

ON THE LABOR FRONT: UNCOVERING DALLAS'S
UNION LEGISLATORS
1890-1920

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ABSTRACT

Dallas, Texas, has long held a reputation as a stronghold of conservative Democratic rule. Such rhetoric reflects the nature of Texas politics throughout the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, as Texas was essentially a state of one-party rule. Meanwhile, minimal historical analysis has been given to the scope and influence of third-party movements such as the Farmer's Alliance, Populists, and various labor organizations. This trend is even more evident in Dallas County, where a conservative, corporate elite supposedly had its way in civic affairs. Nonetheless, a string of pro-labor, union members who served in the Texas state legislature as representatives from Dallas County seem to contradict this ongoing narrative. Specifically, Patrick Henry Golden, John Francis Reiger, James William Parks, and James A. Florer, between 1893 and 1917 pursued progressive platforms at the state level and represented the strength of farmers and laborers in Dallas County. This research will seek to highlight the careers of labor legislators to analyze the influence and impact of labor voices between 1890 and 1920 in Dallas and to argue that a little-understood system of coalition building was common among conservative business leaders and workingmen in the city. By fully understanding the legislators' careers and uncovering the political landscape in Dallas, this research will determine the overall effectiveness of the labor presence in the political forum.

Texas Politics in the Gilded Age

The Texas political landscape in the aftermath of the era of Reconstruction was essentially a system of one-party-rule, dominated by the Democrats. The experience of Reconstruction in the early 1870s had embittered white Texans toward Republicans, who, ruling with the backing of the African American vote, sought to guarantee black rights. Meanwhile Democrats, whose strength in the South rested on a base of limited government and white supremacy, had historically been the dominant party. In the antebellum era its leaders heavily argued for Texas' annexation and protections against the anti-slavery movement, and white Democrats had overwhelmingly supported secession and the Confederacy. Defeated and occupied in the aftermath of the war, Texans waged a successful struggle to "redeem" the state from the supposed "evils" of Republican rule, and by 1875 the state was again in the hands of white Democrats, who remained in control until the 1970s. This is not to say that Democrats were always united. Author Lewis Gould argues that the Texas Democratic Party in the latter half of the nineteenth century was actually "a patchwork of individual parties, each gaining its character from the particular and peculiar political environment of its state."¹ Thus, even under the banner of a single political party, the array of platforms and the fervor of ideological disputes was formidable and unpredictable.

The political milieu in Texas reflected the state's social and economic complexity. While cotton and cattle continued to constitute the state's economic mainstays, Texas was also rapidly modernizing and urbanizing. State and local leaders often found themselves at the juncture of the agrarian interest and the ever-expanding urban-industrial-complex. The conservative Democratic majority traditionally focused on economic growth and minimal regulation, but as Texas

¹ Lewis L. Gould, *Progressives and Prohibitionists* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), 4.

continued to modernize, bolstered by the growth of railroads and massive immigration from the older Southern states, cracks began to appear in the façade of Democratic Party unity. Entirely new coalitions and factions emerged, as farmers, labors, socialists, and reform-minded moderates challenged conservative Democrats' stronghold over state affairs in waves of varied success from the 1870s until the First World War.

The mounting progressive vanguard indelibly affected the advancement of Texas politics beginning as early as 1876, when farmers began to collectivize. The Grange, and to a lesser extent the Greenback party, primarily supported educational initiatives and currency policies designed to empower agriculturalists against the growing engine of American industrialization. The Texas Grange, specifically, rallied the interests of farmers and, despite a minimal political presence, managed to make extraordinary gains and influence the writing of the new Texas state constitution of 1876. Grange members put forward articles "setting maximum interest rates, regulating railways by a commission, and requiring a six-month school term."² While the Grange never became a mainstay in the state's political apparatus, the sheer number of Texas farmers allowed collaborative efforts to impact legislation across the state, which encouraged increasing activism from agriculturalists.

The founding of the Farmer's Alliance in 1877 marked the emergence of another progressive movement. Originally, the Alliance fought primarily to build cooperatives stores for farmers and to improve trade agreements with merchants. Eventually, economic concerns propelled the Alliance to the political forum during the 1880s amid calls for railway regulation, reform of the nation's monetary system, and more wide-ranging labor reforms, including more wage guarantees and protections for union-related activities. With membership peaking at over three

² Ralph A. Smith, "Grange," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, August 1, 1995, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/grange>.

million, the Alliance undoubtedly played a hand in the election of reform-minded gubernational candidate James S. Hogg, who went on to fulfill Alliance aspirations and establish the Texas Railroad Commission.³ A major activist wing of the Alliance spurred the rise of the Texas Populists, a third-party movement that challenged conservative Democratic preeminence more strongly than any other organized group in Texas. The group, burgeoning in size, continued to push forward proposals on progressive platforms and saw impressive turnouts in three successive gubernatorial elections. Furthermore, an remarkable grassroots system of member communication helped usher the People's Party—Populism's political organization in Texas—to the forefront of Texas politics from 1892 to 1896. Despite its popularity with lower- and middle-class voters, Populism struggled to establish an enduring presence in the political system due to financial concerns, pressures from mainstream Democrats, and a failure to build a sufficiently cohesive coalition between black and white voters. Thus, the homogeneity of one-party dominance in Texas became threatened only briefly, as "Democrats ruthlessly employed fraud, corruption, and violence" to ultimately obliterate the local foundations of Populist influence, leaving strictly business Democrats to rule at the state without a formidable competitor by 1900.⁴

After the collapse of the People's Party, statewide progressive voices remained, although no longer in such effective organization. The Democratic Party itself had unwavering control at all levels of the state, with pro-business conservatism habitually prevailing as the principal platform amidst a slew of fractioned interests lobbying for control and cooperation. In the early twentieth century, the leading advocates rallying against business's unfettered operation and expansion were circles of farmers and tradesmen within Texas's rapidly growing urban spaces. City and

³ Donna A. Barnes, "Farmer's Alliance," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, January 1, 1995, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/farmers-alliance>.

⁴ Gould, 6.

county delegations of trade unionists swelled dramatically due to increased immigration and growing connectivity with national affiliations. Pro-labor newspapers helped to organize and endorse the labor cause, and its editors were often closely intertwined with local chapters of the Texas State Federation of Labor, which was founded in 1900 after almost a decade of attempts to collectivize municipal unions and affiliate with the national American Federation of Labor. The Federation aspired to see the implementation of compulsory education, initiative and referendum, the eight-hour workday, and the reduction of convict labor use.⁵ The state labor body reflected the mutual influence of local labor organizations in communities across Texas and affirmed the underlying reality that corporate interests did not wholly control civic affairs during the first decades of the twentieth century.

