

Wal-Mart Does What?!

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Karen Olsson, senior editor at *Texas Monthly* and author of *Waterloo*, writes an essay called, "Up Against Wal-Mart" which was published in *Mother Jones*, a nonprofit magazine committed to social justice. In this essay she argues that Walmart is guilty of mistreating their employees and doing everything in their power to break up unions when they start to form among employees. Olsson also angrily points out that although Wal-Mart has a significant income, they still pay as little to their employees as they can. She continually mentions how badly employees are treated while working at Wal-Mart; often times using actual accounts from the workers themselves. To make matters worse, she touches on the discrimination happening in the management due to gender. She makes the arguments with appeals to the emotional aspects of overworking employees, not paying them enough, and discriminating against women in the management.

Olsson writes this essay due to the many recent lawsuits against Wal-Mart for the very issues she mentions. She writes that, "Workers in 27 states are suing Wal-Mart for violating wage-and-hour laws," and in most of these cases Wal-Mart has been found guilty. Olsson uses this as only a small fraction of her proof for the crimes being committed. She doesn't just focus on the current state of Wal-Mart, however. She goes on to mention how

the company was started and how Sam Walton, the creator of the company, meticulously managed the budget to earn the most profit. In other words, this behavior isn't new, and has been occurring since the company's birth.

Olsson presents her argument with a serious, yet exasperated tone. Often being almost maliciously satirical towards her victim, Wal-Mart. This gives the piece the air of classical journalism making it very believable, especially when adding in the pile of evidence she has for every one of her claims. She also adds credibility to her argument when you look at her own credentials. A winner many awards from the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies, she has also written for *Slate*, *The Washington Post*, and the *New York Times Magazine*. She is known for her investigative reporting and feature stories mostly, and thus giving the reader the impression that she did her homework and she knows what she is doing.

She first appeals to your emotions when she starts the piece with, "Jennifer McLaughlin is 22, has a baby, drives a truck, wears wide-leg jeans and spiky plastic chokers, dyes her hair dark red, and works at Wal-Mart." With this quote she is setting the stage for the piece by giving you the detailed description of a woman who you could picture walking past you on the street or seeing in a Wal-Mart while you are buying groceries for the week. The idea is to make her relatable, and Olsson does a wonderful job of that right from the start. Continuing through the essay, she continually mentions personal hardships from the employees she interviewed and various other forms of emotional appeals to connect the reader to show just how harmful Wal-Mart is being to their workers. She also

uses overwhelming figures to connect the audience with the hardships of employees, mentioning that Jennifer McLaughlin only makes \$16,800 a year, and she is considered to be a high paid employee. This tugs on the heart strings of the average reader when she mentions that Wal-Mart takes away \$6.6 billion in profits.

Along with being under paid, Wal-Mart has the audacity to ask their employees to work off the clock and will do anything to avoid their workers from racking up overtime hours. By anyones definition this is considered wrong, and the way that Olsson portrays this makes it look doubly so. She writes, "Supervisors, pressured by company headquarters to keep payroll low, regularly deleted hours from time records and reprimanded employees who claimed overtime." Olsson uses this as part of her proof that Wal-Mart is, in fact, guilty of what they are accused of, but she also uses it to call to the morals of the reader. She consistently does this throughout the essay, leaving the reader angry by the third page and outraged by the end. The focus of this essay is what is the most maddening however, and Olsson writes it in a way that takes the matter to a whole new level. It is no secret that Wal-Mart avoids unions, but Olsson shows just how far they are willing to go. This is when her emotional appeals come into play most. "In 10 separate cases, the National Labor Relations Board has ruled that Wal-Mart repeatedly broke the law by interrogating workers, confiscating union literature, and firing union supporters." When she uses words like, "interrogating", "confiscating", and "firing", she is exerting her quiet (or not so quiet...) influence over the issue as well as casting a negative light on the already negative situation, and causing the reader to seriously consider the problem. Overall the piece

requires the reader to consider the moral implications and consider the values that Wal-Mart really has. Not only does she play on the emotional connection throughout the essay, but also on the logicity of her argument.

Logically speaking, Olsson has presented a reasonable argument with clear evidence to support her claims, but a significant amount of the evidence is hear-say. She does mention quite a few court cases against Wal-Mart for the very reasons she is arguing to be true. She also uses quotes from professionals that have been involved in the issues she presents. One instance when her evidence was most convincing is when she interviewed Martin Levitt, the consultant from Alpha Associates who helped develop Wal-Mart's "union avoidance program". He states that, "In my 35 years in labor relations, I've never seen a company that will go to the lengths that Wal-Mart goes to, to avoid a union." Not only does this quote come from a professional in the area of avoiding unions, but it also has a significant shock value to it that makes you question Wal-Mart's choices as a company. This adds to Olsson's argument significantly because it is from a professional who had a large part in the union busting.

She also quotes Russell Loyd, an attorney for Wal-Mart employees in Texas, saying that Wal-Mart is consistent in their treatment of employees throughout all of their stores. This again, adds to her argument because she is bring in a professional to say "Yes, she is right!". Therefore her argument looks all the more credible to the reader.

Olsson's arguments appeal both to logic and the emotions, giving a well rounded

voice to the article, and using language that encourages her professionalism and overall credibility. She gives clear evidence for her arguments as well as plenty of background on Wal-Mart itself, therefore helping the reader to better understand the situation she is describing. All of these small pieces of the puzzle add up to a very well written, and convincing article that describe Olsson's arguments clearly and effectively.