

# OUR Walmart: Caring Communities, Courageous Action



**Love With Power:  
Practicing Transformation for Social Justice**

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## OUR Walmart: Caring Communities, Courageous Action

Black Friday, November 2015: On one the most notorious shopping days the year, Denise Barlage<sup>1</sup>, Tyfani Faulkner, Jasmine Dixon and other current and former Walmart workers were completing the 15th day of a 15-day fast.<sup>2</sup> Despite living on liquids for two weeks, those who fasted for the full 15 days were surprisingly clear-minded and energized. This came through in their message: "While many Walmart workers can barely put food on the table this Thanksgiving, Walmart's profits continue to grow." By joining the "Fast for 15" they were making their private stories of hunger public and acting to secure a living wage and stable working conditions for Walmart workers around the country. The action was part of "\$15 and Full Time," a core campaign of The Organization United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart), the worker-run organization dedicated to transforming the lives of past and present Walmart workers. Barlage, Faulkner and other fasters took part in actions that touched all 50 states; many near the homes of Walmart fortune heirs.

Over the last few years Walmart has become the epicenter for Black Friday demonstrations and the symbol of a corporate culture that is fueling extreme economic disparity in the United States and around the world. Walmart is the largest employer in the world. The Waltons who control Walmart rank among the richest families in the world.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, many Walmart associates are among the working poor, employed but unable to sustain themselves without public assistance. Walmart's business model depends on extracting cheap labor and blocking all labor organizing.<sup>4</sup> Through OUR Walmart's Fast for 15, former and current employees fasted for the 15-days leading up to Black Friday to shine a light on conditions that leave many Walmart associates unable to buy enough food to feed their families. "There are days when employees choose between paying for lunch or gas to get home," says Barlage.

1. Facebook. OUR Walmart OHIO. "Meet Denise Barlage." [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1593481367536219&id=1423872897830401](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1593481367536219&id=1423872897830401)

2. CNN Money: <http://money.cnn.com/2015/11/12/news/walmart-black-friday-protesters-fast/>

3. Forbes Magazine. Billionaires List. <http://www.forbes.com/billionaires/list/#version:realtime>

4. Walmart: the high price of low price. Brave New Films. [http://www.bravenewfilms.org/about\\_walmart](http://www.bravenewfilms.org/about_walmart)

### **Collective Practice: Building Communities of Empathy and Care**

Through the practice of building a community of empathy and care, people come together in small circles and establish a foundation of mutual care, trust and support that permeates everything they do. At the core of this practice are "small circles" through which workers provide each other with personal support and support at work, as well as the foundation to innovate and change their conditions.

*Care and action support each other. They create a foundation of trust that gives people the courage to take great risk and then create change at great scale.*

— Andrea Dehlendorf, Co-Director,  
OUR Walmart

## About OUR Walmart

"We, the hourly Associates, are the life-blood of Walmart. Our company is stronger because of the values we embrace – a strong work ethic, compassion for one another and honesty. Yet we are not treated with the respect we deserve. The fundamental desire to be shown respect is what led us to join together as OUR Walmart – an organization of, by and for Walmart Associates. We are one Organization United for Respect at Walmart.

OUR Walmart is an independent group of like-minded Associates as we work together to fix what is broken in our stores and shape our own destinies. OUR Walmart works to ensure that every Associate, regardless of his or her title, age, race, or sex, is respected at Walmart. We join together to offer strength and support in addressing the challenges that arise in our stores and our company everyday.

We envision a future in which our company treats us, the Associates of Walmart, with respect and dignity. We envision a world where we succeed in our careers, our company succeeds in business, our customers receive great service and value, and Walmart and Associates share all of these goals."



The size of Walmart and the role it plays in setting the terms of engagement for other retailers make it a crucial and daunting focus for organizing.<sup>5</sup> While workers struggle to survive in a place that depends on extracting their labor, Walmart uses aggressive strategies to control workers. Many workers like Barlage are harassed or fired for organizing within their stores. The company has been known to shutter whole departments and even entire stores where unions make inroads.<sup>6</sup> Just a few weeks before the Black Friday demonstrations, Bloomberg Businessweek released a scathing report on how the corporation hired Lockheed Martin and coordinated with the FBI to conduct surveillance of Walmart workers and allies involved in OUR Walmart. As Dehlendorf says "It all paints a portrait of a deeply distrustful, even paranoid, company that has long been at war with its employees over wages, hours, work conditions, and unionizing."<sup>7</sup>

Conditions like this could easily make OUR Walmart members fearful. Instead, they choose to challenge the corporation's culture by creating their own, one that nurtures workers and generates enough creative space to go beyond surviving to envision great change. By building an alternate culture from within, one where workers experience care, respect and dignity, OUR Walmart members cultivate courage and plant seeds for transformation.