The Political Landscape in Dallas County

Regarding locally focused labor activism, Dallas presents an intriguing case study of political conflicts between capital and labor that lay just beneath the surface of apparent Democratic Party unity. Dallas got a late start in the nineteenth century in its quest to become one of the largest, most economically powerful Texas towns. Dallas is said to have supplanted neighboring towns as the regional hub through the “hard work and salesmanship” of its earliest inhabitants, and its reputation of industrial grit and bustling enterprise carries through to the modern era.⁶ With no slander to local lore, Dallas was afforded growth beyond the likes of Fort Worth and Waco primarily due to its geographic advantages and diversified immigrant influx. The site of a river crossing with nearby blackland prairies fixated both agricultural production and transportation in

⁵ James C. Maroney, “Texas State Federation of Labor,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, December 15, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/texas-state-federation-of-labor>.

⁶ Patricia Evridge Hill, *Dallas: The Making of a Modern City*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), xvi.

Dallas. Meanwhile, skilled European immigrants and droves of southern Confederate veterans migrated to Dallas, which had avoided damages during the Civil War.⁷ Dallas, thus, had become primed as a commercial center of the southwest United States and opportunity for growth abounded in an era of minimal oversight of economic and urban development.

In the 1870s, Dallas saw its population increase from 3,000 residents to 10,358. The exponential growth did not stop, however, as Dallas became home to 42,638 residents by the turn of the century. By 1920, its population had ballooned to 158,976.⁸ In the midst of incredible growth, Dallas thrived as an agglomeration of trades, firms, and industries. The introduction of the railroad through the city in 1872 was vitally important to the city's development and contributed to safeguarding the budding settlement from the resulting financial hardships over the Panic of 1873. Dallas historian Patricia Evridge Hill cites the U.S. Census Bureau's *Report of Social Statistics on Cities* when referencing Dallas' most profitable industries:

“The most important Dallas County industries (in order of dollar value of goods produced) were grain milling, lumber planing, publishing, saddlery and harness making, cigars and cigarette making, foundries and machine shops, brick and tile factories, production of tin, copper, and sheet-iron ware, bakery products, the manufacture of ice, carriage and wagon building, and confectionery making.”⁹

Dallas became an outward bastion of business and businessmen, relying on capitalists and their industries to support the city's robust industrial core. Factory owners, bankers, and publishers became the face of the city's progress and prosperity. This commercial boom gave Dallas a

⁷ Ibid, xx-xxi.

⁸ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1913*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1914), 20.

⁹ *Bureau of the Census, United States Census of Population: 1800*, vol. 2, *Report of Social Statistics of Cities* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1887), 186-189, quoted in Hill, xxiii.

reputation as a pro-business city run by a united, conservative corporate elite. Yet Dallas's image as Texas's most conservative big city ignores a significant chapter in its political history. For nearly a quarter-century beginning in the late nineteenth century, progressive forces emerging from the city's organized labor movement wielded real power in Dallas politics. Specifically, between the years of 1886 to 1917, Dallas local political culture was unequivocally steeped in a little-known standard practice of "competition and cooperation" among contending factions in the city—an environment where organized labor demanded, and repeatedly won, a seat at the local political table.¹⁰

Residents with vested interests in Dallas's political landscape represented the growing urban-industrial core and a sprawling agricultural hinterland of nearby farmers and townships. The commercial leaders of the city embodied an elite that did not encompass a singular industry but rather represented numerous business and fields, which exemplified Dallas' mixed economy. The diversity of interests, as a result, produced fractures in decision-making over both mundane and landmark issues ranging from social programs to adult education.¹¹ The internal disunity among Dallas leadership created the necessity for coalition, which opened the potential for less politically powerful groups that collectivized "to force compromises and in many instances win significant concessions."¹² Lower and middle-class wage-laborers, farmer populists, and even socialists fighting for regulation and reform thus forced their way into public life between 1886 and 1917, and effectively disrupted conservatives' grip on institutional authority. The reputation of Dallas as an unwavering stronghold of business-minded Democrats is undoubtedly

¹⁰ Hill, *Dallas*, xxix.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 13.

¹² *Ibid*, 15.

oversimplified, and the little-known significance and scope of the labor movement in the county furthers the need for a more accurate understanding of the city's true political landscape.

Early Progressivism in Dallas

The first sign of competing influence with the commercial elite of Dallas was the rising influence of Populists in the county, who were in no short supply among the city's vast hinterland of agriculturalists. For a brief period in the 1890s, Populists were able to join with laborers in the city to build a coalition against the conservative grip on power. Union members and working-class Dallasites were in no short supply as lively industry, chiefly the railroads, beckoned workers to come to the city. With a coalition building in Dallas and growing momentum statewide, the Populist charge surged to threaten for the governor's seat in 1896, when the election pitted Democrat Charles A. Culberson against Populist-nominee Jerome C. Kearby, who were both Dallasites. While Kearby did not win the election, his reputation in Dallas typifies the nature of the relationship between the interests of farmers and workingmen in the country. Despite his Populist platform, Kearby was a renowned trial lawyer in the city, one who garnered widespread sympathies among workers after his defense of the Knights of Labor after the Great Southwest Strike of 1886.¹³ Kearby represented the ability of progressive figures in Dallas to create allegiances between the growing sector of industrial laborers and the sprawling countryside of farmers and small towners at various levels of political dealings.

While Kearby himself became a Populist, other local leaders pursued reform through the dominant Democratic Party. The strong Populist and union presence in the city comprised a significant voting bloc, enabling the Populist-Labor coalition able to "ensure the election of

¹³ Hill, *Dallas*, 39-42.

moderates” to the Texas state legislature.¹⁴ James Clayton McNealus, a Dallas representative in the senate, chaired the Senate Committee on Labor during the Thirty-fourth legislative session. In the city, McNealus went as far to support the Motormen’s Union in their settlement of a strike over the public ownership of streetcar lines. McNealus spoke publicly against the carelessness of the Consolidated Electric Street Railway Company, who he purported to have endangered worker and passenger safety and turned away employee concerns “because they were union men.”¹⁵ Further advancing the labor cause were Dallas Democrats John Hughes Cochran and Barry Miller, both of whom supported regulatory and pro-worker legislation in the Texas House. Cochran specifically, held immense influence as House speaker in the Twenty-third legislature, and underscored the support unions and farmers held on the political stage.

Progressive sympathies and influences evident throughout the community support historian Patricia Hill’s notion that residents “did not denigrate those associated with the People’s Party.”¹⁶ While Dallas held a reputation of devoted conservatism, the farm-labor alliance enjoyed underlying support as Dallasites undoubtedly recognized the importance of a working-class voice amid the rambling, largely unchecked growth happening throughout the county. Cooperation with Populist and union leaders, then, was not only necessary but indicative of broader civic sentiment in which a portion of the population encouraged enabling producers and workingmen in a rapidly growing city. It was not only politicians who associated with labor causes; even the corporate elite of the city cajoled the support of unions at times. Businessmen recognized the necessity of labor support to pursue a vision of growth projects for the city. Moreover, the city’s workingmen recognized that participating in partnership with local leaders,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Dallas Morning News*, August 04, 1900, p. 10, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481683273622>.

