

TWO WEEKS IN A

Right-To-Work State

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“Workers have no rights or protections in Texas.”

It was an honor when I was asked to go to Texas for an organizing blitz with CWA Texas State Employees Union TSEU Local 6186. I would be heading off on April 28 to a state so unlike New York and not returning until May 10. I saw the trip as an opportunity to help my sisters and brothers of CWA, but I didn't know exactly what I was in for.

My trip to Texas was definitely an eye opener. Prior to going, I knew what right to work meant, but I had never really seen it in action. My work in the Lone Star state highlighted just how few rights and protections Texas workers have on the job.

“Are there really unions in Texas?” is a question often heard throughout the state. Yes, unions are legal there, and there are many in the private sector that bargain collectively for employment contracts. However, since Texas is a right-to-work state, it is illegal to make union membership compulsory for employment. There are several public sector unions that represent public employees, but collective bargaining is forbidden, as is the right to strike. A collective bargaining exception applies to many police officer and firefighter unions, and the municipal employees of Houston.

CWA TSEU Local 6186 represents more than 300,000 state employees in Texas, with membership including those at the entry level all the way through management. That “membership” however is at just 10 percent. That means a whopping 90 percent are not union members. There is no bargaining contract, which means that legislators hold the power when it comes to every aspect of their state workers. Salary rates, pay increases, benefits packages are all controlled by the state legislature.

Pay increases come up for discussion only once every two years, and not shockingly, it's been 10 years since their last pay increase. Since there is no contract, the 300,000 state workers are “at will” employees, meaning they can be dismissed by an employer for any reason without having to establish “just cause” for termination, and without warning, as long as the reason is not illegal, such as being fired because of race, gender, or religion. To make matters worse, there is no grievance process either so there is no one to complain to about being fired. If the boss arrives to work in a bad mood, and he doesn't like the shirt you are wearing, he can fire you.

While I was in Austin and San Antonio, we went out each day to different worksite locations, leafletting from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. to catch workers before they started their shifts. Our goal was to let them know we

would be setting up a table at their site from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. to talk about unions, the benefits of organizing, getting workers to sign up to become dues-paying union members, and signing up members for their Political Action Fund.

Some sites were so anti-labor and unfriendly that we had to set up tables outside the buildings.

As part of the organizing blitz, we ran a bumper sticker campaign. Members who signed up for membership received a bumper sticker that read “State Employees Need a Pay Raise”. The intent of this campaign was to have as many bumper stickers as possible on the backs of cars so they would become recognizable to state legislators and all Texans — and send a message that state workers want a union.

We also did a campaign where members would complete postcards requesting a pay increase that would be sent to their legislators. We were trying to show members how to get involved and in an organized manner, speak your mind.

In addition to our organizing endeavor, we also campaigned for Cora Bennett, a case manager for the Texas Juvenile Justice Department who has been an activist since 2005; she was running for a trustee position on the Employees Retirement System ERS Board. While the election ended on June 14, results will not be available until mid July. This position is very important to state employees because the ERS Board of Trustees makes decision on pension investments and which health care providers will be open to employees and their families.

CWA TSEU Local 6186 was lobbying for a \$6,000 across-the-board pay increase. The Texas House of Representatives offered a 2.8 percent increase for the first year but 0 percent for the second, and wanted to give pay increases only to Parole Officers and Direct Care employees who work directly with children and adults who are wards of the state. The Senate, however, offered 0 percent for each of the two years. The session vote took place at the end of May 2019, and we received notice that not one penny in raises was awarded as the state legislature pulled the money out of the proposed budget at the last minute. CWA is now pushing for an emergency raise since again, there have been no raises for the last 10 years.

During my time in Austin, we visited the Health & Human Service Administration State Hospital, Austin Supported Living Centers, Public Assistance Service Centers, a WIC Center, and the Texas Department of Family Protection Services.

In San Antonio, we visited the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Parole Division, San Antonio State Hospital, the Department of Adult Protection, Children Protection, Child Care Services Licensing, and Child Care Home Care Licensing Centers.

Some employees I spoke with were upset and did not understand why they had not received any raises in the past 10 years. I explained that since members make the union, the more members you have, the stronger the union becomes. The stronger the union becomes, the louder the voice becomes. The ultimate power of any union is in its strength and there is strength in numbers.

Many of my conversations revolved around the Texas state legislature. I spoke with workers about how they vote for legislators on election day, but then, without a union, do nothing to hold them accountable. If politicians figure out that their constituents and workers are not interested in what is happening around them, they can easily dismiss workers' needs, wants, and entitlements, such as raises. I often had to remind workers we spoke with that many of the privileges they now enjoy are thanks to unions, such as weekends off, 40-hour work weeks, and legal holidays.

While TSEU represents 300,000 employees, when they go to their State Capital for Lobby Day, they have fewer than 500 members present. We spoke with workers about the message this sends and the fallout from having such a small presence. Unions members pay a \$20 fee to attend, which includes registration, lunch, and bus, plus \$15 for a t-shirt when they attend Lobby Day. By comparison, at 1180 we pay a \$5 fee (reimbursable if you attend Lobby Day), which includes breakfast, lunch, a snack, the bus, and a t-shirt if you need one.

My experience in Texas showed me the great value and importance of having a union and that there is a lot CWA Local 1180 members take for granted. I'm blessed to be a part of my union and to know we have each other's backs. There's power in numbers. All-in-all it was an experience I will not forget. ■

