

Texan activists thirst for a national heat standard to protect outdoor workers

August 2 2023, by Colleen DeGuzman, KFF Health News



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Construction workers, airport baggage handlers, letter carriers, and other outdoor workers—many of whom traveled to Washington, D.C., from Texas—gathered at the steps of the Capitol last Tuesday. They were

joined by labor organizers and lawmakers for what was billed as "a vigil and thirst strike" to protest a law Texas Gov. Greg Abbott recently signed, which, as a downstream consequence, eliminates mandated water breaks for construction workers.

The Republican governor signed House Bill 2127—known as the Texas Regulatory Consistency Act but dubbed the "Death Star" by critics—the same month the state saw at least 13 [heat-related deaths](#) amid a scorching heat wave that's on track to break records.

The measure, heavily backed by business and building sectors, was designed to replace "the regulatory patchwork" of county and municipal rules across the state "with a single set of predictable, consistent regulations," according to a fact sheet circulated by its supporters. That means cities would no longer have the authority to enforce local ordinances related to agriculture, natural resources, finance, and labor; and local protections against extreme heat, such as water break requirements, would be rolled back.

The group of about three dozen people stood in the early-afternoon sun and held signs that read "Working Shouldn't Be a Death Sentence," "Water Breaks = Basic Right," and "People Over Profits," sweating and squinting. In the nation's capital, the heat index had already reached 91 degrees. But protesters were focused on the plight of employees working in their even-hotter home state, where the thermostat had been reaching triple digits.

Rep. Greg Casar, D-Texas, who organized last week's protest, joined more than 100 other U.S. legislators in signing a letter urging acting Labor Secretary Julie Su to continue the development and implementation of federal standards for rest and water breaks to prevent occupational heat illness and death.

Casar, along with others in the group, including members of San Juan, Texas-based La Unión del Pueblo Entero and civil rights activist Dolores Huerta, didn't eat or drink from 10:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., both to push for national action to reverse Abbott's law and as a sign of solidarity with Texas employees, especially those who work outside.

"A basic thing like the right to a water break, a basic thing like being able to go to work and know that working is not a death sentence, is the baseline of what our democracy should be able to do," Casar said, with sweat dripping from his forehead.

Huerta, 93, who worked alongside the legendary labor activist Cesar Chávez to create organizations like La Unión, reminded the crowd that in the 1960s farmworkers in California went on strike to protest poor and dangerous working conditions, including the lack of job security, bathroom access, and water during the day.

"This is such a cruel thing," Huerta said.

A steady stream of lawmakers came by to express support for the rally, including House Minority Leader Rep. Hakeem Jeffries of New York and well-known progressives like Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., and other members of "The Squad," a small group of liberal House Democrats.

And from California, another state in the midst of a heat wave, Democratic Reps. Katie Porter, who is running for the Senate, and Ro Khanna also made appearances. California is among those states that have rules in place to protect workers from extreme heat.

Rep. Joaquin Castro, D-Texas, was in attendance and challenged Abbott to spend a day without water. "One day in the governor's mansion, the air-conditioned governor's mansion, without water," he said. "Or better yet,

one day with the folks who are out in the fields, the folks who are out on top of roofs, the folks who are at construction sites."

At the front of the crowd were Jasmine and Daisy Granillo, younger sisters of Roendy Granillo, a construction worker of Fort Worth, Texas, who died in July 2015 from heat exhaustion. He was 25 and was installing hardwood flooring in a house without ventilation. The temperature was in the high 90s, he was wearing extra layers of protection because of the chemicals in the wood, and his request for a water break was denied. "My parents were told that his organs were cooked from the inside," Jasmine said.

On the day Roendy passed away, he told his sisters he would take them to the flea market when he came home from work. He didn't come home. They're now committed to making sure others don't suffer from heat exhaustion as he did. "I know that a simple water break, a simple water break, could have prevented his death," Jasmine told KFF Health News.

This is the second time Jasmine and her family have rallied for water breaks for outdoor workers. After her brother died, she and others pushed the Dallas City Council in 2015 to pass an ordinance establishing 10-minute rest breaks every four hours for [construction workers](#). In 2010, Austin passed its own such rule. Abbott's law, set to take effect Sept. 1, will dissolve those ordinances and prohibit local governments from passing similar ones.

The protesters gathered at the Capitol steps also said they worried that corporate interests would try to block the national rule from seeing the light of day. "They delay them as long as they can until they die a slow death, and we're here today to make sure that doesn't happen," Casar said.

Taylor Critendon, a [registered nurse](#) who specializes in [critical care](#) at Ascension Seton Medical Center in Austin, attended the event to monitor the congressman's vitals and keep an eye on the group's well-being. She said she has been treating more patients because of heat exhaustion than before. "It's definitely taking a toll on our community," she said.

She emphasized that not drinking enough water while outside in hot temperatures can cause someone's heart rate to rise and blood pressure to drop. Often, patients start to feel weak and faint and lose blood flow, she said, referencing the body's internal mechanism to cool itself down. People shouldn't wait to experience these symptoms before drinking water.

"When you're thirsty, then you're already farther down the line of dehydration," Critendon said, explaining why outside workers need regular [water](#) breaks. "You can't really wait until your body says, 'Oh, I'm thirsty,' because by that time it's already late."

Tania Chavez Camacho, president and executive director of La Unión del Pueblo Entero, also participated in the daylong hunger and thirst strike. The union has historically protected the rights of migrant farmworkers in South Texas but has more recently expanded to include others, such as construction workers.

"We've been here for just about an hour," she said. "We're sweating" and "it's really, really hot," she added. "Can you imagine what it is like for construction workers every single day?"

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Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Texan activists thirst for a national heat standard to protect outdoor workers (2023,

August 2) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-08-texan-activists-thirst-national-standard.html>

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