



THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

GOV. GREG ABBOTT SAID TEXAS LAWMAKERS WOULD PRIORITIZE WORKERS IN 2021. BUT ADVOCATES SAY THE WORKING CLASS WAS LARGELY LEFT BEHIND.

By Megan Muncie
The Texas Tribune
June 15, 2021

When the 2021 Texas legislative session kicked off in January, the state's unemployment rate in Texas was 6.8% — well above the 3.7% rate from before the beginning of the pandemic here.

In response, Gov. Greg Abbott publicly declared in his State of the State address that “hard-working Texans are at the forefront of our agenda this legislative session.”

But with the session now past, workers' advocacy groups say that workers were left behind.

It wasn't a matter of bills not being introduced, according to the Texas AFL-CIO's legislative director René Lara. At the beginning of the session, legislators filed bills on unemployment insurance, workers' compensation and health care access — all pieces of legislation Lara called “pro-worker.”

Some of those bills passed. That includes Senate Bill 22, which makes it easier for public safety employees who contracted COVID-19 to receive workers' compensation, and House Bill 133, which extends Medicaid coverage for mothers.

Several others did not.

Bills similar to SB 22 that would have applied to other essential workers, such as nurses, stalled in legislative committees. So did House Bill 3460, which would have created a grant program for Texans who were affected by the 2021 winter storm.

The session also saw perennially futile attempts to increase the minimum wage in Texas above the \$7.25 an hour rate set at the federal level. Democrats in Congress have also gained little traction in increasing the federal minimum wage since President Joe Biden took office in January.

“Raising the minimum wage, in my view, will only take jobs away from people, will only hurt business,” Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick said at a [Texas Business Leadership Council](#) event, according to The Dallas Morning News. “So that's not something I think is going to happen.”

State Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer, D-San Antonio, has

spent several sessions pushing bills that would raise the state minimum wage or allow voters to decide to do so. His latest attempt, House Bill 1827, never got a committee hearing.

“Myself and the other members who have filed minimum wage bills, we've done everything but go on a hunger strike to try to get these bills heard,” he said. “People in charge are not willing to have a discussion.”

Lara said that not raising the minimum wage this year in particular could make it difficult for many businesses to attract employees willing to work during a pandemic for just \$7.25 an hour.

Such a wage is far below the \$14.01 a single adult Texan with no children needs to earn to maintain a normal standard of living in the state, according to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's living wage calculator.

On top of not passing bills that could help workers, advocates said they had to stave off other bills that could potentially hurt them.

During the session, Stephanie Gharakhanian, special counsel for the Workers Defense Project, said she spent more time defending what rights workers do have rather than fighting for expanded protections.

Gharakhanian said workers she'd met with felt “insulted” and “used” by legislators applauding their bravery during the pandemic, but not listening to their demands for more protections.

“The message that they are receiving is that the state wants their labor, but does not want to honor their dignity,” she said.

One big fight for workers' rights organizations was Senate Bill 14 — legislation initially aiming to prohibit local governments from passing ordinances mandating local employee benefits such as paid sick leave.

The bill's supporters said it was key to ensuring businesses can expand across the state without battling conflicting regulations within different jurisdictions.

“You can imagine trying to find a way to negotiate all the regulations in the [over] 1,200 cities across the state of Texas if they're all different?” said state Rep. Phil King, a Weatherford Republican and the House sponsor for SB 14.

But opponents argued it would have blocked local governments from expanding what little rights Texas



THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

workers do have.

SB 14 was passed by both chambers, but died after House Democrats walked out over a voting restriction bill, keeping the lower chamber from approving a conference committee report reconciling the differences between the House and Senate versions.

King said the measure would have passed if lawmakers had not run out of time to vote on it. He said he hopes the bill will be brought back during a proposed special session.

“The business community is very disappointed and wants to see this bill brought back,” he said.

Overall, Lara appraised the session as “dismal” for workers, made even worse by Abbott’s decision to withdraw from federal unemployment assistance programs after June 26.

Abbott’s office did not respond to requests for comment.

Though this session wasn’t uncommonly unproductive for workers, Lara said, it felt worse given all the hurdles brought upon by the pandemic that weren’t addressed in the end.