



Communities Are Worth Fighting For

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Last month in Washington, D.C. Mayor Vincent C. Gray vetoed the Large Retailer Accountability Act, which would have required corporate retailers with sales of \$1 billion or more that operated businesses of at least 750,000 square feet in the District to pay a “living wage.” In Washington, D.C. that means that workers in places like Walmart would earn \$12.50 an hour. Mayor Gray argued that the law would hurt District residents by depriving them access to less expensive goods and jobs. He also made the argument, reminiscent of those made by Chambers of Commerce in struggling communities across the country, that paying a living wage would discourage future economic development.

Religious and labor groups in D.C. contend that Gray has given in to Walmart’s bullying tactics. By doing so, he has compromised his community’s future by not standing and fighting for the kind of wages that retailers like Walmart could afford and that the working poor desperately need. Numerous studies, histories and exposes on Walmart’s economic practices demonstrate that Walmart’s low wage jobs won’t actually help D.C.’s poor residents and, in fact, a low-wage workforce strains local communities whose small businesses often close because they can not compete. Low-wage employees depend on social welfare to compensate for their employers’ greed, so in the end we all pay for

decisions like the one that Gray has made.



Workers and supporters confronted by troops in Memphis, 1968.

There are many episodes like this one in labor and working-class history where the health and welfare of local communities are pitted against large employers and where questions of race, class and the economy are brought to the fore. One is the campaign in Memphis in 1968 by sanitation workers. In the classroom, the film *At the River I Stand* might be used by educators to help put to the current campaign for a living wage into historical perspective. The film brings this drama to students in a clear and emotionally poignant way. Rather than a corporate retailer, the antagonist in the documentary is the city of Memphis's city council and its Mayor, Henry Loeb. In the 58-minute film, the drama of the city's sanitation workers' 1968 fight for dignity, manhood, and union rights play out. Students watch as Martin Luther King Jr. and his Poor People's Campaign are brought into the struggle and a community is mobilized to make its claim for fundamental, economic rights. Clarifying for students the dynamic connection between civil rights, union movements and economic rights, *At the River I Stand* is a launching point for asking, "What are some of the economic, social, moral and political questions that the struggle for economic rights raises? Do local communities have a responsibility to defend its members' economic rights? What are some ways that communities and their members do this?" Washington D.C.'s Mayor Gray has cast his lot with big box retailers. Films such as *At the River I Stand* show students that other options are not only available, but worth fighting for.

This film is available from many libraries, through interlibrary loan, or for [purchase from California Newsreel for \\$24.95](#).

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