In 2020, when a global pandemic hit Texas, we sprang into action to meet the urgent needs of our community. As COVID-19 cases rose, it became clear that essential workers, immigrants, construction workers would be among the hardest hit.

Early on, the Texas Governor declared construction workers essential workers and forced open construction sites while at the same time tying the hands of local officials from enforcing mask mandates and other worker protections.

Workers Defense took action to save workers’ lives and **MAKE POWERFUL CHANGE** as we continued to fight to right systemic inequities faced by low-wage workers and immigrants:

1. Launched the Texas UndocuWorker Fund that moved $3.5 million to over 3600 families left out of state and federal assistance.

2. The **Better Builder® Program** created safer jobs for 8,430 construction workers in Central TX, including compliance with COVID19 Safety guidelines.
3

Advocated for, and won, safety standards to protect construction workers from COVID-19 in Dallas, Austin, and Houston.

4

Educated 64,000 workers about COVID-19 through digital outreach and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) distribution.

5

Advocated for local policies that centered immigrant workers in relief and assistance programs during the crisis, including:

- Over $90 million in local relief funds in Dallas, Houston, and Austin
- Eviction delays and rental assistance in Dallas and Austin
- The creation of a $7.9 million public health fund in Austin
My name is Parisa Fatehi-Weeks and I currently serve as the Board President of Workers Defense Project. I am a proud immigrant, born in Iran and raised in Austin, Texas, and like many of you reading this, I deeply identify with and am humbled by the courage of the members of Workers Defense.

As an immigrant and woman of color, I have seen first-hand the challenges immigrants and communities of color face in this state and in this country. For too long, many in our community have had to fight simply to get out of the shadow of the systems actively working against them. But time brings powerful change, and this year, so has our community. **Our fight to protect the rights of low-wage, essential workers has never been more urgent than in 2020.**

Throughout our history, Workers Defense has organized to pass groundbreaking policies that improve working conditions and create better, safer jobs for low-wage workers throughout Texas. And throughout 2020, Workers Defense has proven time and again that **in every sense of the word, this organization is a leader, not only of this moment but in this movement.**

That is our strength—with support from people like you and the immense contributions of our members—we have built **People Power** to fight for a more just Texas.

After this uncertain, fragile year that was 2020, and with huge opportunities on the horizon throughout 2021 and beyond, I am asking everyone reading this to support our members in any way you can.

We all know that this fight is too important for us not to be invested. Whatever support you can give, whether it is your time, talent or treasure, we thank you for helping to build our organization’s **People Power**. Supporters like you are the reason our organization’s motto still rings true:

**“In Unity, There is Strength!”**
As a Co-Founder of Workers Defense Project, it has been an honor to serve this organization for the past 15 years. Over the years, I have seen our members take on Herculean campaigns— and win. From winning rest breaks, living wages and safety trainings for construction workers, to passing watershed paid sick leave policies across the state, and creating over 35,000 good construction jobs through our innovative Better Builder® Program, I have seen how our members can change the face of Texas.

And I have never been more proud of the resilience, innovation, and compassion that our members and staff have demonstrated this past year as a global pandemic raged through our community, disproportionately impacting people of color, immigrants and construction workers.

In 2020, we challenged ourselves to remake our entire organizing model, transitioning from in person relational organizing to virtual organizing meetings and digital organizing tactics, and we have experimented with new technologies to stay connected while we have been apart.

We responded to the urgent needs of our community— launching our UndocuWorker Fund, a worker led, mutual aid fund that has provided over $3.5 million in financial support to families left out of other assistance programs.

We advocated for—and won—programs to meet the basic needs of families hardest hit by the pandemic and economic crisis, and we fought for the implementation of local safety measures to keep essential construction workers safe from the spread of COVID-19.

And we said goodbye to our Co-Director José Garza, as our community helped to carry him to a resounding victory as Travis County District Attorney. We will miss José, but we know we will continue to do groundbreaking work with him in his new role.

Our fight for good, safe jobs has never been more critical; the pandemic has laid bare how a failure to provide safety, job security, living wages, paid sick leave and benefits has left millions of workers at risk of illness and economic ruin. It’s never been more clear that when we organize, we win.

Thank you for standing by us in a year of trials and triumphs. We could not do this work without you.

EMILY TIMM
CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
OUR MISSION

WORKERS DEFENSE PROJECT IS A MEMBERSHIP-BASED, STATEWIDE ORGANIZATION WHOSE MISSION IS TO EMPOWER LOW-INCOME WORKERS THROUGHOUT TEXAS TO ACHIEVE FAIR EMPLOYMENT THROUGH EDUCATION, ORGANIZING, DIRECT SERVICES, AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS.

WE ORGANIZE.

Individuals come to Workers Defense Project having experienced injustices such as stolen wages, which can have devastating effects for low-income families. Our legal services, training and leadership programs strategically focus on construction workers and their families to become leaders in their communities.