¹⁶ Hill, *Dallas*, 42.

such as commissioning the opening of the Trinity River's commercial shipping route, would serve to "enhance the image of organized labor."¹⁷ Cooperation was often favorable to both parties, as a result, and demonstrates that strong feelings of pro-unionism or anti-unionism were based largely on fleeting instances of benefit or nuisance.

Dallas Labor in the Legislature

In Dallas County in the 1890s, the farm-labor coalition represented the combined interests of farmers and urban reform-seekers desperate for economic restructuring in the face of the national depression of that decade. The party's success in the city of Dallas itself stood in stark contrast to the usual story of Populism, which generally struggled outside its rural base. "Urban populism" in the city permitted the coalition's efforts to be double-edged, situated on both state level action and local administration's receptiveness "to the needs of workers and agricultural producers."¹⁸ At the state level, the election system's at-large voting structure helped to unify progressive voices in both urban and rural areas of Dallas County. For nomination to a House seat in the Texas Legislature, candidates ran under one of four "places" that were not geographically grounded, but rather open to voting on by the entire county. This system reinforced the impact of urban populism, as rural farmers and urban laborers were not geographically separated or confined to a single voting district. Meanwhile, in the city, a burgeoning economy continued to attract laborers and working-class men in droves. Net migration not only grew local unions and labor organizations but situated Dallas as a growing metropolitan area in which the business-labor relationship reflected statewide and nationwide trends of worker liberties and autonomy.

¹⁷ Hill, *Dallas*, 63.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 37.

Thus, the success of pro-labor politicians in Dallas outlived the Populist Revolt of the 1890s, and in the conservative stronghold of Dallas, activists managed to elect not just a string of pro-labor legislators or labor sympathizers, but actual labor union *members* to the state legislature of Texas between 1893 and 1918. Patrick Henry Golden, John Francis Reiger, James William Parks, and James A. Florer all won election to the state House from Dallas County as nominees of the county's Democratic Party, belying notions of a unanimous conservative Democratic stronghold over the city's leadership.

Patrick Henry Golden was the first Dallas union leader to be elected to the legislature. Born in 1846 in Louisiana, he was raised in the profession of his father to become a house painter. After relocating to Galveston following a stint in the Confederate army, Golden became active in the local Knights of Labor chapter, the largest union in Texas at the time. The Knights had garnered influence in the state in the early 1880s and established a progressive reputation that aligned with the interests of Texas' agrarian interests in addition to those of laboring men. The Knights furthered the hope of a united lower and middle-class political front in the state by inviting farmers, non-organized labor workers, and even women into its ranks.¹⁹ The Knights' momentum in Texas was derailed by the failure of the Great Southwest Strike in 1886, but Golden's connection to the organization propelled him to become a guiding labor leader in the state.

As master workman and eventually chairman of the Knights of Labor's state executive board, Golden quickly gained prominence in labor circles. In 1885, one year prior to the Great Southwest Strike, Golden organized a general boycott of the Mallory Steamship Company after striking white longshoremen had been replaced by black workers. Golden ultimately became a

¹⁹ James C. Maroney, "Knights of Labor," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, July 01, 2022, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/knights-of-labor>.

key negotiator in the strike's settlement.²⁰ The following year Golden moved to Dallas, still working, and soon became president of Dallas's Central Labor League, a "quasi-official" entity that determined the labor agenda in the city and sought to encourage cooperation with farming interests.²¹

From 1890 to 1893, Golden served as president of the newly founded Texas State Federation of Labor, further cementing his prominence as a leading labor voice in Dallas. Golden possessed a political savvy that allowed him to earn the respect of members of the Democratic Party while simultaneously upholding labor causes. This keen skill in maneuvering allowed Golden's progressive platform to resonate in both Populist and Democratic circles. Golden maintained an attitude of steadfast political independence, noting at a gathering of "Alliances, Grangers, Trades Unions, and Knights of Labor," that if they were to "bow to any party," such flattery would leave other politicians no choice but to "never respect us or grant us any concessions."²²

Patrick Henry Golden's far-reaching admiration in Dallas earned him a resounding nomination on the Democrat ticket in 1892 to the state legislature. Upon his nomination, the *Dallas Morning News* reported the sergeant-at-arms to have "jumped in the air almost performing a somersault," possibly suggesting some Democrats pleasure in seeing nomination of a man who had already earned the endorsement of the Trades Assembly.²³ Golden won the election "by good majority" according to *The Fort Worth Gazette*.²⁴ Golden served in the

²⁰ Isabella Rapisarda, "Golden, Patrick Henry [Harry]," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, February 22, 2023, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/texas-state-federation-of-labor>.

²¹ Hill, *Dallas*, 62.

²² *Dallas Morning News*, July 20, 1890, p. 3, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481682178191>.

²³ *Dallas Morning News*, July 20, 1892, p. 1, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481680862730>.

²⁴ *Fort Worth Gazette*, November 11, 1892, p.1, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph109649/m1/1/>.

Twenty-Third Legislature's 1893 session, with appointments to the Public Building and Grounds Committee; Roads, Bridges, and Ferries Committee; the State Affairs Committee; the Town and City Corporations Committee; and, most significantly, the Labor Committee, which he chaired.²⁵

As chair of that committee, Golden concentrated his efforts on pro-labor legislation, pursuing what historian Patricia Hill described as a "populist-labor agenda."²⁶ Golden introduced HB 46 in effort to mandate a legal eight-hour workday on all state and municipal work, a chief goal of the era's labor movement. The bill died on the House calendar, alongside his proposal to establish a bureau of labor statistics, HB 267. Golden's bills to amend the Dallas city charter and regulate the practice of dentistry also died in the House. HB 652, which Golden authored and guided through approval in the House, audaciously sought to protect employees' right to belong to labor organizations and establish a criminal precedent for any employer who "coerces employees or threatens to fire them because of their affiliation to a labor organization."²⁷ Despite passing the House, the bill did not pass the Senate.

Golden likely saved his most passionate advocacy lobbying for a lien law that more fairly compensated laborers. Prior to his election to the legislature, Golden served as president of the Lien Law Association, and used his influence within the Texas State Federation of Labor to encourage lawmakers to introduce a new bill.²⁸ By the time Golden entered the legislature in 1893, the "Henderson Substitute," had been introduced and was voted upon. As a compromise of his original proposal, the legislation lacked Golden's endorsement. He and fellow Dallasite John H. Cochran, House speaker at the time and labor sympathizer, argued that the bill "restricted the

²⁵ "Patrick Henry Golden," Legislative Reference Library of Texas, <https://lrl.texas.gov/legeLeaders/members/memberDisplay.cfm?memberID=3637>, accessed April 06, 2023.

²⁶ Hill, *Dallas*, 38.

²⁷ House Journal: 23rd Legislature, Regular Session, 633, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/23/H_23_0.pdf.

