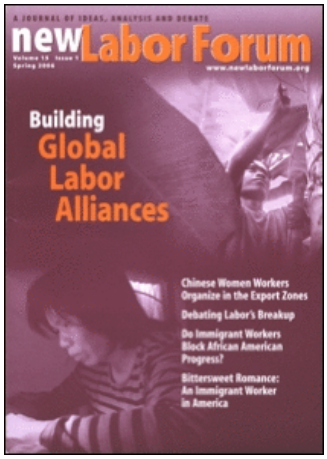

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WAL-MART SURROUNDED: COMMUNITY ALLIANCES AND LABOR POLITICS IN CHICAGO

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Illinois ACORN members rallied against Wal-Mart in City Hall on May 26, 2004.

By Dorian T. Warren

WAL-MART SURROUNDED

Community Alliances and Labor Politics in Chicago

One vote. One City Council vote is all it took to defeat a proposed Wal-Mart on the South Side of Chicago. Granted, a West Side Wal-Mart was approved by the Chicago City Council in May 2004, minutes before it rejected the South Side store. But the larger point is this: in the midst of the current debate within the labor movement about its future, the necessity of organizing Wal-Mart highlights the futility of an either-or dichotomy between organizing and politics. It also indicates the need to focus on the local level, and the ways in which labor can successfully wield its geographic political power in long-term comprehensive organizing campaigns.

This local focus is in addition to, not to the exclusion of, a simultaneous national and global strategy. At the turn of the 21st century, scholars and organizers are beginning to realize that local political contexts and the strategic choices local political actors make are vital to advancing workers rights and economic justice.[1] Indeed, like the more than two hundred local municipalities who have rejected proposed Wal-Mart stores across the country, the Chicago City Council had the sole power to approve Wal-Mart's entry, and it also has the power to regulate the conditions under which Wal-Mart will operate in its jurisdiction. Labor's political clout, along with political alliances with

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communities of color, is instrumental in this regard, as evidenced by successful campaigns waged in Inglewood, CA, and Chicago. However, these kinds of labor-community alliances are fraught with conflicts and tensions. I will discuss some of these obstacles facing the campaign to organize Wal-Mart in Chicago, drawing out some broader lessons and implications. How unions and community groups resolve these tensions, specifically around issues of race, will determine how successful we will be at organizing Wal-Mart and the entire retail industry.

THE CONTEXT OF WAL-MART'S ORIGINS: RACE, CLASS, AND SOUTHERN POWER

In many ways, the origins and growth of Wal-Mart are more closely related to the labor movement—and its postwar failures—than first meet the eye. A brief detour into recent political history, and the politics of race, class, and region in particular, will help make this clear.

Wal-Mart is a direct descendent of Southern political economy, ideology, and culture. As W.E.B. DuBois consistently articulated, the South has always been crucial for creating a more progressive politics in this country, and it is especially important for the future of the labor movement.

During the 1950s and 1960s, those within the labor movement who were sympathetic to the civil rights movement and provided political resources to assist it, did so in part because it was the moral and politically principled thing to do. But labor leaders also got involved because, according to historian Alan Draper, "they expected the civil rights movement to resolve the southern political problem for labor. Blacks would do the political work that southern workers the unions had failed to organize in the 1930s and 1940s should have done. Black enfranchisement, then, would initiate the realignment of southern politics the labor leaders desired."[2]

This hopeful political realignment was never to be; instead, the South reconstituted itself around an anti-labor, anti-black agenda through the vehicle of the Republican Party.

