

Young under fire for Wal-Mart advocacy

DECATUR, Ga. (AP) - At the grand opening of a Wal-Mart in a Black suburb of Atlanta, civil rights leader Andrew Young danced with store clerks, bouncing to the song "We Are Family."

He also posed with a \$1 million check from the company — a donation for a memorial to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to be built on the National Mall in Washington.

Young took part in the pep rally in his new position as a paid corporate cheerleader for Wal-Mart — a role that has perplexed some of his longtime civil rights colleagues, who have all but accused him of going over to the enemy.

Activists for the poor have long complained that Wal-Mart skimps on wages and health benefits, forces employees to work off the clock, and kills off mom-and-pop businesses.

Rev. Joseph Lowery,

known as the dean of the Civil Rights Movement, said Young — the 74-year-old former Atlanta mayor and U.N. ambassador — is acting as a "lone wolf" in working for Wal-Mart.

"Maybe he knows something that other advocates for economic justice don't," Lowery said in a statement. "Maybe we will see the corporate giant be born again and become a good corporate citizen."

Young, who as one of King's top lieutenants was a business liaison during the Civil Rights Era, said that by working for the world's largest retailer, he hopes to increase jobs and open other doors for poor people. He defended his role as entirely consistent with the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement.

"Civil rights leaders are involved in helping poor people," he said. "That's what I've been doing all my life."



Activist, former United Nations ambassador and Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young, center, dances with Wal-Mart employees Sabrina Taylor, health and beauty aides department manager, left, and Antonia Priest, ladies apparel department manager, at grand opening ceremonies for a Wal-Mart Supercenter enterprise in Decatur, Ga., last week.

Young long ago left behind his protest days in favor of stumping for economic opportunity. As a two-term

mayor in the 1980s, Young said he attracted more than a million jobs and \$70 billion in private investment to the

city.

Since 1997, he has headed GoodWorks International, which works with corporations and governments to foster economic development in Africa and the Caribbean.

He and his company were hired last month to promote Wal-Mart at public appearances, in interviews and in op-ed pieces, said Kevin Sheridan, spokesman for Working Families for Wal-Mart, a group organized with backing from the company. The group defends Wal-Mart Stores Inc. against attacks from critics.

Sheridan would not disclose how much Young and his company are being paid; Young said he is not sure how much his company is getting.

"He obviously is a highly credible public face that brings a very high degree of respect to any debate that he involves himself with," Sheridan said. "We take very seriously his advice and his counsel. The career that he has had fighting for poor and working folks for his entire career has been the focus of almost everything he's been involved with in this group to date, and we continue to look for new avenues for him to speak out."

Last fall, in another effort to change its ways, Wal-Mart announced steps to make health insurance more affordable for its employees.

"This is a case where Wal-Mart is hiring someone to make them look good, but this is someone who will try, through friendly persuasion, to get them to review some of what they're doing," said Margaret Simms, an economist for the Washington-based Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

She said that while the Civil Rights Movement long concentrated on winning political power for Blacks, "many people in the Civil Rights Movement view economic development as the next frontier."

This is not Young's first corporate job. He served for 10 years on the board of Atlanta-based Delta Air Lines and still makes public appearances on the company's behalf. He also has Nike as a client through GoodWorks, and in 1997 he came under fire from activists for issuing a report exonerating the shoe manufacturer of unfair labor practices in Vietnam.

Akinyele Umoja, a professor of Black studies at Georgia State University, complained: "What he's doing is providing credibility and legitimacy for some of these corporations that have policies that just reinforce inequality."

On Wednesday, Young hugged customers, signed autographs and posed for pictures. (See Wal-Mart, Page 13)

Tour opposes New Orleans election

ATLANTA (AP) - Rev. Jesse Jackson is touring southern cities to rally opposition to next month's mayoral election in New Orleans, saying too many Hurricane Katrina victims scattered around the country will be unable to vote.

