



Staten Island Advance

Wal-Mart's business practices are at heart of opposition

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Upon reading the March 8th editorial page I was pleased to see that the Advance is of the opinion that I am intelligent and level-headed on most issues. I like to think so myself. So let me be clear that my opposition to Wal-Mart is based not on a knee-jerk reaction but a careful and considered look at the impact of Wal-Mart on local communities.

While it is no secret that the labor movement has long been at odds with Wal-Mart, that is only one of the many reasons that I have looked with great trepidation at the possibility of the world's largest retailer coming to Staten Island, or New York City.

Let's begin with full disclosure. I have spent the last 10 years involved in the labor movement. I have never hid my support for organized labor or workers' rights. I would also like to compliment the Advance for their full disclosure that publisher Caroline Diamond Harrison is married to the developer who hopes to bring Wal-Mart to Staten Island. Notwithstanding our personal associations I believe we are both capable of being objective as we consider what is right for the Staten Island community.

So let's talk about our concerns. Wal-Mart has a terrible record with respect to workers' rights; not simply the right to organize a union. Many of the Big Box stores are not unionized, however they are not aggressively anti-union. But when the workers in one store in Canada voted to unionize Wal-Mart, they closed it down. In that instance they seemed not to care about providing the lowest prices and jobs to the community, they simply took their marbles and went home.

Wal-Mart has a terrible record on obeying labor law. They have had to defend themselves in 27 states against class-action suits brought by workers for failure to pay overtime and violations of the Fair Labor Standards Act. There are thousands of documented cases where employees or associates, as they like to call them, have been forced to work off the clock. That is the business term for free labor. We have very strong laws to protect the rights of workers to earn paid overtime, and yet Wal-Mart has shown time and time again that they are not willing to abide by those laws. They have even had to defend themselves against numerous charges of discrimination in hiring and promotions.

Wal-Mart pays below standard and the vast majority of their employees cannot afford or do not qualify for the company sponsored health plan. Instead they actually offer assistance to their employees in applying for taxpayer funded Medicaid. Imagine that! Wal-Mart reaps profits and the taxpayer gets to foot the bill for their employee's health care. I am surprised that my fiscally conservative colleagues in government don't see the problem with that.

We can't overlook the impact Wal-Mart has had on other businesses. It has been reported that they have turned whole communities into virtual ghost towns. Once thriving commercial strips with local businesses are now boarded up. What will happen to Great Kills, New Dorp, Richmond Avenue and Forest Avenue? I believe that we have an obligation to carefully consider whether or not Wal-Mart will have a similar impact here.

I suggest a different approach. Let's establish a standard for the Big Box stores. We should be talking about a Small Business Economic Impact Fund, requiring that commercial developers deemed to have either potentially negative impact, or that require zoning variances or special permits, would pay a certain dollar amount into this fund to offset the damage to small businesses in our community. We should be talking about the creation of a Health Care Security Fund for big businesses who do not offer coverage to their employees or whose employees do not earn enough to buy into it. This fund would pay for indigent care or

go directly into Medicaid funding so that companies like Wal-Mart would have less incentive to dump their employees on taxpayer funded health care programs.

If Wal-Mart wants to come into New York City, let them come in the right way. Here is an opportunity for Wal-Mart to begin to allay many of our concerns. I invite them to sit down with my fellow community leaders and elected officials to open up a dialogue around these issues.

Low prices and good value are important to the people on this Island. Good jobs at decent wages and businesses that do not put additional strain on our neighborhoods are also important values. If Wal-Mart works with us, it is possible we can achieve both. It is certainly worth fighting for. -- DIANE SAVINO