²⁸ Rapisarda.

amount a laborer or materials supplier could collect from a delinquent owner to no more than the contracted price.” The two were aware that changes in design or materials were made routinely during the course of a project, leading them to believe that workers should be compensated for completed labor not outlined in the original agreement. While the Henderson Substitute passed, an amendment was added to make owners “responsible for material and labor used without reference to the contracted price.”²⁹ Ultimately, none of Golden’s sponsored bills became law, but his efforts revealed his unfaltering commitment to a pro-labor ideology. He did have the satisfaction of seeing one labor measure that he supported become law: a bill making Labor Day a state holiday.³⁰

Golden’s legislative career ended after one legislative session when he accepted appointment as Dallas street superintendent (1894-1897). His work in this position underscored the ongoing politics of coalition-building in Dallas County. Street maintenance uniquely interested both laboring men and conservative businessmen, as the former sought expanding improvements beyond the central business district and the jobs that such expansion created, and the latter favored the improvements as an effort to reduce downtown congestion. Capitalizing on this exceptional partnership, Golden worked to ensure that streets were paved “in the working-class neighborhoods . . . and other improvements were made beyond the downtown area.”³¹ Golden’s career victories reflect the presence of pro-labor voices in the Dallas civic arena, while also revealing that Dallas’s business elite was far from always antagonistic to populist and labor interests.

²⁹ *Dallas Morning News*, March 04, 1893, p. 1, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481683278529>.

³⁰ House Journal: 23rd Legislature, Regular Session, pp, 208, 1300, https://www.lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/23/H_23_0.pdf.

³¹ Hill, *Dallas*, 39.

Golden's career was cut short by kidney disease, which claimed his life in 1898 at the age of fifty-one. But Golden proved not to be an anomaly in Dallas Democratic politics; the tradition continued with John Francis Reiger's election to the succeeding legislature. Reiger, a New York native born in 1858, occupied a unique position as both a labor activist *and* a business owner. After pursuing ventures in sheep ranching and stock trading, he arrived in Dallas in 1890, where he entered the cigar trade. He soon built the La Trinidad Cigar Factory. Despite his position as an employer, Reiger was elected president of the Dallas Federation of Labor, which represented the city's labor unions to the recently founded state organization. Minimal information has been recorded regarding Reiger's career as president, but his service combined with his business experience earned him nomination to the state legislature at the Democratic convention in June 1894 on the fifth ballot.³²

In his career, Reiger served consecutive terms in the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Legislatures. During his first term, he succeeded Golden in chairing the Labor Committee while also serving on committees of Towns and City Corporations, Revenue and Taxation, Counties and County Boundaries, and Irrigation.³³ Reiger proved at least as strong an advocate for organized labor as Golden had been. His first bill, HB 47, outlined a plan to "protect persons, associations, and unions of workingmen, incorporated or unincorporated, in their labels and trademarks and forms of advertising and names." With the backing of labor support, the bill eventually became law, accounting for Reiger's only success in the legislative term. His most ambitious bill, "An act to regulate the hours of labor of women and children in cotton and woolen mills," proved unsuccessful after a special report was released. Finally, Reiger advocated

³² *Dallas Morning News*, July 01, 1894, p. 10, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481683280821>.

³³ "John Francis Reiger," Legislative Reference Library of Texas, <https://lrl.texas.gov/legeLeaders/members/memberDisplay.cfm?memberID=3568>, accessed April 06, 2023.

for other notable labor bills that were presented to him as Labor Committee Chair. One bill sought to limit the use of convict labor and another, similar to a proposal put forward by Patrick Henry Golden, hoped to establish a board of arbitration to adjudicate between employees and employers.³⁴ Neither bill passed.

Reiger won the nomination for a second term by the Democratic county convention by a narrow margin. In the Twenty-fifth legislative session, he chaired the Towns and City Corporations Committee, while also being named to the Finance, Internal Improvements, Labor, and Revenue and Taxation Committees.³⁵ Reiger introduced HB 420, a measure that would guarantee trades unions and associated organizations for wage-laborers the right to organize. While initially approved by the Labor Committee, the bill ultimately died on the Speaker of the House's table. Nonetheless, the Twenty-sixth Legislature by 1899 passed a facsimile of the bill authored by Jefferson Davis Childs, a representative of San Antonio. Reiger's next bill, to increase the "development and improvement" of public roads, also did not become law. Reiger's final bill outlined a definition and relative punishment for vagrancy in Texas, but it did not earn a favorable committee report.³⁶ After his term ended, Reiger did not earn a third nomination to return to Austin. In Dallas, he continued to navigate his roles as both a business leader and labor activist. Reiger became interested in developing real estate in East Dallas while also managing his cigar manufacturing plant. Reiger's dedication to labor causes seemed less fervent after his time in the legislature, but he remained active in civic affairs, founding two "civic improvement organizations," the Columbia Place Improvement League in 1903 and the East Dallas

³⁴ House Journal: 24th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 16, 515, and https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/23/H_23_0.pdf.

³⁵ "John Francis Reiger."

³⁶ House Journal: 25th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 285, 298, and 334 https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/23/H_23_0.pdf.

Improvement League in 1911, both of which appear to have been focused primarily on beautification efforts in local neighborhoods.³⁷

After the careers of Patrick Henry Golden and John Francis Reiger, the presence of Dallas-bred labor leaders serving in the legislature took a hiatus of more than a decade. Dallas's labor coalition had always been a biracial coalition, but with the passage of the poll tax in 1902 and the rise of all-white primaries throughout the state, the political alliance of black and white workingmen lay in shambles. The end of the 1890s also saw the collapse of the Populist movement, which in the 1890s had served to push the Democratic Party further to the left, encouraging the local party to place men like Golden and Reiger on the county ticket. Without a strong system of organization, conservatives now faced minimal opposition from more progressive circles, and it became less necessary to appease or earn the support of progressive interests.

Despite these developments, labor influence in Dallas County persisted, even if the direct conduit to legislative influence in Austin was temporarily closed. Reform-minded leaders continued to seek out advantageous alliances, hoping to remain relevant in public discourse. Primarily, tradesmen positioned themselves to align with the burgeoning socialist movement in the city. In turn-of-the-century Dallas, rather than being universally disdained, socialists instead garnered droves of supporters from the ranks of defecting Populists and cooperation-hungry laborers. George Clifton Edwards, Dean Stuck, and George Hinsdale led the local socialist movement and made significant strides, most notably being the promotion of a statewide child labor bill that would “[limit] the hours a child could work and [establish] minimum working-age

³⁷ *Dallas Morning News*, July 10, 1903, p. 4, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481680862656>; *Dallas Morning News*, February 17, 1911, p. 4, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481680862730>.

limits,” for which they lobbied legislators. This socialist-backed bill, echoing the unsuccessful efforts of Francis Reiger in prior years, passed and was signed into law. The bill, although considered by some progressives to have been “riddled impotent through amendments,” still laid the groundwork for all subsequent child labor legislation in the state.³⁸ Moreover, those not formally in the Socialist Party still produced reform measures and advancements with a shared vision of helping workers and migrants partake in “the benefits of urban growth.”³⁹ Agricultural engineer Carl P. Brannin, for instance, dedicated his profession to expanding opportunities for working-class citizens by establishing an employment program and vocational night school at the YMCA in which he worked. The success of Brannin and Edwards, Stuck, and Hinsdale showcases the persistent existence of a progressive, labor-friendly mindset, which had impact and influence in Dallas at the political level, within business, and among established institutions. A spate of progressive legislation during the administration of Governor Thomas M. Campbell (1907-1911), a protégé of James S. Hogg, also boosted the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, laying the groundwork for a resurgence of Dallas’s pro-labor politicians.

