

BOYCOTTS PLANNED OVER DEI RETREAT



Numerous social media accounts are sharing the message of a 24-hour consumer spending blackout planned for Friday. Consumers are encouraged not to spend money in stores or online for the day. GETTY IMAGES

People encouraged not to shop in stores, online on Friday

Betty Lin-Fisher USA TODAY

Consumers are rallying to speak through their spending – or lack thereof – as a way to protest the retreat by some companies from diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives and President Donald Trump’s actions to eliminate federal DEI programs since taking office. They are calling on consumers to boycott specific retailers and, for one day this month, to refrain from spending any money at all.

Numerous social media accounts are sharing the message of a 24-hour consumer spending blackout planned for Friday, Feb. 28. Consumers are encouraged not to spend money in stores or online for the day. If they have emergencies or essentials they need, they are encouraged to support a local small business.

It is unclear which organization started the Friday, Feb. 28, blackout, but several Instagram posts by a group called The People’s Union have been reshared and circulated. In one of them, People’s Union founder John Schwarz, who posts as TheOneCalledJai, said the goal is to show that the people have the power.

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Political boycotts have a long history, though their success varies. A boycott of Bud Light in 2023 was sparked by conservative consumers upset that the beer maker had teamed up with a transgender influencer. BRYAN BEDDER/GETTY IMAGES FILE

“If enough of us participate, they will feel it and if they don’t listen, we escalate.”

John Schwarz, People’s Union founder

Boycott

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"For decades, they have told us that we are powerless, that we have no control, and that this system is too big, too strong, too unshakable," the video said. "We remind them that this country does not belong to the elite, it belongs to the people."

"Some of you might say one day won't make a difference, and that's exactly what they want you to believe," he continued. "If enough of us participate, they will feel it and if they don't listen, we escalate."

The same group has announced another blackout aimed at blocking purchases from Amazon from March 7-14.

Schwarz said what started as a bold idea while he was posting a video to express his frustration has gained traction quickly.

"I'm trying to use my platform right now to organize and gather people who can see past what divides us and potentially maybe down the road legally find some way to unionize ourselves, to create a powerful voice within the system to create change," he told USA TODAY. "For now, the economic blackout is about getting people together, up off the couch, so to speak, to do some-



A boycott against Target began Feb. 1, the start of Black History Month, with civil rights activists in Minnesota encouraging consumers to not shop at the Minneapolis-based retailer. The boycott started in response to Target's decision to phase out DEI initiatives. MARK VERGARI/ROCKLAND/WESTCHESTER JOURNAL NEWS FILE

thing together."

Schwarz said he will expand to monthly boycotts of other businesses "that are really the biggest offenders within the system." He said he is running the effort alone but looking for people to join him. A website, thepeoplesunionusa.com, has information on the efforts.

A different boycott against Target began Feb. 1, the start of Black History Month, with civil rights activists in Minnesota encouraging consumers to not shop at the Minneapolis-based retailer.

The boycott started in

response to Target's decision to phase out DEI initiatives.

The DEI retreat "really felt like a slap in the face," said Nekima Levy Armstrong, a civil rights attorney and founder of the Racial Justice Network. "Target was a beloved community that seemed to build its model around embracing diversity and being intentionally inclusive of having Black brands on the shelves, having beautiful Black History Month displays. For them to essentially bow down to the mandates of the Trump administration was unacceptable."

After some Black-owned businesses expressed concern about the boycott, organizers, which include several other civil rights organizations in Minnesota, encouraged consumers to support Black-owned brands in Target by buying directly from the businesses' websites.

Levy Armstrong said the support of the boycott has been good. She sees other planned boycotts as "complementary," she said. "People feel empowered in a moment in which they felt powerless and somewhat helpless."

At least two additional consumer boycotts are

planned. On Instagram, comedian and actor Leslie Jones announced planned boycotts and buying actions starting in February and continuing through the end of the year, targeting Walmart, Target and Amazon, and encouraging purchases from Black-owned businesses.

Pastor Jamal-Harrison Bryant, senior pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Georgia and an activist and author, has called on the faith community to start a 40-day fast from shopping at Target during Lent starting March 5, Ash Wednesday. A website, targetfast.org, offers information.

Target and Amazon did not return messages seeking comment about potential boycotts. A Walmart spokesperson declined comment.

Boycotts can be pretty effective, but not in the way that consumers think, said Brayden King, a professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University.

The actions draw attention for the cause, including from the media, which "puts a negative spotlight on the companies they're boycotting and that could in the long run have reputational consequences," King told USA TODAY.

However, "what boycotts don't seem to do is have much of an impact

on consumer behavior," he said. Consumers can usually handle a boycott for a day, "but over longer periods of time, most boycotts don't have any kind of impact on sales." That's because consumer purchasing, especially online, "tends to occur in private where others can't see or judge them."

There are also several social media messages that outline other boycott efforts in different time frames against specific retailers. That is usually "one of the biggest difficulties activists face, which is they're not just competing with all the other events and things that are happening with the world, but also competing with each other and for attention," said King.

The most successful boycotts are ones where "there's a lot of unity," he said. A boycott of Bud Light in 2023, sparked by conservative consumers upset that the beer maker had teamed up with a transgender influencer, was successful due to a couple of key reasons, King said. People tend to consume beer in public, so they could be held accountable. And there were easy substitutes of other beer brands that consumers could choose instead.

Still, a boycott can be a positive way for consumers to express themselves through action, King said. "Saying you're going to boycott something does feel like you're casting a vote that you hope makes a difference down the road," he said. It is a way for people upset about the Trump administration's actions or companies' responses to DEI initiatives "to convert grievances into action."

The Rev. Al Sharpton and the National Action Network have recently taken action at two Costco locations in New York City and New Jersey to bring supporters to spend money in support of the company board of director's actions to vote down an effort to drop DEI efforts.

National Action Network also said in a news release about the "boycott" efforts that it will lead "a strategic boycott in the next 90 days of two companies that have dropped their DEI commitments amid public pressure."

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