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Faith-based groups take aim at Wal-Mart

BY ALEXANDRA ALTER
aalter@herald.com

Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer and the recent target of lawsuits, journalistic exposés and grass-roots campaigns against its employment practices, is facing its most powerful moral opponent yet: faith-based groups.

This weekend, more than 1,100 churches, mosques and synagogues across the country will screen *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, a documentary by Robert Greenwald that charges the company with union busting, worker exploitation and driving out small businesses.

The screening marks the latest collective effort by some faith groups to take on the corporate Goliath, whose reputation as a family-friendly store for church-going, Middle America has come under fire.

"All our faiths believe in justice, and Wal-Mart is one of the biggest perpetrators of injustice," said the Rev. William Jarvis Johnson, director of interfaith outreach at Wal-Mart Watch, a Washington, D.C.-based grass-roots organization seeking to educate people about Wal-Mart's business practices. "We have groups all across the country that are saying, 'We want to stand united with one voice and say, 'Wal-Mart, clean up your act.'"

Greenwald -- whose previous polemics include *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* -- has experimented with "alternative" marketing strategies for his films in the past, but this marks his first campaign to appeal directly to faith communities, he said. The film will show in some 16 churches and synagogues in Florida.

"I felt it was important to have a moral discussion because it is a moral issue for our country," Greenwald said. "When is enough enough? When is it greed? When do corporations cross the line?"

The documentary uses interviews with small-business owners, former Wal-Mart employees and overseas factory workers to catalog the retailer's alleged corporate sins: mistreating its workers, relying on foreign sweatshops for merchandise and driving out small, family-owned businesses.

Wal-Mart said through a spokesman that the film is full of inaccuracies.

"We have seen the trailers and some 'bonus' footage and it's already obvious that Mr. Greenwald has a careless disregard of the facts," the retailer said in a news release.

The company's supporters have responded with a rebuttal DVD release, *Why Wal-Mart Works: And Why That Drives Some People Crazy*, which is being sold on www.whywalmartworks.com. Wal-Mart is not selling the DVD.

Robert McAdam, vice president of corporate affairs for Wal-Mart, said attacks on Wal-Mart from faith groups and other organizations have been launched mainly by those aligned with "liberal political causes" and are based on erroneous charges.

"Our view is that primarily these messages are going to people who already don't like our company, and that's a relatively small population," he said. "It seems to be organizations that have been involved in liberal political causes in the past."

But Wal-Mart has recently received some knocks from conservative Christians as well. Groups like Focus on the Family, the Colorado Springs-based organization run by James Dobson, criticized Wal-Mart for requiring its employees to undergo "sensitivity training" on homosexual issues. On Wednesday, the Catholic League called for a religious boycott of Wal-Mart because the store replaced "Merry Christmas" with "Happy Holidays."

Dan Fogleman, a public relations manager of Wal-Mart, wrote in an e-mail that the "Merry Christmas" issue had been taken out of context, and noted that www.walmart.com offers 8,000 Christmas-related items.

Wal-Mart has weathered a deluge of bad publicity in recent months. In September, a labor rights group filed a class-action suit charging the company with failing to enforce labor standards for its overseas contractors. And earlier this month, the federal Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement unsealed an affidavit that showed a pair of senior Wal-Mart executives knew the company's cleaning contractors were hiring illegal immigrants who lived in crowded conditions at the back of stores, according to the Associated Press.

Wal-Mart denies that senior officials had any knowledge of illegal workers in their stores, according to Marty Heires, a company spokesman. The company also says there is no legal basis for the class-action lawsuit, citing an audit program of overseas vendors that has been in place since 1992, said Beth Keck, director of international corporate affairs for Wal-Mart.

The faith-based movement to pressure Wal-Mart marks the biggest campaign against a major corporation in decades, said Kim Bobo, executive director of the Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice. Consider:

- The United Church of Christ's October issue of *United Church News*, its national magazine, published 'Disgusted by Poverty in America? `Wal-Martization' Is Not the Economic Answer.' The denomination has also printed 6,000 Christmas cards to Wal-Mart's CEO asking him to pay employees a living wage, said Edith Rasell, minister for labor relations at the UCC.
- The Progressive Jewish Alliance, a California-based nonprofit that defends workers' rights, is screening Greenwald's documentary at five Los Angeles synagogues.
- The Presbyterian Church USA is showing the film at its headquarters -- the Presbyterian Center in Louisville, Ky., -- as part of a larger campaign for workers' rights, said Mark Lancaster, coordinator for the Presbyterian Hunger Program.
- The National Council of Churches -- a coalition of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, African-American and Living Peace churches that includes 45 million people in more than 100,000 local congregations -- screened the film for its leadership at its general assembly in Baltimore.
- Interfaith Worker Justice, a national faith-based coalition that promotes living wages for workers, recently mailed 10,000 sample sermons and church bulletins assailing Wal-Mart's employment practices to churches and religious groups around the country, Bobo said.

"In the religious community, we believe that the largest company in the U.S. has to be the one that sets some standards for the nation," Bobo said.

The religious groups say they are following a Biblical mandate to care for the poor.

"Faith communities have forever considered the status of the poor as one of our greatest concerns," said the Rev. Lucy Hitchcock Seck of Miami's Unitarian Universalist Congregation.

Other Christian groups have used their position as shareholders to pressure Wal-Mart.

The United Methodist Church filed a shareholder resolution asking for more detailed reporting of Wal-Mart's foreign vendors. After that, the retailer developed a vendors' standard report to monitor global factories where they source their products, said Vidette Bullock Mixon, of the United Methodist Church.

"We've had a long-term relationship with the company, calling on them to build upon some of the positive actions they've taken," she said.

Wal-Mart has long appealed to religious customers with its family-based products and decision not to stock items like Maxim, the raunchy men's magazine, or the morning-after pill, which conservative Christian groups oppose. According to *Forbes* magazine, Wal-Mart is the largest distributor of Christian merchandise, from Rick Warren's bestseller, *The Purpose Driven Life* to the Christian-themed *VeggieTales* videos.

Rabbi Rebecca Lillian of Temple Beth Or in southwest Miami said some of her congregants don't see why people of faith should oppose Wal-Mart.

"I find people who are saying, `What's wrong with Wal-Mart?'" said Lillian, who will speak after a screening of the documentary Sunday at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Miami. ``I don't think the issue has received enough attention from religious leaders."

IF YOU GO

- The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Miami, 7701 SW 76th Ave., will screen and discuss the film at 6 p.m. Sunday. Phone: 305-667-3697.
- Temple Israel of Greater Miami, in cooperation with Coral Gables Congregational Church, Miami Worker Center, Florida CHAIN, South Florida Jobs with Justice and Human Services Coalition will screen the documentary and host a panel discussion at 6:30 p.m. Thursday. Temple Israel is at 137 NE 19th St., Miami, phone 305-573-5900.

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