According to Mike Goldfield, the defeat of Operation Dixie, labor's failed attempt to organize the South in the late 1940s, is the most important factor in explaining all of American politics from WWII to the present.[3] While cold war politics definitely played a role in this historic defeat, he argues that three internal factors led to the ultimate collapse of Operation Dixie: (1) it was at bottom a corporate strategy, one in which the goal was to convince Southern business and political elites that labor was patriotic, respectable, and legitimate, as opposed to the goal of building a militant social movement that would compel union recognition; (2) it deemphasized racial equality, which resulted in the lack of crucial support among African American workers; and (3) it excluded all left-wingers from the staff, the most dedicated and successful organizers in many cases. These are all factors relevant to the present moment. The ultimate failure to organize the South in the postwar era was fateful not only for the black and white workers whom the labor movement ultimately gave up on, but for several other reasons: It led to the consolidation of an anti-labor, right-to-work South especially with the new industrialization of the Black and Sun Belts; it eliminated what might have been a broad progressive movement for social change; its failure contributed to the to-

tal transformation of Southern politics, whose national impact is omnipresent today.

This is the political womb in which Wal-Mart was conceived and nurtured. It is no coincidence that Wal-Mart was and is still a uniquely Southern creature. So it should be no surprise that more than 85 percent of Wal-Mart's political contributions in the 2004 election cycle went to Republicans. Moreover, Edna Bonacich and Jake Wilson have suggested that "the labor regime which Wal-Mart governs is imperial in scope" exerting overwhelming pressure on its suppliers, thereby shaping the global production process.[4]

… excluding Wal-Mart from…these urban markets is not a long-term winning strategy. Government regulation… is the more sustainable and achievable goal.

In this context, for labor to win against Wal-Mart and the Wal-martization of the economy, it is not enough to simply devote more resources to organize this global corporation. The labor movement, in alliance with other groups and movements for social justice, must tackle the entire political, economic, and cultural edifice upon which Wal-Mart is built. As Rev. Jesse Jackson has put it, "My issue is not with Wal-Mart frankly, my issue is with the ideology of Wal-Mart. This is a Confederate economic Trojan horse." In a sense, to defeat this Goliath, labor must take on the old Confederacy itself, and all that it represents.

FROM EXCLUSION TO REGULATION

In the meantime, the confrontation with the Bentonville behemoth is occurring in Northern cities. But simply excluding Wal-Mart from entering these urban markets is not a long-term winning strategy. Government regulation—setting the terms and conditions under which Wal-Mart and all big box retailers can operate within city limits—is the more sustainable and achievable goal. In the early stages of the campaign, the Chicago Alliance for Justice at Wal-Mart, a community-labor coalition led by Chicago Jobs with Justice and UFCW Local 881, originally wrote a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) that it demanded Wal-Mart sign. And some grassroots community organizations are still pressing a CBA with Wal-Mart as the central strategic tool in their campaigns. However, what the Chicago effort to organize Wal-Mart highlights is the potential leverage provided by the institutions of local and regional government.

A second community-labor coalition led by Illinois ACORN and the Grassroots Collaborative, a citywide coalition of community organizations and labor unions which led the successful citywide living wage campaign a few years ago, pioneered another organizing approach: a regulatory strategy using the power of local city government. According to Illinois' state constitution, Chicago's home rule authority allows it to "exercise any power and perform any function pertaining to its government and affairs including, but not limited to, the power to regulate for the protection of the public

health, safety, morals and welfare." Using this constitutional authority, the Grassroots Collaborative is promoting the very first "Big Box Living Wage Ordinance" in the country. The ordinance demands that all big-box retailers over 75,000 square feet in the city of Chicago pay a living wage of at least $10 an hour and $3 an hour in benefits; hire local community residents; protect the right to free speech and the right to organize; and not discriminate against ex-felons, among other demands. Essentially, the ordinance raises the Wal-Mart "floor" of big-box retailing up to the "prevailing wage" established by Costco.

Wal-Mart promotes its entry into poor black and brown urban neighborhoods as good-willed and beneficial to the community….

