

What do Retail Workers Want? Just a Little Respect

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Eduardo Munoz / Reuters

Walmart is the largest private employer in the US, with 1.5 million Americans, or nearly 1 percent of the country's workforce, stocking its shelves, ringing up its customers, and wrangling its shopping carts. The vast majority of these workers receive low wages and few benefits, and not a single one of them is represented by a union. Why has it been difficult to organize workers at places like Walmart?

To answer this question, Columbia sociologists [Adam Reich](#) and [Peter Bearman](#) undertook an ambitious investigative project, sending teams of student researchers across the United States to conduct in-depth interviews with more than a hundred Walmart employees, surveying thousands more, and even embedding the students

in a workers' rights group created by the [United Food and Commercial Workers International Union](#) (UFCW) as it attempted to organize employees. Their findings are presented in a new book, *[Working for Respect: Community and Conflict at Walmart](#)*.

In order for workers to act collectively, Reich and Bearman argue, they have to be able to develop trust in one another and come to see that they have shared interests. But Walmart's workforce is unusually heterogeneous, consisting of, among others, teenagers, laid-off factory workers, busy moms, retirees, and the formerly incarcerated, a group that might not feel a natural sense of solidarity. Nor are their working conditions conducive to forming bonds, since their shifts are constantly rotating. And then there is the fact that the Walmart corporation has taken a hard line against union activists in the past, shutting down several stores where its workers attempted to organize.

And yet despite these challenges, Reich and Bearman argue, there is still reason to think that Walmart employees may unionize. In recent years, they point out, an advocacy group run for and by the company's employees, [Organization United for Respect](#), has enrolled thousands of members by providing them information and advice about routine workplace issues, like what justifies a medical leave, what types of tasks supervisors can legally ask employees to do, and how to handle oneself in a disciplinary hearing. The organization has a robust online presence, hosting discussion boards that connect employees from across the country, and it therefore has the potential to build the kind of collective that might challenge Walmart and other major retailers on a national level.

But for this to happen, Reich and Bearman say, labor organizers will have to do a better job of listening to what retail workers actually want. Traditionally, US unions have focused on fighting for better pay and benefits. But what Walmart employees want most, the researchers say, is respect. In interview after interview, they write, Walmart employees told them that what they'd like to see changed about their jobs is to be treated more respectfully by their bosses, to have more say in managing their schedules and prioritizing their duties, and to be granted small freedoms that they're often denied, like having the ability to chat for a few moments with customers they know, to choose when to take a bathroom break, or to display one's nickname on a name tag.

“It’s not as if Walmart employees don’t want better pay. They do. Many of them are barely scraping by,” said Bearman in a recent interview. “But more fundamentally, there is a baseline of human dignity that associates feel they’re being denied.”

The sociologists recommend that union organizers borrow a page from the US labor movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — movements that were driven, they say, as much by workers’ desire for clear rules about how bosses should treat them as by concerns about compensation.

“Workers in the late nineteenth century were poor, yes, but they also felt powerless and humiliated when they went to work, and early labor organizations spoke to that situation,” says Reich.



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