

Wal-mart's unfair labor practices in "down and out in discount america

[Business](#), [Company](#)



In "Down and Out in Discount America," writer Liza Featherstone (2004) exposes the dirty tactics and unfair business practices that fuel Wal-Mart's success as a giant retail company, and suggests effective strategies to defeat corporate crime. According to Featherstone, Wal-Mart is one company that literally profits and grows from the presence and worsening of poverty situations, as shown by the results of a study conducted by economist Andrew Franklin which revealed that "Wal-Mart operated primarily in poor and working-class communities."

Most of the retail company's customers are "overwhelmingly female, and struggling to make ends meet." Featherstone argues that Wal-Mart ensures that its market in the low income segment continually expands by "creating more bad jobs worldwide." She also points out that Wal-Mart routinely employs illegal and unethical business practices to maintain its competitive edge over other companies, including violating wage and labor laws that deprive workers of their living wage and health benefits.

More importantly, this set-up "contribute to an economy in which, increasingly, workers can only afford to shop at Wal-Mart." The biggest brunt falls on Wal-Mart's overwhelmingly female workers. As a result, the company has been the subject of "the largest civil rights class-action suit in history" which "charges the company with systematically discriminating against women in pay and promotions.

"The company has also been cleverly using public funds to subsidize its low wages by encouraging its workers to apply for welfare assistance. Despite the company's glaring offenses, however, poor women continue to patronize

Wal-Mart because it is all they can afford. Featherstone therefore contends that the success of a concerted action against the giant company lies in the ability of stakeholders such as labor unions to go beyond the consumer mentality, constructed by big business, in creating avenues of resistance.

The author notes that “ to effectively battle corporate criminals like Wal-Mart, the public must be engaged as citizens, not merely as shoppers,” in order to form a movement with enough social and political power to challenge Wal-Mart and to advance the interest of the poor and the working class. Arguably, Featherstone’s article is one of the most convincing and informative pieces there is that provides a balanced and level-headed discussion of an issue that is as inflammatory as “ the “ Wal-Martization” of American jobs.”

“ Down and Out in Discount America” is clearly intended for a wide spectrum of audience. Featherstone assumes that her readers know Wal-mart but they do not know about its unfair practices and illegal activities. Through the clever use of rhetoric and data, the author delivers an essay that is both incisive and engaging. Featherstone uses both academic data and well-placed personal narratives of the workers of Wal-Mart to build her case.

In the process, she does not need to explicitly state that Wal-mart profits from injustice and deepening income divide, this is already substantiated by the real-life cases and hard statistics that speak about the way the company “ profits not only on women's drudgery but also on their joy, creativity and genuine care for the customer” and conditions its consumers to be heavily dependent on the “ relief” brought by Wal-Mart discounted prices. It is

interesting to note that Featherstone incorporates contrary ideas into her piece—such as the welcoming attitude towards Wal-Mart held by poor women—to illuminate and strengthen her stance.

Thus, Featherstone avoids taking the “boycott” stance that would have been too simplistic an answer to as big a problem as Wal-Mart. “Down and Out in Discount America” also does not have the depressing tone that most articles dealing with serious social issues are often infected with; this is not to say that the article does not evoke an emotional response from the reader but that it presents an image of women workers, who, despite their desperation and sad circumstance, manage to lend their anecdotes to show the multi-dimensionality of the Wal-Mart experience. One therefore finds it hard not to take Featherstone’s side against Wal-mart.

The writer undoubtedly presents a well-informed case that explores the Wal-Mart’s labor issues in both a personal and social angle, and attempts to convince the audience on the logic and soundness of why the poor should stop shopping at Wal-Mart (which Featherstone has already conceded is an exercise in futility) but on why there should be more stringent policies to safeguard the poor from unfair labor practices and why there should be adequate legal measures to punish corporate criminal activities that prey upon the desperation of the poor and the working class.

Featherstone is also right in pointing out the need for a political and social movement that would leverage the interest of the poor and the working class above corporate interests. This movement must be a powerful enough

presence to generate political pressure on the government and on big businesses to fulfill their social obligations.

Clearly, "Down and Out in Discount America" is a searing portrayal of what happens when citizens literally put their souls out for a "bargain" with big businesses, which has transformed them into mere consumers whose participation in political and social decision-making is limited to individualistic shopping and purchase decisions. Fortunately, writers like Featherstone are there to remind consumers that they are, first and foremost, citizens and workers with stakes not only in payday discount sales but in the future and direction of labor and living conditions in the community and the country.