

Wal-Mart's 'Rollback' of GLBT Support Draws Praise, Flak

Monday, 02 July 2007

By Randy Hall, CNSNews.com, Staff Writer/Editor

Less than a year after Wal-Mart joined forces with a homosexual business coalition, the retail giant announced it is halting support for the group and similar ones - a move hailed by pro-family organizations but criticized as "a step backwards" by the chain's union-backed critics.

"We are not currently planning corporate-level contributions to GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) groups," Mona Williams, the company's senior vice president of corporate communications, said in an interview with Fortune magazine.

Williams pointed to a company policy adopted last fall saying that Wal-Mart would not make corporate contributions "to support or oppose highly controversial issues" unless they directly relate to the chain's ability to serve its customers.

She said the decision to stop sending funds to the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC) "does not signal any less support" for its GLBT employees or for Wal-Mart Pride, a resource for homosexual workers at the company. "We certainly don't feel that it's a retrenchment," she added.

In a statement on its website, the coalition of 24,000 businesses says that it "entered into a one-year membership with Wal-Mart that will not be renewed."

"The NGLCC will continue to hold dialog with Wal-Mart as it seeks to educate its associates and external stakeholders about the importance of GLBT employees, customers and suppliers," the site states. "Additionally, the NGLCC will continue to press Wal-Mart for inclusive policies affecting GLBT employees."

Tony Perkins, president of the conservative Family Research Council, said the retail giant's effort had been a "failed experiment."

"In 2006, the company known for its Christian roots did a radical about-face," joining the NGLCC and "selling homosexual-themed products in its retail stores," Perkins said in a news release.

"Wal-Mart's liberal transformation angered many in its customer base and prompted several groups to boycott the chain altogether."

"In the end, the broad backlash forced the company to revoke its political agenda," he said. "Hopefully, this latest decision will signal other companies to rethink their liberal leanings."

For Americans for Truth, which describes itself as "the only national organization devoted exclusively to exposing and countering the homosexual activist agenda," Wal-Mart's "rollback" was only "a partial victory."

Peter LaBarbera, the group's president, told Cybercast News Service Friday that the company "is still selling huge numbers of books that advance homosexuality."

"The problem is that the corporate world is only hearing from one side of the issue, a tiny little minority that is extremely noisy, and not from the vast majority of people who don't want to see Wal-Mart, of all companies, promoting homosexuality," he added.

Nevertheless, the announcement "is a testimony to what happens when people actually voice their values to these corporations," LaBarbera said. "Wal-Mart is at least listening to people. They've scaled back their promotion of the gay agenda. This is a hopeful thing and something we can build upon" when working with other companies in the future.

Reaction to Wal-Mart's decision by homosexual groups has been surprisingly mild. Selisse Berry, executive director of Out & Equal - which received a contribution of \$60,000 from the company last year - said in a news release: "Wal-Mart continues to engage on the issue of worker equality, and we will support them in that."

"This is a marathon, not a sprint, and so long as Wal-Mart keeps its doors open, we hope to give them encouragement," Berry added.

Daryl Herrschaft, director of the Workplace Project for the Human Rights Campaign, said that with a company as large as Wal-Mart, attaining equality with heterosexuals "is not going to happen as fast as many of us would like," but he said he would continue to work with the retail chain.

However, union-sponsored critics of the company had much harsher reactions to the development.

Wal-Mart Watch said the company "remains the only national discount chain that does not offer partnership benefits," unlike rival chains Sears and Target. "Wal-Mart also has the dubious distinction of being one of the few companies to ever pull back a GLBT initiative," the group said on its website.

"Every day, Wal-Mart's actions and rhetoric serve to not only further divide America, but expose this company's extreme right-wing colors," said Paul Blank, campaign director for WakeUpWalMart.com, another union-backed critic.

"Wal-Mart should be ashamed that it would define its support for the GLBT community as 'highly controversial,' while it ignores its explicit support for right-wing George Bush-style Republicans whose policies have cost America middle-class jobs, worsened our health-care system, helped poison our environment and blindly support failed strategies in Iraq," Blank said in a statement.

"The time has come for Wal-Mart, if they truly believe in the best of American values, to realize that every one of its workers, regardless of their sexual orientation, race or religion, deserve to be treated fairly," he added.

"Sadly, for Wal-Mart, treating all of its 1.39 million workers with dignity and respect appears to be another 'controversial cause' they do not support," Blank added.

Telephone calls to Wal-Mart's corporate headquarters in Bentonville, Ark., seeking further comment for this article were not returned by press time.