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Inside C2

Southern DAILY

Make Today Different

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U.S. civil rights groups sue Georgia over sweeping new voting restrictions

(Reuters) - A coalition of civil rights groups has filed a federal lawsuit challenging Georgia's sweeping new voting restrictions, arguing that the Republican-backed law is intended to make it harder for people – particularly Black voters – to cast ballots.

Among other limits, the law imposed stricter identification requirements, limited drop boxes, gave lawmakers the power to take over local elections and shortened the early voting period for all runoff elections. It also makes it a misdemeanor for people to offer food and water to voters waiting in line.

The legislation has alarmed Democrats, who just months ago celebrated historic wins in the presidential election and two Senate campaigns in Georgia that helped deliver the White House and U.S. Senate control to their party in Washington.

The complaint was filed in Atlanta federal court just hours after the legislation became law on Thursday by the New Georgia Project, Black Voters Matter Fund and Rise, Inc. Marc Elias, a Democratic lawyer who spearheaded the party's election legal efforts last year, is representing the groups

"These provisions lack any justification for their burdensome and discriminatory effects on voting," the lawsuit said.

"Instead, they represent a hodgepodge of unnecessary restrictions that target almost every aspect of the voting process but serve no legitimate purpose or compelling state interest other than to make absentee, early, and election-day voting more difficult — especially for minority voters."

Other Republican-controlled state legislatures are pursuing voting restrictions in key battleground states, including Florida and Arizona, after former President Donald Trump repeatedly blamed his loss to President Joe Biden on massive voter fraud without evidence.

RELATED COVERAGE

Biden slams Georgia voting law as 'a blatant attack' on U.S. constitution
Republicans have defended the



legislation as necessary to make "our elections fair and secure," as Georgia Governor Brian Kemp put it when signing the bill into law on Thursday.

Democrats and voting rights advocates decried the restrictions, which passed the legislature solely with Republican support, as a revival of racially discriminatory voting laws that will harm voters in minority communities, which are already plagued by long lines and inadequate election infrastructure.

Stacey Abrams, the prominent voting rights advocate and former Georgia gubernatorial candidate, called the law "Jim Crow in a suit" on Twitter, referring to the era of racist laws that dominated the U.S. South for decades. At a news conference in Washington on Thursday, Biden called the push for new voting limits across the country "un-American."

As he contested his national loss to Biden, Trump focused much of his energy in Georgia. At one point, he personally called the state's Republican secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger, and urged him to "find" votes Trump claimed had gone missing.

That phone call is part of a criminal investigation by state prosecutors into whether Trump broke election laws by pressuring officials to alter the results.

Biden was the first Democratic presidential candidate to win



Georgia since 1992.

U.S. blocks Venezuela bid to seek WTO review of sanctions

GENEVA (Reuters) - The United States on Friday blocked Venezuela from proceeding with its dispute over Washington's sanctions at the World Trade Organization, seizing on the issue to underscore its rejection of Nicolas Maduro as the country's legitimate president.

Venezuela had planned to request the formation of a WTO panel to rule on whether sanctions the United States imposed in 2018 and 2019 breached global trading rules.

The United States asked for the request to be removed, which Venezuela refused to do, prompting the trade body to suspend a meeting about this and other trade matters at the start, a Geneva-based trade official said.

U.S. Trade Representative spokesman Adam Hodge said the panel request was illegitimate because the Maduro administration did not speak on behalf of the Venezuelan people.

"The United States will reject any effort by Maduro to misuse the WTO to attack U.S. sanctions aimed at restoring human rights and democracy to Venezuela," he said in a statement.

The U.S. action was intended to make clear that President Joe Biden and his administration would continue its hard-line stance against Maduro and seek to pressure him to hold free and fair elections, a senior U.S. official said.

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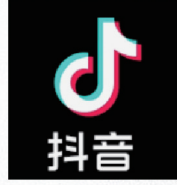
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CORONAVIRUS DIARY

04/19/2021



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Congress Needs To Act ASAP!



The U.S. has suffered at least 45 mass shootings since March 16, after the recent shooting at the Indianapolis Fed Ex facility that left eight people dead. President Biden called the recent spate of mass shootings “a national embarrassment” and urged the Congress to take action.

Dr. Anthony Fauci said in a TV interview that he was thinking as a public health person when he saw so many people getting killed in all of last month.