WE ADVOCATE.

The system is stacked against low-wage workers in Texas. Our members disrupt this system, building collective power and organizing at scale across the state. Our members wage and win campaigns to pass local and statewide policies to raise workplace standards and make our communities safer for immigrant families.
71% of construction workers reported receiving no benefits in their employment.

78% lacked health insurance. Other workplace benefits, such as paid leave and pensions, were even less common.

Change is only possible when it is led by those impacted by injustice. That’s why low-wage workers are the individual and collective heart of how Workers Defense Project builds power to effect change.
With the support of our donors and the immense contributions of our members, we have built 

**PEOPLE POWER**

to fight for a more just Texas. This People Power is also reflected within our organization. In 2020, our Board of Directors took the important step of ensuring that 50% of the Board is made up of worker members. As a worker-led, membership-based organization, we know that worker voices are instrumental in setting our course, developing the goals of our organization, and maintaining true accountability to our community.
MYRNA MENDEZ | DALLAS, TX

Myrna has been an active member of Workers Defense Project since 2019. Originally from Honduras, Myrna is an experienced organizer and has recruited many new members, even during the pandemic. She graduated from WDP’s leadership course and in 2020 joined WDP’s Board of Directors. She is a vocal and inquisitive board member and she draws on her deep experiences of civic participation in other community groups. During the pandemic, she has done membership outreach, and worked to encourage census participation.

“I believe in our power as a community. That’s why I wanted to join WDP and serve on the board of directors. People need to get involved to make a difference in their community.”
ESSENTIAL PROTECTIONS FOR ESSENTIAL WORKERS

Our construction worker members were declared essential workers and were faced with the impossible choice to continue to go work and risk exposing themselves and their families to a deadly disease or lose the income their families depended on for rent, food, and medical services. Other members, especially those in the care, restaurant and hospitality sectors, faced devastating layoffs and reductions in work hours.

Even in the most healthy times, construction work in Texas doesn't provide paid sick leave, health insurance, or even worksite safety protections. Low pay leaves workers living paycheck to paycheck without savings.

And even though immigrant workers are the backbone of the Texas economy, they were left out of the CARES Act and state unemployment insurance programs, making it even harder for them to stay home when sick or to avoid high infection rates at work.

At the peak of the Pandemic, construction workers were 5 times more likely to be hospitalized by COVID-19 workers of any other industry.
We knew we had to pivot our work to meet that dire need.

1. Launched the Texas UndocuWorker Fund to provide assistance to workers left out of state and federal assistance programs, which over the course of a year provided $3.5 million in assistance.

2. Created and passed construction worksafe standards in Travis county, Dallas county, and Harris County to protect workers from the spread of COVID-19.

3. Launched a High Risk Worker Program in Austin to connect over 2,800 high risk workers to legal assistance, direct financial assistance, and education about rights and safety.

4. Advocated for our COVID19 Platform that won protections for working families including:
   - Over $90 million of Emergency funds in Houston and Austin to support those left out of the CARES Act
   - 60-day delayed evictions policies in Dallas and Austin
   - Rental assistance policies in Dallas and Austin
   - $7.9 million public health fund in Austin

5. Recovered $130,000 in unpaid wages for essential workers in 2020, including helping workers receive paid sick leave under the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act.

6. Launched a campaign in Harris County to create an Essential Workers Board to provide input and help enforce essential worker protections

7. Provided education about COVID-19 safety for nearly 64,000 workers through Facebook Live videos

8. Provided Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to thousands of workers in the community
Candido Batiz is a construction worker, a father, and a Houston member leader, originally from Honduras. As an essential construction worker, he continued to work during the pandemic in order to support his wife and his two small children. Candido contracted COVID-19 in early June, while working on a construction worksite. He was hospitalized, and when his wife became sick they both had to quarantine away from their children.

“Being separated from my family was the scariest part. And after I got home from the hospital I was hit with a bill of thousands of dollars. But I didn’t give up. With WDP, I fought back and demanded the paid sick leave I was entitled to. After I got sick, I wanted to make sure my friends and neighbors knew their rights and their power too.”
More than half of Texas construction workers reported earning poverty-level wages.

Half of the workers also reported having insufficient financial resources to support their families.

Additionally, workers earning low wages were more likely to lack health insurance or workers’ compensation coverage.
While Workers Defense Project has always approached our campaigns through an intersectional racial justice lens, after the brutal murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police and in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, we reaffirmed our commitment to fighting anti-Black violence and white supremacy. As an immigrant and workers' rights organization that fights for economic and racial justice, our struggle is inextricably tied to the fight for Black Liberation. Members and staff joined Black Lives Matter protests, and we stand in solidarity with Black communities and organizations to dismantle the racist social and economic institutions that aim to dehumanize us.

