

Wal-Mart vs. the Pyramids

By Laura Carlsen | October 12, 2004

The showdown is rife with symbolism. Wal-Mart's expansion plans in Mexico have brought about a modern-day clash of passions and principles on the site of one of the earth's first great civilizations.

Several months ago Wal-Mart, the world's largest retail chain, quietly began construction on a new store north of Mexico City. To many, it's just another step in the phenomenal takeover of Mexico's retail sector. But to others, it's stepping on the cultural foundations of the country. Excavation for the new store started just several thousand meters from the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon, the crowning structures of the ancient city of Teotihuacan.

The Teotihuacan empire is thought to have begun as early as 200 B.C. It grew into a thriving city estimated at over 200,000 inhabitants at its peak. Its streets and sacred buildings are a marvel in urban planning, organized geometrically along the Avenue of the Dead and punctuated by the massive pyramids. The placement of each structure is believed to have a cosmological and social significance that researchers are only beginning to decipher.

The dominion of Teotihuacan stretched deep into the heart of Mayan country in Guatemala and throughout present-day Mexico. Its major symbol and guiding principle of governance was the plumed serpent, Quetzalcoatl. The civilization fell in 700 A.D., under circumstances still shrouded in mystery.

Since then, other tribes and civilizations, including the Aztecs and contemporary Mexican society, have claimed the "City of the Gods" as their heritage. The grand-scale human accomplishment it represents and the power of its architectural, historical, and spiritual legacy is central to Mexico's history and culture. Indigenous leaders, New Age seekers, sightseers, and archaeologists make continual pilgrimages to the site.

While little is known for certain about the rise and fall of Teotihuacan, much is known about the rise of the Wal-Mart empire. From a store in Rogers, Arkansas founded by the Walton brothers in 1962, the enterprise ballooned into the world's largest company.

Wal-Mart's driving symbol and governing principle is the dollar sign. The company has revolutionized the labor



and business world by working cheap and growing big. Labor costs are held down through anti-union policies, the hiring of undocumented workers, alleged discrimination against women and persons with disabilities, and cutbacks in benefits. Prices paid suppliers are driven down by outsourcing competition.

In Mexico, Wal-Mart's conquest of the supermarket sector began by buying up the nation's extensive chain, Aurrerá, beginning in 1992, and from there building new stores across the country. Today, with 657 stores, Mexico is home to more Wal-Marts and their affiliates than any other country outside the United States. Buoyed by \$244.5 billion dollars in annual net sales, the chain can afford to make ever deeper incursions into the country's retail sector.

Proponents of pyramid Wal-Mart argue that it will create jobs and serve consumers cheaply—the hallmark of the store's reputation. The chain has already become Mexico's largest private employer, with over 100,000 employees. But recent studies in the United States, where resistance to the megastore has been growing, show that job creation is often job displacement, as Wal-Marts put local stores out of business, leading to net job losses.

Opposition to the store is led by a diverse group of local merchants, artists, actors, academics, and indigenous organizations that protest damage to Mexico's rich cultural heritage. Through ceremonies, hunger strikes, demonstrations, and press coverage the movement to defend



the site has kept the conflict in the public eye and heightened the public-opinion costs to the transnational. Opponents have taken their concerns to the Mexican Congress and UNESCO.

Excavation on the site has revealed archaeological relics from the layers of civilizations that have populated Teotihuacan. Wal-Mart construction workers told the national daily, *La Jornada*, they had orders to hide any pieces they find. The presence of relics often requires that further excavation be carried out painstakingly or halted altogether. These are processes that the booming Wal-Mart clearly has no time for.

Wal-Mart's economic power as an employer and investor, however, is a force to be reckoned with—especially considering Mexico's high unemployment and the chronic need for foreign currency. Mexico State Governor Arturo Montiel had announced an effort to relocate the planned store, but that initiative inexplicably dissolved only days later. Wal-Mart refuses to relocate, claiming it obtained legal permits and has complied with all formal requirements.

The dispute in Teotihuacan today is not a battle between the past and the future. It is a struggle over a nation's right to define itself. For defenders of the site, gathered behind banners that read "Don't ruin our ruins," the pyramids symbolize the nation's cultural heritage—but they also constitute part of its contemporary

integrity. Mexico in the modern age is still a country that defines itself by legends, and whose collective identity—unlike its neophyte northern neighbor—reaches back thousands of years.

In this context, Wal-Mart is a symbol of the cultural insensitivity of rampant economic integration. Although its actions may be technically legal, in the end it could pay a high price for them.

And if there's anything Wal-Mart hates, it's high prices.

(Laura Carlsen is director of the Americas Program (online at www.americaspolicy.org) of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org.)

TAKE ACTION!

Write Wal-Mart Chief Executive Officer H. Lee. Scott to request relocation of the store:

Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.
702 S.W. 8th Street
Bentonville, AR 72716
Phone: 1-800-WALMART (1-800-925-6278)
Web: <http://www.walmart.com/>

Also Mexico State Governor Arturo Montiel:
<gob@gubernatura.gem.gob.mx>

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