



The People vs. Wal-Mart: *strategies that work*
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In Inglewood, California, the people are committed to ensuring that the winds of inevitable change prominently carry their voices as they demand that “progress” in their backyard include new developments such as open-air promenade shopping centers and family sit-down restaurants; land developments that respect community by considering safe traffic flow and green space in their planning; the creation of businesses that promote the types of jobs in which workers are respected and paid a living wage; jobs that provide employer-provided family health care; and which provide for local training and hiring. And how do we know that *this* is the type of progress the people of Inglewood demand? We asked. The Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) was founded in 1993 and is a nationally recognized authority on issues affecting the working poor and an innovator in the fight against working poverty. Combining a vision of social justice with a practical approach to social change, LAANE has helped set in motion a broad movement based on the principle that hard work deserves fair pay, good benefits and decent working conditions.

When Wal-Mart Knocks, the People Answer

In 2004, Wal-Mart set its sights on Inglewood, California; at the same time, LAANE set her sights on Wal-Mart. Determined to purchase land and to build a super center in the city, Wal-Mart began an extensive campaign to bring their goal to fruition; with the support of the Mayor, Wal-Mart took its cause to the people of Inglewood – yet it conveniently forgot to include many of the details of its planned development.

Publicly, Wal-Mart asked the residents of Inglewood if they would like their community to have more shopping choices. Because over the past two decades Inglewood had lost many of its shopping choices, it was not surprising that residents were excited and even supportive of the opportunity to bring “choice” to the struggling city; but the devil was living quite comfortably in the details. Wal-Mart’s public campaign failed to inform the people of Inglewood that their initiative included a land development



plan that would require them to pay for much of its implementation; that it would allow the store to sell guns; that it would take away the public review process and deny the public the ability to give input on Wal-Mart's development plan; and that it would ensure that neither the Mayor, City Council or the Planning Commission would have the power to curtail any changes to the development plan proposed by Wal-Mart. In a nutshell, Wal-Mart failed to inform the people that their initiative gave them full sovereignty over approximately 60 acres of land and that they intended to circumvent the process every other Inglewood business had to go through in order to operate in the city. But the people of Inglewood would not be fooled. LAANE organized a broad coalition of residents, clergy, small businesses, community-based organizations, local teachers and workers known as the "Coalition for a Better Inglewood" to conduct extensive community outreach and education, we mobilized the people, and in April of 2004 the people of Inglewood voted "no" on Wal-Mart's pernicious initiative. Yet, despite the voice of the community, Wal-Mart has not given up; only a few months later it very quietly purchased 60 acres of the old Hollywood Park Race Track.

Mobilizing the Community

In order to defeat the April 2004 initiative and to continue to develop the community's power structure for future Wal-Mart confrontations, LAANE committed itself to comprehensive community outreach through the Coalition for a Better Inglewood. This outreach required grassroots organizing, creative approaches and frank discussions to overcome the positive "myths" that Wal-Mart was steadily infusing into the public conversation.

Myth number one: *good jobs for the community.* It only seemed natural that the prospect of a super center would bring with it the possibility of as many as 300 jobs – and what inner-city community doesn't want jobs? Wal-Mart was so committed to hyping this angle that leading up to the April vote, they littered the community with "provisional employment applications." LAANE meticulously unraveled this myth by demonstrating that the jobs Wal-Mart would create would provide poverty wage jobs with little to no health care and that Wal-Mart's anti-union stance would serve to undermine well respected union grocery stores providing high wages to local residents. In fact a recent



study by the Institute for Labor and Employment at UC Berkeley determined that because Wal-Mart pays its employees such low wages and refuses to provide meaningful health care packages, the taxpayers of California subsidized Wal-Mart employees use of Medicaid and other public assistance programs designed for low-income families, to the tune of \$86 million in 2004. In the same year, Harper's Index estimated that Wal-Mart employees were eligible for \$2.5 billion in federal assistance despite the fact that the store made \$10 billion in profits.

Myth number two: *Wal-Mart treats its employees well.* LAANE helped educate the community as to the lesser known facts surrounding life as a Wal-Mart employee; namely that Wal-Mart has been named in a class action suit alleging sex discrimination with one million current and former women associates asserting that the company pays women less than men for comparable jobs and regularly passes them up for key promotions; other lawsuits filed in Washington and New York by former employees alleging that Wal-Mart required them to work "off the clock" to meet internal deadlines, with managers refusing to pay them for the extra time worked, and that it was not an uncommon practice for employees to be locked in the store after clocking out so that managers could finish their "rounds." And unforgettably, in February of 2005, Wal-Mart chose to close a store in Jonquiere, Quebec, Canada just six months after its workers voted to be represented by a union for better wages, healthcare and respect on the job.

What's Next

While Wal-Mart has not put in a public bid to build their super center, all indications are that they intend to go forward. That said, LAANE intends to ensure that any forward movement takes the best interests of the Inglewood community into consideration, at *every* step, and not simply in surface-level demonstrations of good-faith to appease the people. For this reason, the Coalition is demanding that Wal-Mart sign a Community Benefits Agreement that would demonstrate the true extent of the retail giant's commitment to strong, healthy communities by guaranteeing living wage jobs, affordable health care, green space and environmental review. Members of the coalition will continue to oppose any Wal-Mart development without this legally enforceable written agreement.



In addition, LAANE is committed to continuing a holistic approach to dealing with Wal-Mart's attempt to build in Inglewood; holistic in the sense that not only is LAANE committed to empowering, mobilizing and uniting black and Latino residents around this issue but we are also committed to taking Wal-Mart on directly on every front, beyond simply saying "not in our back yard." Rather, true to our commitment to the working poor and our role as innovators in the national fight against poverty, LAANE is committed to ensuring that as we seek to protect our own backyard, that we also open doors for others to take up the fight in their own communities.