Illinois First" program, where our tax dollars were doled out to legislators to use as they wished. Is someone at Wal-Mart getting ready to run for office or is this just an intense marketing program?

Well, it's no doubt the latter. But one has to wonder, wouldn't the money be better spent on the hiring of more full time employees at a decent wage with employee benefits? If there is one fact we've learned about many businesses these days, it's that far too many employees work hours just short of those necessary to be qualified as "full time" so the company doesn't have to pay benefits.

This summer I received a letter from Ronald Powell, Illinois president of Local 881, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, AFL-CIO and the International Vice President. The letter says that "WalMart and Sam's Club are challenging the long established economic security that our members enjoy and deserve." The letter implores, "Please be aware of the harmful impact Wal-Mart is having on working families and their communities across the nation."

The letter points out that Wal-Mart's hourly wages average \$3 less than those of union supermarket employees and fails to provide health insurance to approximately 60 percent of its employees. Apparently

Wal-Mart responded fiercely to a successful organizing drive at one of its Supercenters in Texas. When meat department employees at this store voted "yes" for Union representation by the UFCW, the company swiftly switched from fresh-cut meat to selling pre-packaged meat in 179 stores nationwide, thereby eliminating jobs in the very area where the company detected the greatest risk of unionization.

The letter states what has been reported for years, that Wal-Mart is the largest outlet for imported goods in the United States. Mr. Powell says, "Despite its patriotic commercials and pledges to sell American-made goods 'whenever it can,' in truth Wal-Mart actually buys a vast number of products from foreign countries where child labor, slave labor and the suppression of human rights are commonplace."

The purpose of the letter was to ask the Knox County Democratic organization not to spend our organizational money in Wal-Mart or Sam's Clubs. They don't need to twist my arm. Years ago my husband and I were shopping in the Galesburg Wal-Mart for Christmas decorations. We could find none made in the USA. I know Wal-Mart is not the only retail store to sell goods from other countries, but Wal-Mart has certainly been trying to distract us from the real issues in their campaign of contributions. The recipients are deserving and grateful, of course. That is not the point.

The point is: it's aggravating to see money given away by a company which has a reputation for hiring part-time workers at low wages and no benefits.

Caroline Porter is a freelance writer from Galesburg who can be reached at cporter@galesburg.net.

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