This has several key benefits. First, it averts the common criticism that social justice groups have no economic development alternatives; that instead, they end up killing job opportunities in poor communities of color. It also trans-forms Wal-Mart's cheap use of the "race card"—that the company is providing work for the inner city unemployed—into a substantive claim about "racial injustice," linking it to economic inequality. As Illinois ACORN head organizer Madeline Talbott puts it, this ordinance strategy "absolved us of the usual spurious charges that we were anti-business, anti-job and that our demands were unrealistic. Wal-Mart couldn't claim that we were picking on them, but we could claim that they were taking advantage of African-American neighborhoods by offering lower wages and benefits than Costco."[5]

Second, it shows tangibly that community organizations, and especially labor, are fighting for all working-class and poor residents, not just for the self-interest of their (relatively) more privileged members. All workers who get jobs at any big-box retailer will benefit from this ordinance, not just those who might someday be covered by a union contract. Numerous studies have shown that achieving a living wage and gaining access to health care benefits are tangible forms of investment in marginalized communities. Wal-Mart exploits local communities by forcing its workforce to use taxpayer-funded public assistance. Third, this strategy empowers workers, especially in grassroots communities of color, by opening up the political processes of economic and community development to democratic participation. Organizing people—in their geographic communities as well as their workplaces—to demand a say in economic policy decisions that affect their lives at the local level builds organizing capacity to take on even bigger fights.

Right now, local labor federations with significant political power can take advantage of such a strategy. There is no question that even central labor councils, such as the Chicago Federation of Labor, are currently underutilizing their still significant power. But to pursue a local strategy of economic regulation will require labor to overcome several obstacles.

WAL-MART'S URBAN STRATEGY AND THE NEW POLITICS OF RACE AND CLASS

Wal-Mart promotes its entry into poor black and brown urban neighborhoods as good-willed and beneficial to the community, its own form of corporate paternalism. After all, when it is not busy writing checks to churches, community organizations, the NAACP, the Urban League, and La Raza, or waging a television and radio public relations campaign, it is supposedly creating much-needed employment and offering the lowest-priced goods to economically depressed communities. Wal-Mart deploys this corporate (and Southern) paternalism to exploit the already existing racial divisions between communities of color and the labor movement, and the class divisions within black, Latino, and Asian American communities.

It would be erroneous to characterize "the labor movement" as a monolith, and we must also be careful not to see communities of color as monolithic and one-dimensional. There are deep internal divisions within labor and within communities of color. It is now more important than ever to challenge African American politicians and organizations like the NAACP and Urban League if their political agendas reflect the interests of their corporate backers like Wal-Mart, rather than the interests of the vast majority of constituents they claim to serve. For instance, how should members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) be held accountable for accepting large donations from Wal-Mart? Do Wal-Mart's corporate contributions influence their votes or their voices around issues of workers rights and racial justice? And just whom should challenge the CBC or the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, if necessary, around this issue? At the very least, this seems like an issue for black and Latino labor organizations to take the lead in addressing.

Acting locally, in this case, means addressing the racial and class conflicts unique to the specific local context. Wal-Mart used the persistent exclusion of African American workers from the city's building and construction trade unions to discredit the campaign's demands for social justice. Indeed, the term "racist unions" was often tossed around to paint the entire labor movement, not just one or a small subset of unions, as discriminatory. Of course, the local news media eagerly picked up on this and framed the entire anti-Wal-Mart effort as one of privileged "white labor" versus poor and desperate "black communities."

… how should members of the Congressional Black Caucus be held accountable for accepting large donations from Wal-Mart?

This negative racial framing was not challenged by a more positive one (i.e., why is it that Costco can offer high-road economic development to middle-class white communities, but poor and working-class black communities are expected to accept Wal-Mart's crumbs?) The labor movement is largely to blame. First of all, the labor movement must deal unequivo-

cally with racial inequality internally and externally. Internally, labor leaders must demand that the house of labor, especially the building trades, once and for all end patterns of exclusion. Externally, unions should emphasize the racial and gender aspects of their economic justice campaigns, which Wal-Mart's practices make easy to do. For example, in yet another indication of Wal-Mart's roots in Southern culture, stores in Kentucky and Texas apparently ignored the 1967 Loving vs. Virginia Supreme Court case and fired workers for engaging in interracial dating.