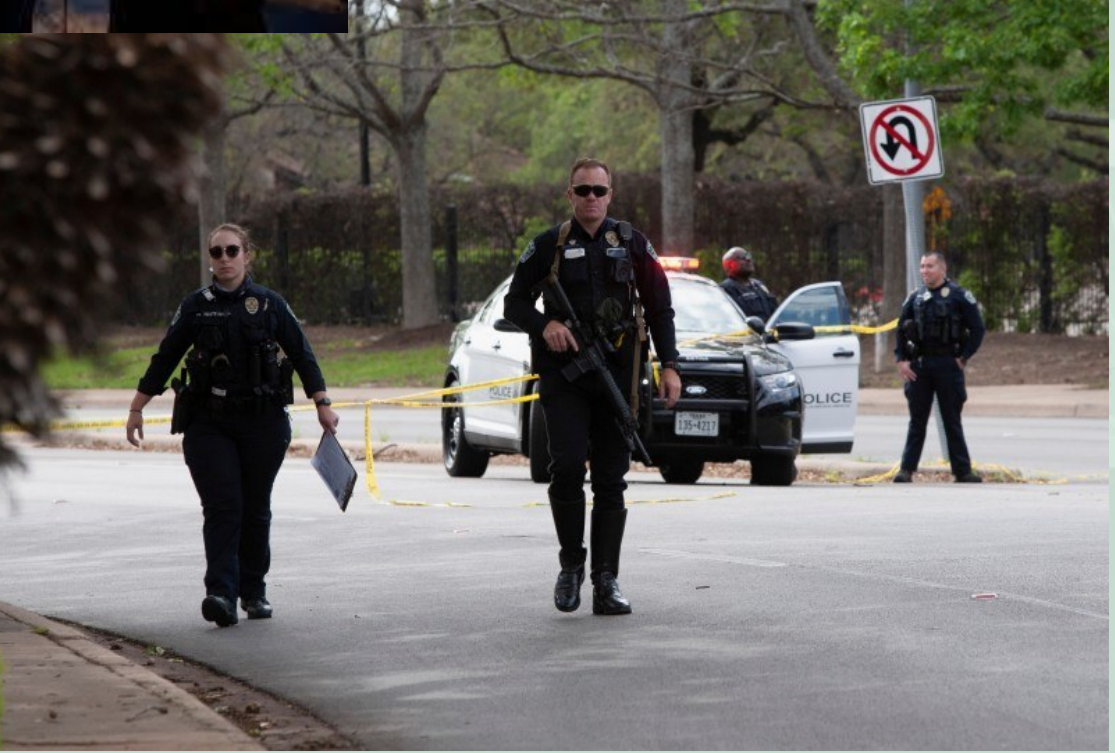
“It’s just been horrifying what’s happened,” Fauci

said. “How can we say that this is not a public health issue?”

In March of this year the Democrats in the House passed two gun reform bills that would expand background checks, including one that would required checks on all sales and transfers including between private parties at gun shows

and over the internet. But this bill needs 60 votes in Senate to pass.

We so much regret and are very angry that this mass killing is happening all over the nation each and every day! How many lives we have lost with no reason! We urge the lawmakers in Washington to act as soon as possible.



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Editor's Choice



Mwajuma Tabyawa applies cream on her son Mmemba Mkangya after his shower, on his first day back to school after coronavirus restrictions were adjusted, in Louisville, Kentucky, March 17, 2021. REUTERS/Amira Karaoud



People carry the coffin with the body of Rivaldo Jimenez Ramirez during his funeral in Comitancillo, Guatemala, March 14, 2021. He was among 16 Guatemalan nationals massacred in one of Mexico's northern border states in January, a case that caused renewed consternation about the dangers faced by migrants bound for the United States. The bodies, some badly charred and with gunshot wounds, were found along a migrant smuggling route in a remote area of Tamaulipas state. REUTERS/Luis Echeverria



People watch a burning effigy of Lady Maslenitsa during celebrations of Maslenitsa, also known as Pancake Week, which is a pagan holiday marking the end of winter, in the town of Yuryev-Polsky in Vladimir region, Russia March 13, 2021. REUTERS/Evgenia Novozhenina



Ariana Lamcellari, 4, holds a sign at a protest against violence, following the charge of a British police officer in the London kidnapping and murder of Sarah Everard, in Dublin, Ireland March 16, 2021. REUTERS/Clodagh Kilcoyne