James William Parks restored organized labor’s presence to the Dallas County legislative delegation in 1913. Born in 1876, and moving to Dallas in 1902 as a cigarmaker, Parks quickly built an impressive labor resume. In 1904, just two years after moving to town, Parks was elected president of John Francis Reiger’s Cigarmaker’s Union and served as a vice president in the Texas State Federation of Labor. As a promising labor leader, Parks’s primary objective with the Federation was supporting legislation to “instituting the initiative and recall in city elections” – a favorable cause of urban progressives nationwide. Such exposure propelled him to become president of the Dallas Trades Assembly. Parks also rose to prominence in a second union – the

³⁸ Hill, *Dallas*, 49.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 51.

Musician's Union – which he became involved in as a result of his second career, that of a professional band and orchestra performer. Ultimately, Parks garnered a remarkable array of labor leadership positions that poised him to become the foremost labor politician in Dallas.⁴⁰

Running for Dallas County's Place Two seat in the state House of Representatives in 1912, Parks campaigned explicitly on the need for Dallas to be represented by a "laboring man" in Austin. He adopted a progressive platform that focused on amending the state constitution to permit the initiative, referendum, and recall, the direct election of senators, wide-ranging public education improvements, and reforming the state's convict labor system, long a bone of contention among organized labor because of the competition that convict labor gave to paid labor. Parks ran on the Democratic ticket and won the primary with 5,250 votes over William M. Jones and W. H. Hall, who had 4,272 votes and 2,812 votes, respectively. though it is unclear exactly why his path to victory was so easy. In the general election, he handily defeated his Republican, Progressive and Socialist counterparts, earning 8,645 votes while no other candidate earned more than Republican Luther Bowers 531 votes. His victory, credentials as a labor leader, and support of a broader progressive agenda that appealed to local business elites proves that Dallas in the 1910s remained a place where cooperation, rather than hostility, characterized the relations between business and labor. A man such as Parks was apparently acceptable to a broad array of union members, socialists, small business types, and even corporate leaders.⁴¹

In the Thirty-third Legislature, Parks, like Golden and Reiger before him, was named to the Labor Committee, and he also served on the Internal Improvements, Criminal Jurisprudence, Constitutional Amendments, and Common Carriers committees. He introduced a number of bills,

⁴⁰ Lindsay Brown, "Parks, James William," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, February 15, 2023, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/parks-james-william>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

two of which were predominantly labor-driven. HB 487 sought to establish a legal guideline that all buildings over two stories must have an adequate fire escape in any accommodation or “place in which five or more persons shall be assembled.” Meanwhile, HB 488 hoped to institute additional regulations of health, safety, and comfort for employees working in factories, mills, and other workshops. While neither of these bills made it through the House, Parks did heavily support Senate Bill 1, the state’s first workmen’s compensation law, in its passage through the House in 1913. The bill held businesses liable for workplace injury or death and established an Industrial Accident Board to review and process employee claims. The law’s passage made groundbreaking progress for laborers working in dangerous conditions under constant risk of injury. James Parks’s role in passing the law emphasizes the importance of collaboration in ensuring labor leaders had an opportunity to influence public opinion and legislation throughout a period of a sustained conservative majority.⁴²

Returning to Austin for a second term in 1915, Parks continued his pursuit of labor-minded legislation with commendable success. He opened the Thirty-fourth legislative session co-authoring a string of pro-labor bills designed to further protect railmen, construction workers, and improve lien laws across the state. These bills, House Bills 61, 62, and 63, were introduced by a diverse group of supporters that reflected Parks’s wide-ranging respect and influence. HB 61, which would require railroad companies to construct sheds at worksites to protect their employees, was introduced by Hilton Robert “Hill” Walters, a farmer and educator from Anderson County. The bill was co-authored by Parks, alongside James Brooke Furrh, a banker

⁴² “James William Parks,” Legislative Reference Library of Texas, <https://lrl.texas.gov/legLeaders/members/memberDisplay.cfm?memberID=2724>; House Journal: 33rd Legislature, Regular Session, p. 2060, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/33/H_33_0.pdf; Lindsay Brown, “Parks, James William,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, February 15, 2023, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/parks-james-william>; Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1913-1914* [Volume 16], 1914, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 20, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph10838/m1/439/>.

from Elysian Fields, and two esteemed Dallas Democrats, Dwight Lyman Lewelling and Johnathan Edward Davis. Lewelling was a Dallas County attorney who, according to the *Dallas Morning News*, also ran for governor and attorney general of the state. While Lewelling had no explicit labor ties, some of his legislative initiatives, such as introducing a bill aimed at establishing a state board to oversee statewide utilities, hints at a bias towards progressive goals. Furthermore, John E. Davis was a legendary nine-term legislator who served as editor of the *Texas Mesquiter*, Dallas County's oldest operational newspaper established by the "town father" of Mesquite, Charles Snead Kimbrough. Davis's and Lewelling's consistent commitment to working with Parks suggests that their collective interests for Dallas County were symbiotic. In turn, Parks's legislative successes were not just victories for pro-labor advocates but also representative of a coalition of influences that viewed progressive legislation as an avenue to prosperity.⁴³

While HB 61 was never signed into law, the result did not deter Parks or his co-authors. House Bill 62, with Lewelling as the primary signatory, continued to bring pro-labor interest to the highest authoritative body in the state. Specifically, the bill sought to "protect those engaged in the erection or construction of buildings three or more stories in height." Despite the bill's eventual failure, the proposal reflects the impact of unions in Dallas, specifically, which

⁴³ House Journal: 34th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 1248, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/34/H_34_0.pdf; "Hill Walters," Legislative Reference Library of Texas, <https://lrl.texas.gov/legeLeaders/members/memberDisplay.cfm?memberID=2752>; "James Brooke Furrh," Legislative Reference Library of Texas, <https://lrl.texas.gov/legeLeaders/members/memberDisplay.cfm?memberID=2690>; "Dwight Lyman Lewelling," Legislative Reference Library of Texas, <https://lrl.texas.gov/legeLeaders/members/memberDisplay.cfm?memberID=2706>; Tracy Anders Greenlee, "Public Utility Commission of Texas," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, November 1, 1995, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/public-utility-commission-of-texas>; "John E. Davis," Legislative Reference Library of Texas, <https://lrl.texas.gov/legeLeaders/members/memberDisplay.cfm?memberID=2136>; *Dallas Morning News*, April 24, 1936, p. 1, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481682420382>; *Dallas Morning News*, November 03, 1958, p. 5, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481682420489>.

