

Union turns up volume in battle

Members asked to approve dues increase to finance fight against Wal-Mart.

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A local union isn't letting Wal-Mart build one of its supercenters in Bakersfield without a fight.

The United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 1036 has sent its members a two-page letter explaining the "imminent" danger the planned Wal-Mart Supercenter poses for area workers.

The letter asks union members to attend a fourth-quarter membership meeting and to support a dues increase in order to fight Wal-Mart. It also asks members not to shop at Wal-Mart and to spread the word that "... every dollar they spend in a Wal-Mart is a nail in your career coffin."

Local 1036 says Wal-Mart has a history of unfair practices against its competitors and employees. The union also argues that Wal-Mart has had an overall negative impact on the communities where it has opened supercenters.

George Hartwell, president and CEO of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 1036, had said in an earlier *Californian* story that Wal-Mart eats up nearby neighborhood stores, pays lower employee wages and makes it difficult for employees to buy health benefits for their families. Hartwell did not return

Please turn to UNION / C4

UNION: Wal-Mart denies allegations

Continued from C1

repeated calls by *The Californian* this week.

Wal-Mart spokesman Peter Kanelos has flatly denied the allegations in the letter.

Wal-Mart offers competitive wages and benefits to its employees, including 401(k) profit sharing, health benefits and a 10 percent discount at the stores, he said.

"The facts are simple: We have a million associates in the United States," he said. "You can't have a million employees if you're not doing something right."

Kanelos added that last year Wal-Mart outlets in California donated, on average, \$56,000 per store to its communities. He also said the retailer gave \$9 million to community projects statewide in 2001.

And there's plenty of room for competition, Kanelos said.

"The Bakersfield community has welcomed Wal-Mart with open arms," he said. "My facts are this: cash register sales. Our Bakersfield stores are doing very well, and Bakersfield customers vote with their pocketbook."

Kanelos said the retailer has a strong relationship with the community and its employees.

"We continue to strive to better that every day," he said. "Is Wal-Mart perfect? No."

But, he said, "We continue to do things that will make us a better community."

News of the letter to union members didn't surprise Lee Jamieson, the developer for the commercial project that will include a Wal-Mart Supercenter and Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse near the northeast corner of Panama Lane and Highway 99.

He said unions have typically opposed Wal-Mart, adding "it's not a big shock."

But he questions the campaign in Bakersfield, which he calls a great Wal-Mart town.

"I don't think Bakersfield is anti-business and anti-Wal-Mart," he said. "I think there's a lot of excitement in the community. They offer the lowest prices around. It's good for the consumer and the community."

Plans move ahead

Wal-Mart is scheduled to open the planned 220,900-square-foot supercenter in 2004. The store's concept pairs a grocery store with general merchandise.

The retailer has three stores in Bakersfield, at 2300 White Lane, 2601 Fashion Place and 8400 Rosedale Highway. When the supercenter opens, the company will close its White Lane store. Wal-Mart Supercenters typically

hire between 450 to 500 employees, depending on community demand.

The Wal-Mart Supercenter in Bakersfield would be one of the company's first two to be built in California. Wal-Mart's other California supercenter is planned for La Quinta, near Palm Springs.

Wal-Mart's expansion plans include adding 40 supercenters statewide over the next four to six years. The company operates more than 1,100 supercenters nationwide, with the first opening in 1988.

The United Food and Commercial Workers Union has lobbied against Wal-Mart in other communities nationwide.

Meanwhile, the local union, which represents about 12,000 members in Kern, Mono, Inyo, Ventura, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties, is continuing its campaign against Wal-Mart in Bakersfield.

Local 1036 began airing critical television commercials on Time Warner Cable broadcasts in July. The commercials warn of Wal-Mart's monopolistic power over local communities. The commercials, which were purchased through the end of the year, were halted in September but will resume in October, said Danielle Armstrong, spokeswoman for Time Warner Cable.

The paid air time has been divided equally between two commercials. In addition to the Wal-Mart warning, Local 1036 has a commercial promoting the union.

Time Warner Cable ran the union-paid commercials about 125 times a week and will air them again in October at the same frequency, Armstrong said.

The Panama Lane/Highway 99 shopping center project, which includes the planned Wal-Mart Supercenter, is also moving forward. The project is in the early planning stages and could change after completion of an environmental review, public hearing and Bakersfield Planning Commissioners' examination.

A draft environmental impact report is available at the city planning department. A city planning commission meeting is scheduled Oct. 3 to receive public comments and discuss the adequacy of the EIR report. A 45-day public review period, which began Friday, ends Oct. 23.

The city planning commission will consider the project's general plan amendment and zone change request from residential to commercial Dec. 19. The city council will then vote on the project by early next spring.

ON THE INTERNET

United Food and Commercial Workers Union: www.walmartwatch.com
Wal-Mart: www.walmart.com