Asylum-seeking families and unaccompanied minors from Central America walk towards the border wall after crossing the Rio Grande into the United States from Mexico on rafts, in Penitas, Texas, March 17, 2021. REUTERS/Adrees Latif



A migrant child from Central America plays with his own shadow inside the office of the Center for Integral Attention to Migrants (CAIM) after being deported with his mother from the United States, in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico March 15, 2021. REUTERS/Jose Luis Gonzalez

Warren Buffett Group Lobbying Texas Lawmakers For \$8 Billion To Build Emergency Power Plants



Billionaire Warren Buffett head of Berkshire Hathaway Energy

Key Points

If approved, the deal would signal a move away from decades of a competitive electricity market in Texas in which all power generators in Texas are paid for the energy they produce and sell, rather than the power they could potentially generate.

In return, lawmakers would agree to create a revenue stream for Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway through an additional charge on Texans' power bills.

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

As the Texas Legislature debated how to respond to last month's winter storm-driven power crisis, executives at billionaire Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway Energy were pitching lawmakers an idea: The group would spend over \$8 billion to build 10 new natural gas power plants in the state. Lawmakers would agree to create a revenue stream to provide Berkshire a return on its investment through an additional charge on Texans' power bills. Representatives for Berkshire Hathaway Energy have been in Austin meeting with lawmakers and state leaders for the past week and a half, according to a person working closely on the issue. The proposed company, which would likely be known as the Texas Emergency Power Reserve, would build and maintain plants that sit idle during normal times, according to a slide deck obtained by The Texas Tribune. Whenever demand for power in the state threatened to surpass supply, these new plants would kick in to make up the difference, if ordered to do so by the state's grid operator. "When you flip that switch and say, look, demand has exceeded supply, it has to come on in 10 minutes," Chris

Brown, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway Energy, said in an interview Thursday with the Tribune. "That's the Texas Emergency Power Reserve Promise — that's the promise that we're making to the citizens of Texas."



In the presentation, the representatives estimated the cost of that new charge to consumers as \$1.42 per month for residential customers, \$9.61 for commercial customers and \$58.94 for industrial customers. The pitch to state leaders also included a poll conducted by Republican pollster Mike Baseslice suggesting that Texans would be broadly supportive of paying a little more on their power bills to increase reliability. The poll was conducted from March 17-21 among 800 likely voters

in Texas, according to topline of the poll obtained by the Tribune.

A senior adviser for Patrick confirmed the lieutenant governor met with Berkshire Hathaway executives earlier this month. And a spokesperson for Phelan said the speaker met with the executives recently. A spokesperson for Gov. Greg Abbott did not immediately respond to a request for comment. If approved, the deal would signal a move away from decades of a competitive electricity market in Texas in which all power generators in Texas are paid for the energy they produce and sell, rather than the power they could potentially generate. Berkshire Hathaway Energy executives say their plan would not create a "capacity" market, but instead, serve as highly regulated back-up electricity generation. The company says that building extra power generation in Texas would help ease fears of a repeat of the February power outages during which dozens of people died. "We're not in favor at all of getting rid of [the deregulated market]," Brown said. "We think competition is to Texas' benefit. We're not dipping into the market at all."



Power grids must keep energy demand and supply in balance at every moment or risk uncontrolled blackouts. The February outages were ordered by the grid operator, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, in a move to prevent a bigger catastrophe that could have left most of the state without power for weeks.

Under Berkshire Hathaway's plan, ERCOT would control when the new power plants are activated to avoid the threat of such widespread power outages, and customers would pay a fixed fee only to cover the project's costs, while the price for energy supplied to the market would go to the state, not the company. It's a similar model to how transmission and distribution utility companies are regulated. Brown said that while the company is not against the state's procurement process, it believes it's "uniquely suited" to carry out the idea because of its \$8.3 billion investment and a commitment to have those 10 plants operational by November 2023. "Certainly there's other entities out there that could potentially do it," he said, "that list is pretty short." Texas deregulated its electricity market decades ago, theorizing that the price of electricity in the market — based on demand — would attract a sufficient amount of power supply. When demand for power is high, the price for power increases, and companies that can supply electricity to the grid make more money. The more

cheaply a power plant can generate electricity, the higher the profit margin when they sell it in the wholesale market. Conversely, a plant that has been expensively weatherized to be able to operate in the extreme cold, or a plant that only operates on the few hottest days of the year, represents a big upfront investment for what may be little return in Texas.



