
UNION INTENSIFIES EFFORTS TO ORGANIZE WORKERS AT WAL-MART

By KRIS MAHER and ANN ZIMMERMAN

The United Food and Commercial Workers union is ramping up organizing at Wal-Mart Stores Inc. after a five-year lull, dovetailing with its efforts to win support in Congress for a bill to make union organizing easier.

The Bentonville, Ark., retailer, a leading opponent of the legislation, said managers have seen increased union activity at a number of stores, prompting mandatory meetings to discuss unionization. "We have noticed that the UFCW has been working harder lately in its attempts to get Wal-Mart associates to sign union cards, but we don't think our associates have any reason to be more interested than before," said Wal-Mart spokesman David Tovar.

Unions are expected to escalate card-signing efforts at other companies as well. But the campaign at Wal-Mart, because it is the nation's largest private-sector employer with 1.4 million employees at more than 3,600 stores, could have the greatest impact on the legislative debate and other organizing efforts.

UNION RESISTANCE

United Food and Commercial Workers is using this union sign-up card to organize Wal-Mart workers.

Last month Wal-Mart's head of labor relations sent a letter to the United Food and Commercial Workers union complaining about alleged unfair organizing tactics. United Food & Commercial Workers sent a letter in response to Wal-Mart's complaint.

A transcript of a Target Corp. video shown to store managers illustrates alleged management changes that could be brought about by new legislation making unionizing easier.

Since February, about 60 UFCW organizers have been dispatched to more than 100 Wal-Mart stores in 15 states to get workers to sign union-authorization cards. The cards are attached to flyers that feature a photograph of President Barack Obama and a quote from a 2007 speech he gave to UFCW activists in Chicago. "I don't mind standing up for workers and letting Wal-Mart know they need to pay a decent wage and let folks organize," Mr. Obama said in 2007. A White House spokesman said Thursday that the president stands by the statement.

Meanwhile, the UFCW plans to fly about 100 pro-union Wal-Mart workers to Washington this month to lobby members of Congress on the pending legislation, known as Employee Free Choice Act. The bill, organized labor's top legislative priority,

would allow unions to bypass secret-ballot elections and form union locals if more than 50% of workers at a company location signed cards requesting representation. At this point, the union said it hasn't obtained majority support at any Wal-Mart stores, but has majorities in a handful of individual departments, which can be unionized separately.

Business groups are spending tens of millions of dollars to defeat the bill and say it would allow union organizers to pressure workers to sign cards.

Wal-Mart and other companies targeted by unions are trying to counteract organizing efforts with meetings, fliers and videos. "I was a member of a union in a previous job, and it was not a good experience for me," a Wal-Mart representative said, according to an audio recording reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

Wal-Mart remains one of labor's staunchest opponents, arguing that a union would lead to higher operating costs and less flexibility in managing workers. It also represents labor's biggest prize, because its jobs can't be shipped overseas and it sets standards in the retail and grocery industries. Union officials believe they would have an easier time organizing Wal-Mart competitors if the retailer were represented by unions.

At a Duncanville, Texas, Wal-Mart, the union has signed up 58 employees, representing a little more than 10% of the store's 500 employees. Several workers said the company's strong performance during the recession encouraged them to sign union cards in an effort to get better wages and benefits.

Linda Haluska, an overnight stocker at a Wal-Mart in Glendale, Ill., said Wal-Mart is "a good place to work, but it would be better with a union." Since February, Ms. Haluska said her store has held five or six meetings attended by managers from the Wal-Mart corporate office to discuss unionization. Ms. Haluska and other workers said the meetings are aimed at dissuading workers from supporting the union. "They are not giving us the full picture, just enough to discourage you."

For its part, in a letter dated March 6, Wal-Mart asked the union to stop violating company policy by entering its facilities and soliciting signatures from workers "in working areas and on working time." The company added: "These tactics provide a great illustration of why there is such widespread concern about allowing unions to be certified based solely on the basis of authorization cards."