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5. Dear Walmart – the Film. [http://www.dearwalmart.com/the\\_film](http://www.dearwalmart.com/the_film)

6. Mother Jones Magazine online: <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/02/our-walmart-black-friday-union>

7. Bloomberg Businessweek. How Walmart Keeps and Eye on its Massive Workforce. <http://www.bloomberg.com/features/2015-walmart-union-surveillance/>



## First Steps: A Declaration for Respect

OUR Walmart began in June 2011 when a group of 100 Walmart workers from across the country gathered in Bentonville, AR to draft and share their “Declaration for Respect” with Walmart<sup>8</sup>. Each of the workers faced fear to speak out: fear of being fired, fear of going further into poverty. The Declaration reflected their stories of low pay, the instability of constantly changing shifts and their need for healthcare. The Declaration asked Walmart to “listen to us” and “have respect for the individual.” The concerns about Walmart were not just about “having to choose between paying the bills or having enough to eat,” they were being “discouraged and mistreated.”<sup>9</sup> The statement defined a bold direction and what OUR Walmart was for: Respect, Dignity and Care.

From this first group of 100, OUR Walmart began organizing through a process of deep listening. As Marianne Manilov, Director of the Engage Network and consultant to Our Walmart says, “We wanted to see how people were already supporting each other. We looked for informal places where people had a depth of trust and connection. In the effort to change Walmart it was the networks of private Facebook groups, support phone calls and people who really stood together in difficult times, like not having enough money for groceries at the end of the week, where we saw great potential.”

The small circles, formed organically and informally by workers, dealt with specific issues faced in the stores. It was the small circles - communities of empathy and care – that became central to OUR Walmart’s organizing model. By nurturing and centering human relationships, OUR Walmart began to develop an approach to change that enabled workers to experience deep trust, their own creativity, and the support to take action with others just like them. This was a powerful counterforce to what workers experienced every day, one that pointed to a new leadership model and method of organizing.



8. OUR Walmart. The Declaration. <http://forrespect.org/the-declaration/>

9. Why we are standing up: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caV-m1wq6Vc>

## Finding a New Way: **Communities of Empathy and Care**

*When I try to describe the day-to-day practice of people who are suffering and how they stand with each other, I say that most of all it is done with love. And real love, deep love, changes everything.*

— Marianne Manilov, Director, Engage Network

Small circles begin with a worker reaching out to others for mutual support, whether it's coworkers at a particular store, a veteran connecting across stores to other veterans, or someone wanting space to talk about LGBT issues with their peers. OUR Walmart supports people interested in forming small circles by providing training on how to engage and facilitate a group. The small groups determine their own focus and structure. Some groups meet regularly and others are more informal; some groups start in person and add in online networking later while others start online and then become in-person gatherings.

For example, says Dehlendorf, OUR Walmart's innovative online-to-field model was built in collaboration with an OUR Walmart member, Dawn Littman, who spent countless hours communicating with current and former Walmart employees through Facebook. "I noticed Dawn was building a circle of workers who were supporting each other in a private Facebook group called Treasures. Every day they supported each other, shared what





was going on in their lives, honored each other as important.” In the past, Dehlendorf says she would have appreciated members’ online outreach and relationship building, but not thought to shift the organizing model and structure to leverage it.

“People in extreme poverty and people on public assistance are often invisible in our society and are devalued on the job by Walmart,” observes Dehlendorf. “This group provided connection and support to a huge community. From there we began to look at scaling a program in ways that allowed people to find communities of support that matter to them.” Members of OUR Walmart have formed LGBT groups, veterans groups, and regional groups. “It’s such a large network of groups,” says Dehlendorf, “that we can barely count them all.”

