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Urban Leaders Issue Call to Action on Wal-Mart In Advance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day

**Civil Rights, Religious, Political Leaders From Across the Country Hold
National Tele-Press Conference Urging the Retail Giant to Create Good Jobs**

New Report, Statements Signed By 100 Urban Leaders From 10 Cities Released

Los Angeles—One week before the nation observes Martin Luther King Jr. Day, religious, political, civil rights and business leaders held a national telepress conference today in which they called on the world's largest retailer to create good jobs and become a responsible community partner.

In conjunction with the press conference, two statements from more than 100 urban leaders across the country were released—one demanding that Wal-Mart and its CEO Lee Scott change their approach to urban communities, the other calling on elected officials to enact policies that encourage the creation of good jobs in urban America.

A new report was also released today by the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) and the Partnership for Working Families. "Wal-Mart and Beyond: The Battle for Good Jobs and Strong Communities in Urban America" documents the extensive negative impacts of Wal-Mart and offers a series of strategies both to hold Wal-Mart and other companies accountable, and to create good jobs in urban neighborhoods.

"Wal-Mart has positioned itself squarely in the path of workers and communities seeking to realize Dr. King's dream of civil and economic equality," said Tracy Gray-Barkan, Director of Retail Policy at LAANE and author of the report. "But it's not enough to criticize Wal-Mart—urban communities must come together around a new vision for economic development and empowerment."

The leaders participating in today's press conference, citing Dr. King's emphatic commitment to economic justice, called upon Wal-Mart to abandon its public relations offensive and begin to address the real needs of urban communities, including living wage jobs, affordable health benefits, support for minority-owned businesses and a meaningful role in decisions over large-scale economic development projects.

"It is time for Wal-Mart to stop paying lip service to King's legacy, and start to truly honor the vision of justice that he advanced," said Van Jones, Executive Director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland.

Today's call to action comes as Wal-Mart continues its aggressive attempts to expand into urban markets around the country. The retail giant has met with stiff resistance in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and many other cities, where communities have formed broad coalitions to fight for good jobs and a voice over the economic development decisions that affect them.

Wal-Mart employees earn 20 percent less than what the average retail worker earns, and over \$10,000 less than what the average two-person family needs to meet its basic needs. The company enrolls fewer than half of its employees in its costly health insurance plan, compared to 67 percent for the average large employer. As a result, taxpayers end up subsidizing health care for the company's workers. In California alone, taxpayers pay \$32 million annually in medical care for Wal-Mart employees.

Despite a growing chorus of criticism, Wal-Mart has moved recently to reduce the number of full-time jobs, establish wage caps on hourly jobs and institute scheduling rules in an effort to weed out older employees and employees with family responsibilities.

Several of the participants in today's press conference challenged the argument voiced by Wal-Mart and its supporters that the retailer should be embraced by urban communities with high unemployment. "Too often, we hear that for our communities, any job is a good job," said Rev. Lennox Yearwood, CEO of the Hip Hop Caucus in Washington, D.C. "We reject the idea that minority communities should settle for low-paying jobs without a future."

California State Senator Gil Cedillo, who represents Los Angeles, noted Wal-Mart's penetration into Latino as well as African American communities and said that the company's low prices come at too high a cost. "In order for our communities to achieve the American Dream, we need more than poverty-wage jobs. We need economic development that meets the real needs of our communities—good jobs that allow working people to support their families and provide a better life to their children."

Cedillo and other speakers made clear that while Wal-Mart must make fundamental changes, responsibility for creating good jobs in urban neighborhoods also lies with public officials. "We encourage elected officials throughout the country to join us in holding Wal-Mart accountable and for them to pledge to establish policies across urban America that promote good jobs and healthy communities," said Adrienne Shropshire, Executive Director of New York Jobs with Justice.

Urban leaders encouraged Wal-Mart to change its approach, warning that the company may ultimately lose the battle to establish a permanent presence in urban America unless dramatic steps are taken.

"Many communities across the country now see Wal-Mart as a symbol of corporate disregard for the American values of fairness, responsibility and respect," said Rev. Eric Lee, Executive Director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Los Angeles. "As we celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King's birth, we call on Wal-Mart and its CEO Lee Scott to lead the way in eradicating poverty rather than perpetuating it."

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