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Wake-Up Wal-Mart National Town Hall Bus Tour in San Jose

By Gil Villagran - El Observador (CA)
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On August 29 the nationwide campaign against Wal-Mart corporation's labor practices held its 29th town hall meeting at the San Jose City Hall rotunda. The campaign, kicked off in New York on a bus painted with the slogan "Wake-Up Wal-Mart: Join America's Campaign to Change Wal-Mart," is traveling to 35 cities in 35 days, holding town hall meetings in major cities.

"The goal is to wake up America to the reality of Wal-Mart, a company with the economic power of Standard Oil and the values of big tobacco," said Chris Kofinis, the campaign communications director. "Wal-Mart destroys good paying American jobs with its employment practices of low wages, part-time employment, and limited, if any, health benefits."

Approximately 150 local residents attended the town hall meeting. Among these were many labor union members, justice activists, and 10 members of the tour campaign who condemned the business practices of the nation's now largest retailer which include: --an average hourly wage of \$8.23 for sales associates (the most common job) amounting to \$13,861 annual income, below the federal 2001 poverty level of \$14,630 for a family of three; --purposely limiting weekly work hours to disqualify employees from eligibility to its health benefits; --encouraging employees to apply for public assistance, which their low wages make them eligible to obtain, thereby making the public subsidize Wal-Mart's low wages; --buying most merchandize from China and other foreign manufacturers, causing American worker displacement; --forcing ever lower costs for products sold to Wal-Mart, which in turn has forced many U.S. companies to move their manufacturing off-shore, causing further unemployment of American workers; --building ever more and bigger retail stores causing local businesses who cannot compete to close up, causing many cities' downtowns to die off as shoppers seek the lower prices of Wal-Mart.

It is clear that Wal-Mart has a very successful business model, making the Walton family wealthy to the tune of combined assets of \$77 billion! However, their wealth is based upon a model that offers the lowest price for foreign (therefore cheaper) manufactured goods, beating retail competitors for customers and thus forcing competing retailers to lower their prices which forces them to lower wages to their employees and their suppliers, here and abroad. The consequence of this business model, according to the campaign organizers, "is to impoverish (or displace) American workers as well as impoverished foreign workers in China and other nations who supply Wal-Mart." One might ask, where will we be as a nation as Wal-Mart succeeds further and other retailers are forced to close or seek to match the now infamous "Wal-Mart business model?"

Will Wal-Mart be the only retailer for the low wage or bargain shopper? How will unemployed or under-employed workers be able to shop anywhere at all with ever lower wages or no wages at all? Will America become a nation of fewer and more extremely rich at the top and a vast majority of low income or no income welfare recipients at the bottom desperately seeking the lowest cost clothes, food and other essentials at the mega Wal-Mart Superstore? As the campaign to change Wal-Mart challenges: Wake-Up America!