experienced a massive construction boom beginning in the mid-1910s. The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, which represented construction workingmen, had two Dallas chapters – No. 198 and No. 622. The unions were consistently reported to have some of the largest number of members in the city, so that it comes as no surprise that Dallas representatives, and James William Parks specifically, often introduced construction-related bills into the Texas House.⁴⁴

Three additional legislators joined Parks, Davis, Lewelling, and Walters in the presentation of House Bill 63, a bill that ensured people working on building construction would be justly compensated for all their services provided. Particularly, the bill outlined the manner in which liens should be filed, suggesting that Parks hoped to win legislative gains that Patrick Henry Golden had failed to fully acquire in 1893. While it is not fully clear at what point the bill died, Senate Bill 79 was passed as a result of the Thirty-fourth legislative session. The upper chamber's bill, expanded to include work on railroads, greatly clarified the steps by which a lien should be filed, a major victory for laborers. Nonetheless, the bill also explicitly states that “the owner. . . shall pay no greater sum for labor performed or material furnished than the price stipulated in the original contract.” The inclusion of this section is in direct opposition to House Bill 63 put forward by Parks, and hints at a complete rollback of a policy introduced by the “Henderson Substitute” that was passed during Golden's term. Golden had successfully fought for an amendment that specifically held owners, not laborers, financially liable for completed work not specified in the original contract.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ House Journal: 34th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 78, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/34/H_34_0.pdf; Hill, 61.

⁴⁵ House Journal: 34th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 78, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/34/H_34_0.pdf; Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1915-1917* [Volume 17], 1917, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 223, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth12596/m1/235/>.

While the lien bill did not in the end achieve all of laborers' goals, House Bill 64—introduced by Lewelling and co-authored by Parks, Davis, and Walters—did end in a big victory for the progressive agenda. The bill was a facsimile of HB 487, the fire escape bill that Parks had introduced in the preceding session. Previously, the bill had been single-handedly introduced by Parks, so the support of other Dallas Democrats in 1915 undoubtedly helped the bill earn the support necessary to pass the House. Senate Bill 50 was eventually adopted following an exemption for residences, and the legislation passed resoundingly and was signed into law by Governor James E. Ferguson.⁴⁶

In the Thirty-fourth Legislature, Parks aggressively pursued child labor legislation with the introduction of House Bill 72. The proposal “regulated the employment of children in certain occupations,” with provisions that included the obtainment of permits by employers, mandating the availability of chairs for female employees under twenty-one years of age, and outlining a process for the inspection of factories and workplaces to ensure that these measures were being upheld. Charles Osborne Laney, another Dallas County representative, was the primary author of the bill, further elucidating Parks's ability to win political allies despite differing ideologies. Laney, similar to Lewelling and Davis, had a clear reputation for pursuing a moderately progressive agenda. While he was not directly involved in organized labor, he introduced bills aimed at establishing standards of protection and compensation for women in the workplace and was even so forward-thinking that he authored gun-control legislation in his second term. His bill with Parks did not survive the senate, but Senate Bill 63 was signed into law in the same legislative session. The landmark labor bill prohibited the employment of children under fifteen

⁴⁶ House Journal: 34th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 78, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/34/H_34_0.pdf; Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1915-1917* [Volume 17], 1917, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 20, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph12596/m1/32/>.

years old in “any factory, mill, workshop, laundry, theatre or other place of amusement,” and also barred the hiring of children under seventeen at mines or places where liquor was kept or distributed. Furthermore, in accordance with Parks’s original proposal, the bill included specifications to ensure that businesses who employed children acquired permits under special circumstances. The bill also empowered the Bureau of Labor Statistics to enforce this law and monitor establishments where children worked.⁴⁷

In the remainder of the Thirty-fourth session, Parks introduced eight more bills. House Bill 141, authored by Parks and coauthored by Dwight L. Lewelling, required electricians to be licensed and regulated, but there is no evidence that the bill became law and it likely died on the calendar. Parks went on to author a similar bill in the 1917 session, House Bill 20, which also failed to become law. House Bill 351, introduced by Parks and cosponsored by Charles O. Laney, proved more successful. The legislation sought to regulate private employment agencies across Texas, and virtually identical proposals outlined in Senate Bill 203 were signed into law in accordance with Parks’s aims. The subsequent bill introduced to the lower chamber, No. 352, was unique, and represented a meaningful moment for the legislative labor cause. Authored by Charles Burton and cosponsored by Parks, the bill hoped to amend the state’s anti-free pass law, a measure intended to regulate the practice of railroads corruptly distributing free tickets to legislators. Burton was a Tarrant County representative who was a prominent labor leader in Fort Worth. Former president of the International Typographical Union’s Fort Worth chapter, he was a labor-inspired legislator who oversaw the successful passage of a bill that would support Texas

⁴⁷ House Journal: 34th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 1248, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/34/H_34_0.pdf; Leigh Welder, “Laney, Charles Osborne,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, February 15, 2023, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/laney-charles-osborne>; Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1915-1917* [Volume 17], 1917, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 104, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph12596/m1/965/>.

publishers and require schoolbooks to be printed in-state, which supported local publishers.

While Parks and Burton's bill failed to pass the house, their partnership and presence proved the prominence of North Texas's labor cause in the state legislature, and rallied against the standard misconception that the progressive agenda was villainized and isolated by a stronghold conservative majority.⁴⁸

James William Parks ended the Thirty-fourth legislative session by coauthoring three bills with all the Dallas representatives, two of which held links to the progressive agenda. The group of Dallas representatives included Parks, and also fellow labor leader James A. Florer, who represents the last of the string of Dallas labor-union members in the legislature for a considerable period. House Bill 441, a major revision of the Dallas roadbuilding process then in place, aimed to “[create] a more efficient road system for Dallas county.” Having no votes in opposition to the bill in either chamber allowed the bill to be signed quickly into law in March 1915. House Bill 479 continued the theme of the Dallas coalition authoring legislation, this instance in hopes of standardizing all elections to be held in publicly owned buildings. While the bill never made it to the governor's desk, a duplicate of the legislation was passed in the subsequent session in 1917, with John E. Davis as the sole author of House Bill 117. While this law was not explicitly indicative of the pro-labor agenda, it undoubtedly increased political access for working-class men and voting members of the lower classes. Ultimately, Parks proved influential across political cliques in Austin, and he used his influence to pursue a busy legislative session. As a result, support from moderate Democrats willing to introduce more

⁴⁸ House Journal: 34th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 1252, 1263, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/34/H_34_0.pdf; Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1915-1917* [Volume 17], 1917, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 163, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph12596/m1/175/>; Christopher D. Wilson, “Burton, Charles Aaron,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, February 22, 2023, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/burton-charles-aaron>.

regulation-aimed proposals helped a number of his initiatives find their way into becoming permanent law.⁴⁹

