

“In pursuit of the truth”

When I was in college I learned that facts can be distorted depending on where you get your statistics. The viewpoint article, “In defense of Wal-Mart”, found in the September 22nd issue of “*The Observer*”, is satiated with questionable facts. Anyone who does research about this corporate giant does not have to dig deep to find that this company lacks many redeeming qualities. Unless you are looking for a bargain on low-priced imported merchandise, I do not see a lot of positive attributes associated with this business entity. The records about this company bring to light some dubious business history and practices.

In the past fifteen years, Wal-Mart has helped to transform America by putting hundreds of thousands of small, family-owned operations out of business. Dr. Kenneth Stone of Iowa State University, who, for more than a decade, has tracked Wal-Mart’s impact in Iowa. As local stores lose sales, they either downsize or close. The resulting job losses typically equal or even exceed the gains of the new superstore. The new jobs of Wal-Mart, moreover, often pay less and offer fewer benefits than the jobs they replace. Taxpayers end up picking up the difference. Half of Wal-Mart’s workers qualify for Food Stamps. This has been detrimental for both the American taxpayer and for small business owners who are burdened more year after year with higher ad valorem and/or property taxes. We need some relief.

Next, the average Wal-Mart employee makes around \$7.50 an hour (the \$10.00 per hour wage figure that the *viewpoint* writer discusses includes some middle-management positions) and works about 28 hours a week. How can anyone living in the United States today survive making those wages or working those hours? The answer is simple—they can’t. In sixteen states, Wal-Mart employees top the Medicaid benefit rolls. I guess a lot of the health problems aren’t covered by the medical insurance that Wal-Mart offers to its employees. A low cost premium with no real assistance does not sound like a great benefit for the Wal-Mart employee or one for the American taxpayer either.

Additionally, Wal-Mart has also helped to displace thousands of American companies to foreign countries to manufacture low-priced products. These foreign operations often employ workers in unsafe industrial environments from 12-15 hours per day and at an average wage of 18-cents per hour. A friend once commented that if Wal-Mart can sell items for so cheap, someone somewhere must be suffering. If making 18-cents per hour isn’t suffering than what would you call it? If Wal-Mart were a country it would be China’s sixth largest trading partner. This company is helping to create the largest trade imbalance in the history of the world. American manufacturers export six times less to China than what Wal-Mart imports to the United States. How can that be good for America?

There’s more. The largest class-action lawsuits in the history of the U. S. judicial system concerning race and sex discrimination (men make an average of \$3,500 more in salary than women) have been levied (by 1.5 million women) and won against this company. Andrew Young, former mayor of Atlanta and US ambassador to the United Nations, stepped down last year as chairman of the Working Families for Wal-Mart lobby group for racially charged remarks something analysts say is rampant in the Wal-Mart corporate culture. Wal-Mart has also added to the illegal immigration issue that is burdening our country. In 2006, Wal-Mart paid \$11 million to settle charges that it used hundreds of illegal immigrants to clean its stores. Abandonment and reuse issues concerning empty Wal-Mart stores across the nation have negatively impacted the financial stability of those communities. Wal-Mart has been fined more times and for more money than any other American company for environmental violations. Law enforcement departments in small communities across our nation have been struggling to keep up with the increased crime rates that are often associated with Wal-Mart locations. Also, when a supercenter opens (those stores with groceries) an average of two grocers in close proximity will shut their doors within three years. This reduces competition and limits our choices as consumers. All of these facts are startling. These questionable business practices are helping to disintegrate the character of our communities and to destroy the free-enterprise system, which helped to build this great nation.

Over 300 communities across America have successfully battled Wal-Mart to keep them out of their neighborhoods. And, the number is rising. Cities the size of New York and San Diego have banned Wal-Mart from attempting to build within their city limits. Even countries (i.e. Germany and South Korea) have joined the movement against this corporate giant. Last year, the country of Norway caused an international furor which resulted in a protest from our ambassador. Because of Wal-Mart’s seemingly unethical business practices, the government of Norway sold all of the Wal-Mart stock it held for their employees’ pension accounts. The viewpoint writer (“in defense of Wal-Mart”) would like you to believe that the fight against Wal-Mart is isolated to just a few radical activists. I know that is not true. It is being waged by numerous communities and nations around the globe. Actually, I am more scared of what Wal-Mart can do to my community than what a handful of activists (like those from WARN, Wal-Mart Alliance for Reform Now, and ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform) might do. What facts do you believe--those that you can see and quantify or those that are distorted? There are approximately 24 Wal-Mart locations within thirty-seven miles of my neighborhood. 19 of them are supercenter locations. There are plans to build three more. Is Wal-Mart coming to compete fairly or do they just want to push the established businesses, those we currently enjoy, out? Hmmmm.....I wonder.

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