## Internal Transformation: Leadership from the Ground Up

*I would never have talked about love and family the way I do now. OUR Walmart has totally changed how I approach movement building.*

— Andrea Dehlendorf

As OUR Walmart began using the newer technology of the internet to spread the older technology of the small circle, its network grew and deepened tremendously. The combined technologies enabled the network to connect with Walmart’s 4,000 stores in the US and to workers around the world. Grounded in small circles, their online-to-field approach began changing Walmart’s employment practices, generating an unprecedented wave of national attention and support, and influencing the way people think about low-wage workers. It also transformed the organization internally. As the practice of small circles gained momentum, OUR Walmart recognized how the deep threads of relationship formed between workers also created the potential for bolder collective action.

Dehlendorf shares a story: at a national convening of OUR Walmart leaders, an OUR Walmart member fell sick and went to the hospital, only to be discharged. When the other members found out they went to the hospital with her, staying up all night taking shifts watching over their friend. The next morning the OUR Walmart leaders decided she needed to go back to the hospital where she was finally diagnosed with a stroke. The exhausted leaders went from the hospital back to the national meeting where a session on building communities of empathy and care had already been planned. With tears in their eyes, the members talked about saving the woman’s life.



"It was clear to all of us that this value of love was deeply rooted," says Dehlendorf. For Manilov, the moment demonstrated a transformation within OUR Walmart. "There was a shift in the fabric of the leadership."

OUR Walmart encourages leaders to invest time building love, connection, and support among members in need. Their leadership is defined through "being there for each other." Dehlendorf explains that this model allows innovation and leadership to grow from the ground up. "OUR Walmart focuses on people leading in whatever ways they lead, not just people taking specific actions like signing a petition or going to a march. A distributive network like this builds on existing relationships and pushes power to the edges rather than trying to centralize it."

Over the last four years, several of the small circles have transformed their depth of connection and purpose into action and campaigns. One powerful example of this evolution is "Respect the Bump" which started in 2013.

When Los Angeles-based Walmart Associate Girshreila Green became pregnant, she was afraid that if she told her manager she would lose her job or put her baby's health at risk. She started talking to other women on Facebook who shared her fear. In the

process she connected with a woman in Texas who had almost lost her baby because her manager refused to accept her doctor's note that said she couldn't do heavy lifting; a woman in Maryland whose manager had required her to take an early leave of absence, forcing her to scramble to pay the bills; and a woman in Chicago who had miscarried in a Walmart bathroom. Across the country, she heard the same stories: women who were afraid to say they were pregnant for fear of being forced to take leave or lose their jobs. Many worked in harsh conditions to support their families, risking their health and the health of their unborn babies. These women formed an OUR Walmart group called "Respect the Bump."<sup>10</sup>

Respect the Bump started as a small circle of pregnant mothers who were denied accommodations with their pregnancies," explains Dehlendorf. "They came together initially to share their pain and ended up creating significant change." Respect the Bump workers began to hold meetings and events to call attention to how Walmart treated pregnant women and single mothers. From there they launched a campaign to call for a change in Walmart's pregnancy policies. The *Washington Post* profiled Respect the Bump members. The Obama Administration invited members to the White House and members worked with national women's organizations to put forward a proposal for policy change and a shareholder resolution at Walmart's annual meeting. Due to this pressure Walmart shifted their policy to allow women with high-risk pregnancies to receive accommodations. Respect the Bump now helps women to enforce the new policy with managers locally and seeks to create a policy for all pregnant women. A national network of women's groups and legal groups now joins them in this effort.

10. OUR Walmart, Respect the Bump: <http://forrespect.org/respect-the-bump>



  
**RESPECT  
THE BUMP**

  
**RESPECT  
THE BUMP**

This leadership and action model, rooted in an intentional commitment to love and caretaking, is a transformative element of OUR Walmart. “Love and caretaking have always been part of movement and organization building, but they weren’t always recognized or cultivated with collective intention.”

*In traditional organization building we’d say, “That leader is great at GOTV” and maybe give them an award. But we wouldn’t understand what made them great at GOTV or looked at the group around this leader. Always there are the unseen empathy and care leaders—people cooking for everyone, taking care of people’s children, helping people when they were sick. When you interview people and ask them why they turned out, some will come because of the action but many will say its because they felt seen, heard, or ‘part of a family.’ Building an organization is about strategy and action, of course. But I also think building a movement requires this kind of commitment to love and care. Dr. King called this the Beloved Community. But how often have you truly felt loved in that way? That is actually what is happening in OUR Walmart.*

— Marianne Manilov

Manilov recalls a simple exercise from the OUR Walmart team leadership workshops. In the exercise a piece of paper is placed on the back of each worker and everyone is invited to walk up and write words that describe the leadership qualities of the worker. Then each worker listens as their special qualities are read out to the group. Months after one of the leadership workshops, an OUR Walmart leader called Manilov to tell her how she continued to carry her piece of paper with her and tried to live up to what people saw in her.