Throughout 2020, we reflected on our role in this fight, we continue to be inspired by the bravery and resilience of communities rising up in this powerful movement led by the righteous anger of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people.
OUR COMMITMENTS TO CARRY OUR WORK ON RACIAL JUSTICE FORWARD:

We will act in solidarity with Black-led organizations.
We will demand radical solutions to dismantle white supremacy.
We will recognize the centuries-long struggle that led to this moment.
We will confront white supremacy within our organization and community.

Read our full statement: https://workersdefense.org/black-lives-matter

In 2020, we joined Black-led organizations to demand justice for our communities.

• Ahead of the 2020 election, we worked with our allies to hold a digital public forum with candidates for Sheriff offices across Texas and demanded accountability for the treatment of immigrants and people of color.

• We joined Black-led community allies to demand that Dallas and Austin reduce spending on Policing and reinvest in measures to keep our communities safe. In Austin, our advocacy helped secure $142 million in cuts and reallocation of resources away from the Austin Police Department.

• Our organizing team facilitated a series of conversations with our members about the Black Lives Matter movement and police violence, and built support for demands to reimagine public safety.

• Through our Dignity for Dallas campaign, we worked with our allies in the North Texas Immigration Coalition to advocate for the use of "cite and release" by the Dallas Police Department to reduce the number of arrests for low-level crimes that lead to deportations.
In 2020, Workers Defense Project fought on multiple fronts to build power in the construction industry. From our innovative Better Builder® program, which raises standards on both public and private construction sites, to a public campaign to recover unpaid wages for construction workers building the University of Houston, WDP leveraged worker power to make sure the men and women who build Texas have a voice in the conditions they face on the job.

**Better Builder®:** Throughout 2020, the Better Builder® program played a critical role in ensuring that local COVID19 worksafe standards were met on monitored sites. In October 2020, the BB & Policy team won a critical victory in strengthening community benefits and environmental protections required on tax abatements in Travis County. Over 8,430 workers on Better Builder® sites benefited from safer conditions, higher pay, and training opportunities in 2020.

**University of Houston:** At the University of Houston, WDP organized alongside dozens of construction workers to demand payment of more than $100,000 in claims for unpaid wages from work on the University of Houston’s newly constructed $120 million dormitory. Since 2019, WDP has organized dozens of workers to fight back and demand fair pay. WDP has built the support of hundreds of students and faculty who are also demanding justice for the workers. After winning a settlement for the workers, WDP has continued conversations with the University to adopt workforce standards and independent third-party monitoring on more than $300 million in planned construction over the next three years. Institutions of higher education must be held responsible for upholding safe and fair working conditions on their sites.

**Always Essential Worker Campaign:** In 2020 we joined forces with key allies in Harris County to launch the Always Essential Campaign. The campaign has made headway in establishing an Essential Worker Board within the County government where essential workers from multiple sectors (construction, retail, custodial, care economy) have a voice in establishing and enforcing safety guidelines.
1 IN EVERY 5 construction workers in Texas is denied pay by their employer.

Additionally,

1 OUT OF 3 workers who try to recover wages are retaliated against by their employer.
A construction worker in Texas dies from a workplace injury EVERY 3 DAYS making it the country’s deadliest state for construction workers.
Juan Pedro is a construction worker and a worker leader in Austin. Through his involvement with Workers Defense Project, he has become an enthusiastic advocate for the safety of construction workers. He serves on the city of Austin’s Construction Advisory Committee where he reviews labor violations on city construction sites and makes recommendations on city construction policy. In 2020, he was trained as a COVID19 Construction Health Promoter and has educated thousands of other workers both on the worksite and online. He also provided powerful testimony to Travis County Commissioners Court to demand that when corporations receive tax breaks they must treat construction workers with dignity and respect.

“My demand is that employers ensure a safe worksite. That they provide us with masks, safety glasses, gloves, and enforce social distancing, and limit tool sharing. It's their responsibility to keep construction workers safe.”
OUR LEADERSHIP

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Claudia Golinelli, Board Vice President, Electrician
Isaac Faz, Secretary, Dallas County Community College
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Tory Gavito, President & Co-Founder, Way To Win
THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS

Join us in building a better future for those who build Texas!

**invest in our fight**

Our fight is fueled by people just like you. You can stand with us by donating to Workers Defense Project. Donations directly support our efforts to elevate the voices and issues of working people, and are tax-deductible.

To give by mail, please make a check payable to Workers Defense Project and mail to:

WORKERS DEFENSE PROJECT
ATTN: DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT
5604 MANOR ROAD
AUSTIN, TX 78723

**get involved**

From internships to volunteering, there are many ways to get involved. Learn more by visiting workersdefense.org and sign up for our monthly e-newsletter!

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www.workersdefense.org  
info@workersdefense.org
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