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By James M. Lawson, Jr.

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Throughout his life, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made vital connections between the struggle for civil rights, freedom, economic justice and equality. Dr. King's 1967 "Poor People's Campaign" was a heroic effort to bring all these issues together with a powerful call for family-supporting wages that could build ladders from poverty to prosperity.

It was the dogged pursuit of that vision that motivated sanitation workers in Memphis to fight for a living wage by forming a union. When Dr. King was assassinated, he was supporting those striking workers, whose quest for dignity was captured in their campaign slogan "I am a man."

Dr. King's lessons still resonate, with sometimes painful relevance today. As the automation of the 1960s swept away jobs and living standards, he decried workers being pressed into low-wage jobs with longer hours and no protections. Yet even Dr. King could hardly have imagined that such standards would become the business model for the world's largest employer: Wal-Mart.

With 1.2 million U.S. workers, Wal-Mart is reshaping the American workplace. Its Supercenters are being built where productive factories once stood, and middle-class workers are now competing for jobs as all-night cashiers, making a fraction of their former wages. The Wal-Mart model of low costs, underwritten by low wages, has cast a shadow on Dr. King's dreams of an American economy that provides stability and prosperity for all workers. Just as the Memphis sanitation workers were asked to work without dignity, so too are Wal-Mart's.

For all its resources, Wal-Mart shares little with its employees. The average salesclerk made \$13,861 in 2001, nearly \$800 below the federal poverty line for a family of three.

Less than half of Wal-Mart workers are enrolled in the company's health insurance plan. State after state has documented Wal-Mart workers' reliance on publicly-funded state health care plans for themselves and their children.

Wal-Mart stops at nothing to break the will of workers who seek to improve their lives by forming unions. When meatcutters in Jacksonville, Texas chose union representation, Wal-Mart eliminated the department and switched to pre-packaged

meat. The company recently announced it would shut down an entire store in Canada rather than honor the newly formed union.

Finally, Wal-Mart imported \$15 billion worth of Chinese products last year, a result of pressuring its suppliers for costs so low they can only be achieved in an environment where human rights are violated at will. Its insatiable demand for cheap labor has crushed local competitors and driven thousands of American jobs overseas, leaving nothing but, you guessed it, Wal-Mart jobs in their wake.

With more than 3,500 stores nationwide, the company has a voracious appetite for growth, and urban areas are one of the few places left to conquer.

That's why in cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, Wal-Mart is sending its corporate flaks into African-American communities to trumpet the jobs a new store would create.

But we know that jobs in themselves are not enough. Throughout our history, African-Americans have all too often endured backbreaking jobs with low wages, long hours, no benefits, little respect, and even less hope for the future.

That is exactly why Dr. King and many other civil rights leaders have fought for our right to good jobs that pay enough for us to support our families and afford us the dignity that we deserve.

Wal-Mart made \$9.1 billion in net income in 2004. The Walton family, worth \$90 billion, is the richest family in America. Wal-Mart can afford to pay a living wage and offer decent health benefits. But they will only do so if we stand up together to make them accountable.

Jesus said, "The laborer deserves his wages." Wal-Mart is a wealthy corporation reaping profits off the backs of poorly paid workers. So when Wal-Mart arrives to seduce us with shallow promises, let's dig deeper and look closely at the company's real record. If we are going to follow through on Dr. King's dream, we can't settle for any jobs, we have to demand *good* jobs.

Rev. James M. Lawson Jr., president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Los Angeles and Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, was a working colleague of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from 1957 to 1968.