Recognizing the transformative role of empathy, care and trust, organizers in OUR Walmart are now able to nurture strategies that really work and replicate them.



## External Impact: Work that is Valued, Respected and Secure

In just four years OUR Walmart has grown into a fierce and functioning association inside one of the largest most exploitive companies in the world. The network now permeates all of Walmart's stores and has tens of thousands of active supporters. At its core is a culture of resilience and community rooted in the values of respect, care and love. Combining the power of this network with the power of this culture, Walmart workers have begun to change this giant from the inside out.

OUR Walmart members have called for and won increased hours, regular shifts, and respect from their managers. They have formed a network of protection for any worker who speaks out and is threatened with less hours or termination. Whether that worker is gay, pregnant or trying to go to school at night, OUR Walmart leaders help each other navigate Walmart policies.

In 2012, striking workers, customers and supporters first initiated the annual Black Friday protests across the country. Since 2012 the annual protests have swelled to tens of thousands of participants and now dominate local and national media on the busiest shopping day of the year. In just one year the number of Black Friday actions grew to 1,500 with over 100 arrests, establishing Black Friday as a nationally recognized day of resistance. By 2015 over 1,400 people, including hundreds of Walmart workers, actively took part in the all-liquid fast for 1 to 15 days.<sup>11</sup>

In 2013, when Walmart fired a group of OUR Walmart leaders who were speaking out nationally, the OUR Walmart network escalated protests and filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board. In January of 2014, the National Labor Relations Board found merit in a vast group of legal charges, deciding that Walmart had illegally retaliated against workers who were going on strike.

In early 2015 OUR Walmart won \$1 billion in wage increases for 500,000 workers.<sup>12</sup> The win was significant, but the workers did not believe it was enough. OUR Walmart leveraged the momentum, trust and relationships they had built to call for "\$15 and Full Time" for all workers. These wins would be so far reaching and significant that Yahoo Health declared they would make America – as a country – a healthier place.<sup>13</sup> Workers across 2,600 stores signed petitions and went on strike in order to secure a living wage of \$15 an hour and stable, predictable working conditions for associates. Building to the 2015 Black Friday protests, OUR Walmart transformed itself into an independent worker-led organization.<sup>14</sup> They established online help for workers and used crowdsourcing as a powerful way to protest working conditions at stores.

OUR Walmart leaders are creating a new collective culture of resilience that permeates and impacts the corporation and everything around it. This culture has also enhanced the organization's ability to make adjustments and take risks in rapidly changing conditions. OUR Walmart has also built new relationships and

11. Common Dreams Newswire, OUR Walmart Press Release: <http://www.commondreams.org/newswire/2015/11/18/our-walmart-fasters-bring-protest-clinton-hq-today>

12. Daily Kos: <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2015/11/24/1454050/--Building-Bridges-Walmart-Workers-Black-Friday-Fast-for-15-and-Full-Time>

13. Yahoo Health. Why Raising Wages at Walmart Would Make America Healthier: <https://www.yahoo.com/health/why-raising-wages-at-walmart-makes-america-213011563.html>

14. In These Times. OUR Walmart Relaunches Its Campaign To Beat the World Retail Giant. <http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/18424/our-walmart-ufcw>

partnerships, expanding to 20 formal partners, including the Restaurant Opportunities Center, the National Domestic Workers Alliance, Demos, the Sierra Club and many others.

“Past efforts to challenge Walmart’s low road employment model succeeded in moving public opinion and slowing Walmart’s expansion into urban centers,” explains Dehlendorf. “Building on this success, OUR Walmart worked to more deeply support the people most impacted - the 1.25 million Walmart workers who have been able to build a network of leaders that is powerful.”

“To go to scale, networks need to ground transformative practices and values in the relationships, leadership, and work that is already happening,” says Dehlendorf. “We can train some leadership deeply but we will never be able to afford a transformational workshop for 1.25 million people,” Dehlendorf says. “So we really have to look at what are people already doing and how we can support them.”

Manilov agrees: “Start with 10 people and ask them, what are the ways you feel seen and heard and cared for? In this space of love and empathy,” concludes Manilov, “you will build a strong enough network to create real change.”