Power companies did not prepare plants to withstand severe winter weather, in part because companies build plants as cheaply as possible to maximize their profit margins. When the plants tripped offline during the winter storm, unprepared for the extreme cold, there wasn't enough power generation available to the grid. Power prices spiked, and the Public Utility Commission of Texas ordered ERCOT to set prices at the artificial cap — \$9,000 per megawatt-hour — to signal to power companies that any and all power was desperately needed. But energy experts have expressed doubt that merely having more power plants would have prevented the crisis. Electric generation tripped offline due to freezing temperatures and a shortage of natural gas, which fuels many plants in the state. "We didn't have a shortage of power plants, we had a shortage of power plants that could work in the cold, and the gas to run them," said Dan Cohan, an associate professor of civil and environmental engineering at Rice University. "Texas has an enormous amount of natural gas plants already. It's not at all clear that there's a need to have more power plants built."

Berkshire Hathaway's presentation argues that adding power generation capacity would be more cost effective for the state than upgrading existing plants to withstand extreme weather. Brown, the CEO, said that the natural gas plants would be winterized and maintain seven days of natural gas storage on site to ensure it could operate during an emergency. Last Thursday, the Texas Senate Jurisprudence Committee advanced Senate Bill 3, a wide-ranging winter storm bill that also mandates winterization for power plants and the natural gas supply chain.



J.P. Urban, senior vice president and acting CEO of the Association of Electric Companies of Texas, a trade associa-

tion of electric companies in the state, warned lawmakers earlier this week against subsidizing new power plants in their response to last month's outages.

"We believe the program should only focus on bolstering resiliency and existing facilities to avoid disruption in the competitive market," Urban said during a committee meeting Tuesday.

But lawmakers responded that they want more power generation on Texas' grid, not just for future storms, but generally for the growing state population.

"We're going to be a little bit more open to the types of investments that need to be made," said Rep. Richard Peña Raymond, D-Laredo, responding to Urban. "We're going to need more power in Texas, period. Freeze or no freeze." The committee left the legislation pending on Tuesday, but witnesses and lawmakers indicated they would support the Huberty bill.

Even with the support of the Legislature's top leaders, the Berkshire Hathaway deal will need to win the approval of the rank-and-file members — a lesson Buffett learned in a past session. In 2017, after the billionaire met with Abbott and Patrick at the Capitol, the Senate used emergency powers to quickly craft legislation that became known as the "Buffett Bill," a special interest carve-out allowing Buffett to be exempt from a state law that was barring people from owning both a vehicle manufacturing company and auto dealerships.



The bill was effectively killed after Tea Party activists blasted it — and the attempt to fast-track it — as special treatment for a rich and powerful business owner. Other lawmakers and officials have expressed doubts about letting Buffett and his companies play too big of a role in Texas. Speaking at Texas Energy Day at the Capitol Wednesday morning, Texas Railroad Commissioner Wayne Christian, one of the state's oil and gas regulators, criticized President Joe Biden over his energy policies and in doing so, swiped at "Warren Buffett's company." Christian said canceling oil and natural gas pipelines would put more trains on railroad tracks, and "Warren Buffett's company makes a lot of money from it." (Courtesy <https://www.texastribune.org/>)

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BUSINESS

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For Health Care Workers, The Pandemic Is Fueling Renewed Interest In Unions



Nurses at Albany Medical Center picketed on Dec.1, asking for more personal protective equipment. They say they're having to reuse N95 masks up to 20 times. (Photo/Hans Pennink)

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

In September, after six months of exhausting work battling the pandemic, nurses at Mission Hospital in Asheville, N.C., voted to unionize. The vote passed with 70%, a high margin of victory in a historically anti-union state, according to academic experts who study labor movements. The nurses had originally filed paperwork to hold this vote in March but were forced to delay it when the pandemic began heating up. And the issues that had driven them toward unionizing were only heightened by the crisis. It raised new, urgent problems too, including struggles to get enough PPE, and inconsistent testing and notification of exposures to COVID-positive patients. They're far from alone in their complaints. For months now, front-line health workers across the country have faced a perpetual lack of personal protective equipment, or PPE, and inconsistent safety measures. Studies show they're more likely to be infected by the coronavirus than the general population, and hundreds have died, according to reporting by KHN and The Guardian. Many workers say employers and government systems that are meant to protect them have failed. Research shows that health facilities with unions have better patient

outcomes and are more likely to have inspections that can find and correct workplace hazards. One study found New York nursing homes with unionized workers had lower COVID-19 mortality rates, as well as better access to PPE and stronger infection control measures, than nonunion facilities.



