

Jury: Wal-Mart Forced Unpaid Overtime

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PORTLAND, Ore. (Reuters) - A federal jury on Thursday ruled that Wal-Mart Stores Inc., the world's largest retailer, for five years had forced more than 400 employees to work unpaid overtime.

A separate phase of the trial will determine monetary damages, but a lawyer for the plaintiffs said total damages could be double the unpaid back-pay in the case, which covers the period between 1994 and 1999.

The lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court, accused Wal-Mart of violating federal and state wage laws by making employees continue to work without pay after their shift ended or by calling on managers to edit time cards to eliminate overtime.

"This was a finding by a jury that Wal-Mart permitted its employees in 18 of its Oregon stores to work for free," said James Piotrowski, an attorney representing the plaintiffs.

A spokesman for Bentonville, Arkansas-based Wal-Mart could not be reached for comment immediately.

Shares of Wal-Mart closed on Thursday at \$50.16 on the New York Stock Exchange. The verdict was announced after the close of trade.

The lawsuit, which was filed by two former Wal-Mart managers who worked in Oregon and joined by other employees, was the first of 30 or more similar class-action suits against the company to go to trial.

"I think that this shows that it is possible to beat Wal-Mart and I think it will have a real energizing effect on the lawyers fighting those other cases," Piotrowski said.

Carolyn Thiebes, a former Wal-Mart personnel manager and one of the primary plaintiffs, said that she was asked to edit time cards and delete hours about eight months after she joined the company in 1992.

She said she continued to do so until she left Wal-Mart in 1998. In addition, she said, Wal-Mart hourly employees were encouraged to believe that they would be better off financially if they completed work after their shifts ended because many had some stock in the company.