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Understanding the demonization of Wal-Mart

Tuesday January 17, 2006

FORGET terrorism. The real threat is Wal-Mart. Many in this country, and now this state, see Wal-Mart as a threat, a corporate giant that has killed Main Street and relegated American workers to a substandard life.

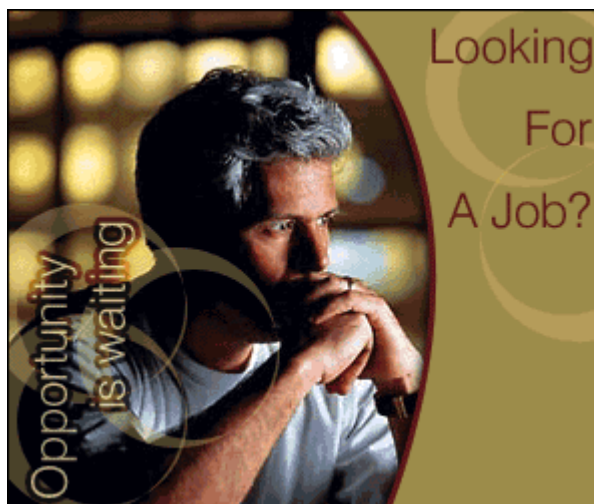
The Legislature this year will consider the "Fair Share Health Care" bill. It requires any business with more than 10,000 employees to spend at least 8 percent of its payroll on health care benefits.

In West Virginia, as in 31 other states where similar legislation is being considered, the target is Wal-Mart. Maryland's legislature is currently trying to override Governor Robert Ehrlich's veto of the bill last year.

The West Virginia proponents, including Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Jeff Kessler, D-Marshall, say Wal-Mart should show some corporate responsibility and offer better health benefits.

They say many of the 12,000 Wal-Mart workers in West Virginia earn so little and have such meager benefits that they go without health insurance or turn to government health care programs such as Medicaid.

Economist Michael Hicks, in the 2005 Regional Economic Review at Marshall University, wonders why politicians are upset that workers at Wal-Mart or any place else are using Medicaid.



Hicks says the 1996 federal welfare reform bill was "specifically designed to make available Medicaid for low-wage workers" not on welfare.

Labor unions, unhappy with Wal-Mart's largely non-union status, are pushing the Wal-Mart bill here and in other states.

The unions are joined by a collection of groups and politicians who believe Wal-Mart is damaging the U.S. economy by undercutting competition and shifting health-care costs to others.

True, Wal-Mart has developed a new business model of buying directly from the manufacturer that has changed the way people shop. The company delivers on its promise of low prices, drawing customers away from other retailers.

In short, the company has been one of the most wildly successful capitalist enterprises in history. And now our government is trying to punish it.

I'm no great fan of Wal-Mart, but this is hardly the American way.

Kercheval is host of TalkLine, broadcast by the MetroNews Statewide Radio Network from 10 a.m. to noon Monday through Friday. The show can be heard locally on WCHS 580 AM.

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