Members of the Union of American Physicians and Dentists went on a two-day strike in November asking for more N95 masks. MultiCare found another vendor for N95s and said it would provide them by mid-December.

"The urgency and desperation we've heard from workers is at a pitch I haven't experienced before in 20 years of this

work," said Cass Gualvez, organizing director for Service Employees International Union-United Healthcare Workers West in California. "We've talked to workers who said, 'I was dead set against a union five years ago, but COVID has changed that.'" Labor experts say it's too soon to know if the outrage over working conditions will translate into an increase in union membership, but early indications suggest a small uptick. Of the approximately 1,500 petitions for union representation posted on the National Labor Relations Board website in 2020, 16% appear related to the health care field, up from 14% the previous year. In Colorado, SEIU Local 105 health care organizing director Stephanie Felix-Sowy said her team is fielding dozens of calls a month from nonunion workers interested in joining. Not only are nurses and respiratory therapists reaching out, but dietary workers and cleaning staff are as well, including several from rural parts of the state where union representation has traditionally been low. "The pandemic didn't create most of the root problems they're concerned about," she said. "But it amplified them and the need to address them."



In response to union actions, many hospitals across the country have said worker safety is already their top priority, and unions are taking advantage of a difficult situation to divide staff and management, rather than working together.

Inside Mission Hospital

The nurses at Mission Hospital say administrators have minimized and disregarded their concerns, often leaving them out of important planning and decision-making in the hospital's COVID-19 response. Early in the pandemic, staffers struggled to find masks and other protective equipment, said nurses interviewed for this story. The hospital discouraged them from

wearing masks one day and required masks 10 days later. The staff wasn't consistently tested for COVID-19 and often not even notified when exposed to COVID-positive patients. According to the nurses and a review of safety complaints made to federal regulators, the concerns persisted for months. And some nurses said the situation fueled doubts about whether hospital executives were prioritizing staff and patients, or the bottom line. In a statement, Mission Health said it has adequate staffing and is aggressively recruiting nurses. "We have the beds, staffing, PPE supplies and equipment we need at this time and we are well-equipped to handle any potential surge," spokesperson Nancy Lindell wrote. The hospital has required universal masking since March and requires staff members who test positive to stay home, she added.



Although the nurses didn't vote to unionize until September, Waters said, they began acting collectively from the early days of the pandemic. They drafted a petition and sent a letter to administrators together. When the hospital agreed to provide advanced training on how to use PPE to protect against COVID transmission, it was a small but significant victory, Waters said. "Seeing that change brought a fair number of nurses who had still been undecided about the union to feel like, 'Yeah, if we work together, we can make change,'" she said.

Old concerns heightened

Even as union membership in most industries has declined in recent years, health workers unions have remained relatively stable: Around 7% of health care and social services workers are in unions Experts say it's partly because of the focus on patient care issues, like safe staffing ratios, which resonate widely and have only

grown during the pandemic. At St. Mary Medical Center outside Philadelphia, short staffing led nurses to strike in November. Donna Halpern, a nurse on the cardiovascular and critical care unit, said staffing had been a point of negotiation with the hospital since the nurses joined the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals in 2019.



In Colorado, where state inspection reports show understaffing led to a patient death at a suburban Denver hospital, SEIU Local 105 has launched a media campaign about unsafe practices by the hospital's parent company, HealthOne. The union doesn't represent HealthOne employees, but union leaders said they felt compelled to act after repeatedly hearing concerns. In a statement, HealthOne said staffing levels are appropriate across its hospitals and it is continuing to recruit and hire staff members. COVID-19 is also raising entirely new issues for workers to organize around. At the forefront is the lack of PPE, which was noted in one-third of the health worker deaths catalogued by KHN and The Guardian. Nurses at Albany Medical Center in New York picketed on Dec. 1 with signs demanding PPE and spoke about having to reuse N95 masks up to 20 times.

"An experience like treating patients in this pandemic will change a health care worker forever," Givan said, "and will have an impact on their willingness to speak out, to go on strike and to unionize if needed." (Courtesy <https://www.npr.org/>)

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