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Retailer pressed to lead on pay

Wal-Mart urged to raise standard

By Steve Painter

Posted on September 2, 2009 at 5:07 a.m.

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LOWELL — A coalition of labor, environmental and consumer groups called on Wal-Mart Stores Inc. Tuesday to improve employee pay and benefits, cease its opposition to labor unions and source more of its products locally to reduce its environmental impact.

Led by the United Food and Commercial Workers union, which is seeking to represent Wal-Mart workers in 21 states, the coalition said the Bentonville-based retailer's workplace practices and pay levels have far-reaching impacts.

"As the largest employer in the nation, Wal-Mart is able to establish the national standard for wages," said Kim Bobo, executive director of Interfaith Worker Justice, a Chicago-based worker-rights group.

Members of the coalition spoke to reporters in a conference call.

Wal-Mart employs more than 1.4 million people in its U.S. operations and more than 2 million globally.

Cynthia Murray, a Laurel, Md., Wal-Mart worker who was on the conference call, said she and other workers who want union representation are subject to company intimidation.

"We need better pay, we need health care and we would like some kind of job security," she said.

Daphne Moore, a Wal-Mart spokesman, declined to address the issues the coalition raised during the call, but said, "as so many families are dealing with tough economic circumstances, Wal-Mart is playing an important part in their day-do-day lives. That is what we're focused on."

Nelson Lichtenstein, a labor historian, said Wal-Mart wields the kind of influence in the nation's labor force that auto manufacturers once had on wage levels. But he gave Wal-Mart and competitors credit for bringing down the cost of goods that people need and want.

"That's good. I think we should applaud that," said Nelson, author of the book *The Retail Revolution: How Wal-Mart Created a Brave New World of Business*.

Kathy Deck, director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, said retail workers' wages historically have a relationship with the U.S. minimum wage, currently \$7.25 an hour, and supply and demand.

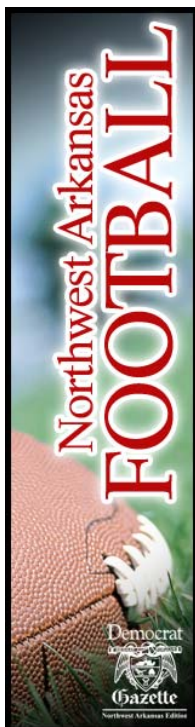
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