Parks won reelection for a third and final term in 1916. As a veteran in Austin, Parks repeatedly introduced legislation that would benefit workingmen in Texas. Parks immediately introduced bills, either as the primary author or alongside Charles Burton, that would regulate the profession of electrician, provide increasing oversight of private employment agencies in addition to the law passed by the previous session, and regulate the practice of chiropractors. Despite Parks's increasing reputation as a legislator, none of these bills proved successful.⁵⁰

Parks served in the legislature well after the golden era of Populism in Texas, but his commitment to promoting the farmer cause in his tenure is nonetheless evident. House Bill 363, to which Parks was a cosignatory, authorized the "incorporation by those engaged in agricultural pursuits of famers' co-operative societies." While this bill did not pass, the upper chamber's version, Senate Bill 183, became law. The bill outlined the methods by which cooperatives must organize, establish membership, and sell and purchase goods, among other things. Parks then returned to his long-held goal of protecting workingmen and helped pass a law, authored by James Florer, mandating an eight-hour workday for police patrolmen in cities of fifty-thousand or more residents. At the time of the bill's passage, the bill went into effect in Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio. Parks also was an important cosponsor of House Bill

⁴⁹ House Journal: 34th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 1268, 1270, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/34/H_34_0.pdf; Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1915-1917* [Volume 17], 1917, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 183 <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth12596/m1/511/>; Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1915-1917* [Volume 17], 1917, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 357 <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth12596/m1/1218/>.

⁵⁰ *Texas Mesquiter*, July 28, 1916, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth400426/m1/3/?q=%22J.W.%2BParks%22>; House Journal: 35th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 1538, 1540, 1544, <https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/35/HBHistory35RS.pdf>.

560, which designated annual vacations to paid firemen in cities of thirty thousand or more. Parks helped introduce smaller, unsuccessful bills that would “preserve defenses in libel suits” and another amendment to the Dallas road law, but his final significant labor charge in the regular session was House Bill 505, whom he sponsored alongside fellow three-term legislator William Dade Cope. The wide-sweeping labor reform bill provided health and safety assurances for employees of factories, mills, workshops, and mercantile establishments. The bill did not become law, but the ambitious legislation included provisions that protected workers from dangerous machinery, ordered the “proper temperature and ventilation” of such places of employment, and ensuring the disinfection and cleaning of workspaces, among other objectives.⁵¹

The Thirty-fifth legislative session had four called sessions. Parks attended all and introduced four bills, one of which earned major gains for working-class women in urban businesses. House Bill 94, introduced in the fourth called session by Parks and three other legislators, read very comparably to the failed House Bill 505 of the 1917 regular session but narrowed its scope to only included establishments where women were employed. With the passage of this bill and its signature from Governor William P. Hobby, businesses were obligated to properly ventilate and clean workspaces, and ensure that harmful gases and odors were removed from the working area. Thus, Parks concluded his commendable legislative career with

⁵¹ House Journal: 35th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 1556, 1561, 1564, 1567, 1574, 1575, <https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/35/HBHistory35RS.pdf>; Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1915-1917* [Volume 17], 1917, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 432, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph12596/m1/1293/>; Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1915-1917* [Volume 17], 1917, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 403, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph12596/m1/1264/>; Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1915-1917* [Volume 17], 1917, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 407, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph12596/m1/1268/>.

a noteworthy victory for labor and concluded three terms that repeatedly opposed notions of conservative dominance at all levels of Texas politics. Parks's legislative career was not extended after his failure to win reelection in 1918, which largely stemmed from his unabashed support of Governor James E. Ferguson, who was impeached and removed from office during Parks's final term.⁵²

During James William Parks's second and third terms in the legislature, James A. Florer joined him. Thus, for a span of almost four years, two union members represented Dallas, clearly demonstrating the limits of the conservative elite's one-sided authority over the civic engine in the city. Florer, born in 1865 in Kentucky, moved to Dallas early in his professional career and began working as a printer, and eventually, linotype operator for the *Dallas Morning News*. He quickly took up leadership roles in the Dallas chapter of the International Typographical Union and was recorded speaking at meetings educating members on the importance of an eight-hour workday and union shops. Florer gained political renown as an alderman after he was the primary voice behind introducing a streetcar line between Dallas and Oak Cliff, the suburb in which he lived. His success in city leadership propelled him to nomination on the Democratic ticket for the legislature in 1914 as a floatorial candidate. His platform lay resolute in pursuing educational reform, a key objective labor leaders whose lower- and working-class base often had minimal public pedagogical resources. Unlike most pro-labor politicians, Florer was a staunch prohibitionist and vehemently opposed the gubernatorial candidacy of James E. Ferguson. It is unclear how this stance affected his popularity among more conservative circles of leadership.⁵³

⁵² House Journal: 35th Legislature, 4th Called Session, p. 608, <https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/35CS4/HBHistory35CS4.pdf>.

⁵³ Kevin Alzate, "Florer, James A.," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, April 21, 2023, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/florer-james-a>.

In the Thirty-fourth Legislative Assembly, Florer served on the Constitutional Amendments Committee, the Liquor Traffic Committee, the Municipal Corporations Committee, the Public Buildings and Grounds Committee, the Public Lands and Land Office Committee, and the Juvenile Reforms Committee, which he chaired. His most notable labor accomplishments during his first term were the passage of House Bills 273 and 402, both of which demonstrated his commitment to tackling educational initiatives in the Texas House. HB 273, to which Florer was a cosignatory, mandated that school textbooks be printed in Texas, which both strengthened the state's responsibility to education, and also supported local publishers. HB 402 was a landmark compulsory school act. The legislation, most significantly, legally required "children between the ages of eight and fourteen to attend school" and also prohibited work-related excuses as a reason to miss school, provided for a fund to pay for textbooks in necessary circumstances, and created the position of school attendance officer. Ironically, Florer had introduced similar legislation with House Bill 108 previously in the session, but with him as the only author the bill found little support. The second bill, however, was coauthored by a dozen legislators, including Parks, to encompass both labor and conservative interests. HB 402's ratification was undoubtedly a key win for labor proponents, as education was seen as a primary conduit to achieving social mobility and civic influence in a rapidly developing society.⁵⁴

In addition to scholastic objectives, Florer also introduced bills related to public health, the establishment of a petroleum commission, and a handful of bills concerning the sale, funding, and endorsement of bonds in jurisdictions smaller than the state level. None of these aims proved

⁵⁴ "James A. Florer," Legislative Reference Library of Texas, <https://lrl.texas.gov/legLeaders/members/memberDisplay.cfm?memberID=2686>; House Journal: 34th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 1259, 1266, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/34/H_34_0.pdf; Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1915-1917* [Volume 17], 1917, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 92, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph12596/m1/104/>.

