

Wayfair walkout says no to concentration camps

written by Sharon Black
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On the afternoon of June 26, hundreds of Wayfair workers walked off their jobs at the company's Boston headquarters. They took united action to protest the company's sale of beds to a detention camp for migrant children in Carrizo Springs, Texas.

Carrying homemade signs that read, "A cage is not a home" and "We won't be complicit in childhood incarceration," workers marched to nearby Copley Square. Several thousand union and nonunion supporters greeted them, including UNITE/HERE Local 26, Movimiento Cosecha, Uber Guild drivers, the Boston Teachers Union's immigrant rights action committee, Mijente, Pride at Work, 32BJ SEIU and Harvard Graduate Student Union-UAW.

For many of the largely youthful Wayfair workers, it was the first time they had participated in any political or protest activity. The fact that they are not represented or protected by a union makes their actions all the more courageous.

Workers at the Brunswick, Maine, Wayfair offices participated in their own solidarity walkout that also received community support.

Background to walkout

The organizing for the walkout took a little over a week after Wayfair's detention camp business was leaked. A \$200,000 order by federal contractor Baptist Children's Family Services was for its children's detention camp in Texas.

Workers discussed the issue, then drafted a petition signed by 547 workers demanding that Wayfair reject profiting from detention camps. When Wayfair workers learned the bid sale was final, they demanded: 1) don't do business with the contractor again; 2) donate proceeds to the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), a non-profit that helps reunite families at the border; and 3) institute a code of ethics. The workers clearly understood that a prison with a bed is still a prison.

Instead of responding affirmatively to the workers' demands, the company donated \$100,000 to the Red Cross. After a June 25 in-house meeting, CEO Steve Conine made it clear that the company was not budging. In response, workers spun on a dime and organized the walkout for the next day.

Who are the Wayfair workers?

Wayfair is an ecommerce company headquartered in Boston and Berlin, similar to Amazon but on a much smaller and limited scale. It sells home goods such as furniture, rugs, lamps and decorations.

The company has fulfillment center warehouses and call centers around the U.S. in places like Springfield, Ohio; Big Flats, N.Y.; Bryan, Texas; Hebron, Ky.; and Parris, Calif.

In 2018, Wayfair made a reported \$6.8 billion in revenue and is [ranked number 446](#) on the Fortune 500 list. The company employs over 12,000 workers worldwide, with 7,000 working at the Boston headquarters.

The type of labor done by these workers varies from customer service representatives and call center workers to artists and engineers to product managers to warehouse workers. On the lower end of the pay scale, Glassdoor lists the average base wage for a warehouse associate at \$13 an hour.

Wayfair was given one of the largest tax breaks in Massachusetts history when it was awarded [\\$31.4 million in tax incentives](#) in December 2018 to benefit expansion in the cities of Boston and Pittsfield.

Political work stoppage

Aside from the youthfulness of the participants and the fact that they have no union protection, a factor that caught the attention of many working-class advocates was the walkout's political character. This work stoppage was based on an anti-racist demand in solidarity with migrant and refugee children, families and workers — not on wages or working conditions in the shop.

The cruel and inhuman conditions imposed by the U.S. government and its for-profit private prisons and nonprofit detention centers are widely protested. What if workers' power interrupted every link of the supply chain that enables these concentration camps and prisons?

The Wayfair workers' walkout serves as an important example and a critical tactic in the working-class struggle.

This type of disruption is not new in recent U.S. labor history. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has contributed rich examples.

On Sept. 27, 2014, ILWU Local 10 honored a [Zim Action Committee](#) picket at the Port of Oakland in California by refusing to work a ship with Israeli cargo. The action was in protest of the Israeli government's genocidal bombings of Palestinians in Gaza that killed over 2,100 people, mostly civilians.

Previously, as the December 2013 Dispatcher remembered: “ILWU Local 10 members helped put the anti-apartheid struggle in the national spotlight in 1984, when they refused to unload South African cargo from the Dutch ship, Nedlloyd Kimberly, at San Francisco’s Pier 80.

“Although they unloaded the rest of the ship, the South African ‘bloody’ cargo of steel, auto parts and wine remained in the ship’s hold for 10 days while community supporters held daily demonstrations outside protesting South Africa’s apartheid regime. At its peak, the demonstration grew to an estimated 700 participants. Employers tried to find another West Coast port to take the ship, but because of solidarity from other ILWU locals, no port was willing to accept the Nedlloyd Kimberly.”

The April 6, 1974, issue of the Black Panther newspaper reported on the International Longshore Association (ILA) support for the Black liberation struggle in Zimbabwe (then called “Rhodesia”). In December 1973, the African Sun ship was “forced to return to Mozambique with 56 crates of Rhodesian nickel ore because dockworkers refused to unload it.”

Baltimore’s Ray Ceci, ILA Local 333 member and founding member of the All Peoples Congress, a precursor of the Peoples Power Assembly, participated in that action.

Critical community support and mass strike

The Wayfair workers’ action illustrates the importance of working-class-wide support. As a number of the workers who left their jobs to walk out remarked, the encouragement of the hundreds of people who had gathered in Copley Square buoyed them and made their sacrifice both possible and worth it.

The broader movement made it possible for the workers to act, and the actions of

the workers ignited the movement.

Fighting as a class has never been more important. June 26 is a tiny example of what is possible and what can win workers' power with mass strikes. A mass strike, with everyone in the working class uniting to shut down business as usual because of the refugee crisis, could turn the situation around very quickly. A mass strike could abolish Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and shut down the detention/concentration camps permanently.

It's the kind of action that can prevent racist police terror, end imperialist war and force action to stop the capitalist climate crisis.