Secondly, while we know that unions have to organize close to a million new workers a year to survive,[6] they will be unable to do so without the strategy and resources to organize existing rank-and-file members and develop them as leaders, particularly their members of color. What was striking about the Wal-Mart campaign in Chicago was the lack of education and mobilization among labor's rank and file. This was especially so compared to the community groups' mobilization of their members. Black city council members would have had a much harder time justifying a vote for Wal-Mart if 50 unionized African American and Latino grocery store workers were present in Council chambers to remind aldermen that they too, are the "labor movement." In fact, this was part of the successful formula in Inglewood, as Liza Featherstone argues: "…black women who lived in town and worked in supermarkets were prominent faces in Wal-Mart's public opposition; they knocked on doors and talked to their fellow citizens about why their unionized grocery job was so important to them and their families, and why Wal-Mart was such a threat."[7]

Wal-Mart used the…exclusion of African American workers from the city's…construction unions to discredit the campaign's demands for social justice.

Rank-and-file leadership development—especially among workers of color—builds organizational capacity while also drawing upon the often underutilized networks in which workers are organically embedded. This leadership development is linked to a long-term political strategy; it facilitates relationships of accountability and joint action between union members and their neighborhood groups, churches, and other civic organizations. In the 1940s and 1950s, for example, organized African American workers influenced campaigns for racial and economic justice through other (middle-class) black organizations. A prime example is in Winston-Salem, N.C., where hundreds of rank-and-file leaders of the Food, Tobacco and Agricultural Workers Local 22 joined the local NAACP, transforming it from a membership of eleven in 1941 into a large and militant branch with 2,000 members by 1946.[8]

Long-term political strategizing and alliance building is a third salient in building strong labor-community power. But to do so also requires internal organizing and rank-and-

file leadership development. As Miguel Contreras argued in discussing his formula for revitalizing Los Angeles' labor movement, "labor-community alliances must be active all the time, not just when unions need help."[9]

The labor movement must build locally based grassroots organizations just the way the Right has done over the last quarter century. This is crucial considering how much power local governments actually have over economic development and workers' rights.[10] Local and regional municipalities can become "incubators" for progressive labor-community political alliances, which can help create the conditions for new organizing. Contreras described how this effort came together in L.A.: "To use politics to help workers organize, we realized that we first had to elect true warriors for working people to office—people who *came from the ranks* or had a proven commitment to making unions stronger. To do that, we had to stop relying just on insider relationships and personal lobbying, and build a political program…"[11] Rank-and-file leadership development prepares future labor-backed candidates to enter political bodies where they can utilize state power to advance economic justice. The election of former union organizer Antonio Villaraigosa in L.A. earlier this year is largely a result of the successful implementation of labor's political strategy—often in coalition with strong community organizations in communities of color—over the last ten years.

Here in Chicago, where the legislature is widely known to be a rubber stamp for Mayor Richard M. Daley's racially inequitable, pro-corporate, and neoliberal agenda, the Chicago Federation of Labor has learned its lessons and is preparing to run its own candidates for city council in the 2007 municipal elections. In fact, an unintended effect of the Wal-Mart fight is that it might potentially forge a strong labor-community alliance that could expand workers' rights in the city and state. Earlier this year, *Time* magazine, in naming Daley as one of the nation's top five mayors exclaimed that, "he wields near imperial power, and most of Chicagoans would have it no other way." Thanks to Wal-Mart, Chicago's workers are a step closer to having justice "their way." ■

Notes

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2. Alan Draper, Conflict of Interests: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, 1954-1968 (NY: ILR/Cornell University Press, 1994).

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10. Wells, ibid.

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