

City Gets Busload of Big Box Bashers

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Chicago Sun-Times

August 13, 2006

As supporters and opponents continue battling over Chicago's newly passed "big-box" ordinance in anticipation of Mayor Daley's decision on a veto, the "Change Wal-Mart, Change America" bus tour rolled into town Saturday.

Organizers of the grassroots campaign -- which is traveling by bus through 19 states and 35 cities in 35 days -- say they are trying to raise awareness of their complaints against Wal-Mart through a series of town hall meetings.

"Wal-Mart is the most significant economic force in America today that, unfortunately, has a negative impact on community after community across the country," organizer Chris Kofinis told a North Side meeting sponsored by U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky and attended by union, religious and community leaders here who support Chicago's ordinance.

"What this tour is about is making Wal-Mart realize you can be both wealthy and responsible," Kofinis said.

Topping organizers' Wal-Mart gripes was its low employee wages and benefits -- the complaint that helped organized labor sell aldermen on a groundbreaking ordinance that, unless Daley vetoes it, will make Chicago the nation's first major city to establish a wage and benefit standard for "big box" retailers.

D-day: Sept. 13

Aldermen who oppose the ordinance, including several from impoverished and retail-starved wards, argue their communities need the jobs and sales tax revenue. Business leaders argue that nowhere in the United States is there a living wage law applied exclusively to retailing giants, and that passing one here puts Chicago at a competitive disadvantage.

The ordinance, passed July 26 by a 35-14 City Council vote, requires Wal-Mart and other "big-box" stores to pay employees \$10 per hour and \$3 per hour in benefits by 2010. Daley, who strongly opposed the ordinance, could issue his first veto in 17 years if he gets two aldermen to change their positions before the next council meeting on Sept. 13.

"This is a national issue, and Chicago is really Ground Zero because of our big-box ordinance," said Schakowsky. "I would hope the mayor would look for other ways to bring companies like Wal-Mart and Target to Chicago."