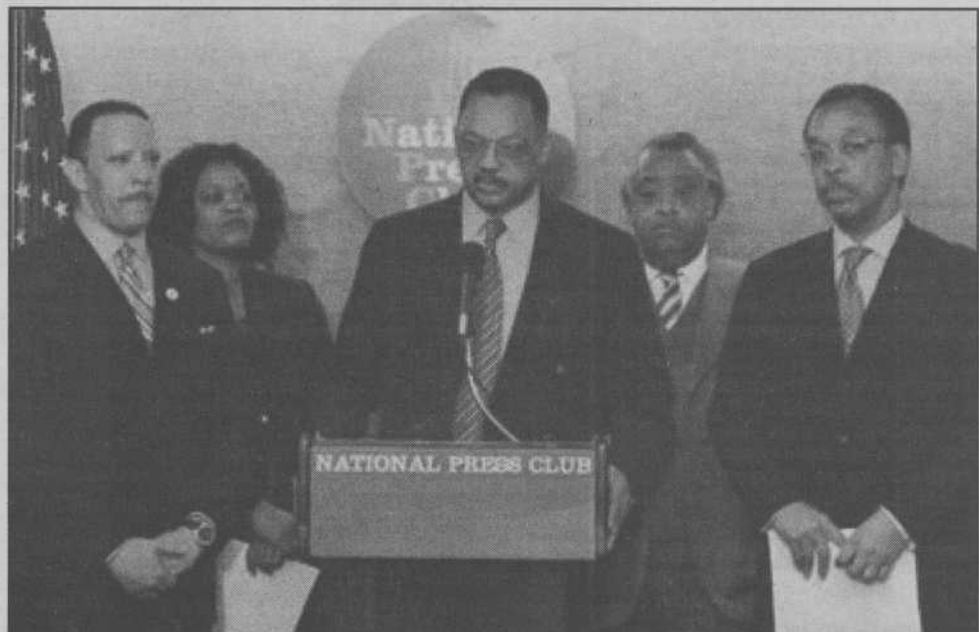
He is asking Black churches, Black colleges and other organizations in cities like Atlanta, Jackson, Miss., and Memphis, Tenn., to encourage their members to march on New Orleans on April 1. The election is set for April 22.

Black leaders have charged that Louisiana officials have not done enough to ensure that voters scattered by the storm will be able to vote. Louisiana loosened procedures for absentee balloting and plans to set up satellite polling places around the state for New Orleans residents driven from their homes, but it decided not to create such stations outside Louisiana.

Jackson and other civil rights leaders have demanded that the election be postponed. But they have said when they believe the balloting should be held.

Jackson said the march will be the most critical such demonstration since the Civil Rights Era.

"Fast is not more important than fair. We marched for fair elections, not fast elections," he said at a church in Atlanta, referring to his involvement in the Civil



Rev. Jesse Jackson, center, speaks during a news conference at the National Press Club in Washington on Friday. From left: Former New Orleans Mayor Marc Morial; Melanie L. Campbell, executive director of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation; Rev. Al Sharpton, president of the National Action Network; and Bruce S. Gordon, president and CEO of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Rights Movement with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

New Orleans was about 70 percent Black before Hurricane Katrina, and some Blacks fear they will lose political power if the elections go forward now, when less than half of the city's pre-Katrina population of 465,000 has returned.

Two dozen candidates are running for mayor, including incumbent Ray Nagin, who is Black. The candidates have had to campaign nationally to address their scattered electorate. Only seven of them showed up last weekend in Atlanta for a candidates' forum held for evacuees in the area.

"Those who are running don't know who is eligible, and the eligible don't know who's running," Jackson said.

Among those scheduled to attend the march in New Orleans are actors Bill Cosby and Harry Belafonte, National Urban League President and former New Orleans Mayor Marc Morial, NAACP President Bruce Gordon, the Rev. Al Sharpton and Southern Christian Leadership Conference President Charles Steele.

Rev. Raphael G. Warnock of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, which was once King's pulpit, said a busload of his congregation members

plan to march in New Orleans.

"We are unified in saying no to those who would roll back voting rights won through the shedding of blood," Warnock said.

Jackson said the two options for casting a ballot on April 22 — voting absentee, or going back to Louisiana — violate federal law. He said the Postal Service is having trouble delivering mail, and traveling hundreds of miles to vote is a hardship on many evacuees.

Steele wants the federal government to help pay voters' travel costs or provide out-of-state satellite voting sites.

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