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Area Wal-Mart Workers Join Effort to Unionize

By Yan Q. Mui
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The United Food and Commercial Workers union held organizing campaigns at several Wal-Mart stores across the country this week -- including one yesterday in Landover Hills -- as it renews pressure on the world's largest retailer to increase pay and improve health benefits.

In the Washington area, union representatives said they have been responding to increased inquiries from workers. UFCW Local 400 spokesman Mark Federici said hundreds of Wal-Mart employees in the area have signed union authorization cards, but he declined to give a specific number.

"They see their company actually being a rare success story in this tight economy, and they rightfully are asking where do they fit in to all that," he said.

Similar rallies were held at stores in Seattle and Miami this week, a few days before Wal-Mart will hold its annual shareholders meeting Friday at its Bentonville, Ark., headquarters. The UFCW is hoping to build on momentum from a rally it held in April that drew Wal-Mart employees from 17 states to Capitol Hill to meet with lawmakers and lobby for the Employee Free Choice Act, the labor movement's top legislative priority. The bill would allow unions to organize through signing cards rather than a secret ballot election, as many companies require.

Wal-Mart has long been at loggerheads with the labor movement, particularly over health care. After heavy union criticism, the retailer introduced plans with nominal premiums and decreased the waiting period for part-time employees to qualify for coverage. It also slashed the cost of many generic prescription drugs to \$4 at its pharmacies, forcing competitors to follow suit.

"We don't think our associates have any reason to be more interested than before, and looking at all we offer, many of our associates just don't seem to feel that union membership would be a better deal," Wal-Mart spokeswoman Daphne Moore said.

Efforts to unionize Wal-Mart employees in Canada have gained traction. In April, workers at a store in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec, won the only collective bargaining agreement in North America after four years of legal wrangling. Last year, Wal-Mart shut down the tire and lube department of a store in Gatineau, Quebec, after a handful of employees secured a union contract.

Wal-Mart is the country's largest private employer with about 1.4 million workers. Shoppers have flocked to the behemoth retailer known for its low prices as the recession has taken a toll on their wallets. The company trimmed about 800 workers from its headquarters staff this year but avoided the mass layoffs that have plagued other retailers such as Macy's and Home Depot, which each eliminated about 7,000 positions.

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