successful, but Florer did help to promote amending the Dallas road bill and expanding the jurisdiction of the Dallas County criminal court alongside the other Dallas representatives, both of which passed and became law. Florer's name also appears on a signed law that oversaw the establishment of levee improvement districts throughout the state. Florer closed his first term as a legislator by introducing three bills in the only called session of the term. The ideas put forward by Florer in House Bill 17, regarding further guidelines for the operation of interurban railways, were signed into law in Senate Bill 15. Finally, House Bill 34, with Florer as the lone sponsor, became a law and regulated "the business of co-operative savings and contract loan companies."⁵⁵

In spite of Florer's success in the legislature in his rookie term, his second and final term proved less fruitful. As previously mentioned, he did have success in passing House Bill 460 to provide eight-hour working days for policemen in cities, but this was the only passed bill to which Florer was the primary sponsor. It is worth noting, however, that the contents of Florer's House Bill 218, which provided pensions to "widowed mothers for the partial support of their children in their own homes," was passed in Senate Bill 13 and became law. With regard to labor initiatives, Florer introduced bills to regulate plumbing and veterinary medicine, but neither succeeded. Florer's most significant involvement during the session was his cosponsorship of House Bill 2, which created the State Highway Department.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ House Journal: 34th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 1253, 1264, 1265, 1271, 1277, https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/34/H_34_0.pdf; Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1915-1917* [Volume 17], 1917, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 31, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph12596/m1/669/>; Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1915-1917* [Volume 17], 1917, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 5, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph12596/m1/643/>.

⁵⁶ Hans Peter Mareus Neilsen Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1915-1917* [Volume 17], 1917, Austin Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, p. 411, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph12596/m1/1272/>; House Journal: 35th Legislature, Regular Session, p. 1537, 1545, 1571, <https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/Housejournals/35/HBHistory35RS.pdf>.

The evening prior to the start of the Thirty-Fifth Legislature's fourth called session in February 1918, Florer was killed in a car accident near Mesquite, Texas. With Florer's abrupt death, and James William Parks's failure to win a fourth term, Dallas was left without a labor leader in the Texas House for the first time since 1912. While the changing era certainly marked the fading significance of labor influence, Parks's defeat was seemingly more rightfully attributed to his steadfast support of James E. Ferguson amid his impeachment from the governor's office in 1917. Despite his inability to get reelected, Parks's career as a labor leader was far from finished. He served as president of the Dallas Central Labor Council from 1927 to 1934 and eventually became president of the State Federation of Labor, Texas's highest organized labor office. He was also chosen for several advisory positions within the Dallas city government, and he narrowly lost an election for a city council seat. During that campaign, he was endorsed by the conservative-friendly *Dallas Morning News* as a respected voice of the working-class, which further suggests cooperation between labor and capital interests during this period. Parks, whose career as a union advocate extended into the 1950s, arguably more than anyone else, epitomized the pushback against the idea of unified conservative rule in Dallas.⁵⁷

Labor's Decline in Dallas

While James William Parks extended his reputation as a labor leader for decades to come, his departure from the legislature marked a significant shift in labor's influence in Dallas County. The growing city not only no longer had a labor voice advocating at the state-level, but

⁵⁷ *The Statesman*, February 27, 1918, p. 5, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1456070/m1/5/zoom/?q=%22James%20A.%20Florer%22&resolution=4&lat=2716.5&lon=2260>; *Dallas Morning News*, Jan. 16, 1927, p. 13, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481682424275>; *Dallas Morning News*, Jan. 20, 1934, p. 3, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481682424313>; *Dallas Morning News*, May 17, 1929, p. 4, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481682424337>.

the end of this era coincided with broader factors that contributed to a period in which producers' empowerment was disparaged by war, generational divergence in leadership, and growing resentment of labor organizations robust authority within the commercial sector. Whereas previously, Populists, unionists, and socialist had joined forces to provide an established and influential balance to the platforms of Dallas' business elite, the wartime and post-war era of Dallas labor politics was much more fractured and desperate to remain in a positive light among local residents.

Patricia Hill argues that the generation of labor leaders at the latter half of the 1910s adopted a platform of more conservative rhetoric, hoping to promote the social mobility of the working class and garner "a greater share of the capitalist pie," rather than overhauling the system via robust social change. After two decades of growing influence in civic affairs and as the authorities over increasingly powerful unions, labor leaders had apparently begun to revel in their public distinction and craved the respect of the local business elite. Labor had maneuvered its way into the political sphere and now relished the systems of electoral action and campaign over grassroots advancements. For six consecutive years, Dallas labor leaders had representatives in the state's highest political body, not to mention local influences as well. Moreover, World War I and the Soviet revolution in Russia caused many leaders to renounce socialism, which alienated a key sector of progressives with which labor had previously aligned itself. This attitudinal shift did not fully make its way to the rank-and-file of unions and working-class laborers. Certainly, regular union members still valued the power of strikes as a negotiating tool, especially during the wartime when the need for labor was high. Thus, union leaders and

the rank-and-file often found themselves divided over whether to pursue progressive legislation or to engage in forceful action in mass.⁵⁸

The swelling strength of union membership allowed for greater support for strikes and demanding change. World War I and its aftermath placed the working-class in a positive position, as a construction boom helped unions make significant gains in pay and working conditions. Nonetheless, union belligerence arguably negated the progress unions made in wages and replaced it with major setbacks in influence and popularity. Most notably, in 1919, a strike over wages and working hours locked linemen employed by Texas Power and Light in a months-long stalemate of whether the company would accept a board of arbitration's decision. The strike was supported by other local unions and on June 11, 1919, the strike turned violent when a strikebreaker was killed by a union lineman and four others were wounded. This incident began a downturn of popular support among the middle classes of Dallas but strikes and walk offs only continued throughout the year. Union loyalty between trades motivated groups to continue making demands, such as the sixty-two Dallas Bridge and Dallas Structural Workers' Union workers who walked off their jobs in October 1919. Ultimately, the increasingly problematic strikes among Dallas unions soured local feelings among businessmen—who viewed such aggression as detrimental to the city's growth—and paved the way for the crushing establishment of the Dallas Open Shop Association.⁵⁹

The Dallas Open Shop Association buried the strength of unions in the city. On November 18, 1919, a group of business leader established the Association, which effectively pronounced Dallas to be an “open shop town.” Open shops allowed workers not belonging to

⁵⁸ Hill, *Dallas*, 74.

⁵⁹ *Dallas Morning News*, June 12, 1919, p. 5,

<https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481683286105>; *Dallas Morning News*, October 19, 1919, p. 14, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481683286767>.

unions to work freely in the city, which destroyed the effectiveness of organized strikes. After just one week of establishment, the Open Shop Association already boasted one thousand members, and companies now had a steady pipeline of scabs to replace striking workers. Strong, “well-orchestrated anti-union propaganda” left the already destabilized labor organizations to decline amid their growing generational gaps in ideology. For the first time since the mid-1880s, the influence of radical progressives in Dallas vanished, and the little-known standard of cooperation and competition became disregarded. With the onset of the 1920s, the Dallas labor movement was extinguished, and would not return to the forefront of the political scene until the Great Depression.⁶⁰

Conclusion

By the 1920s, hysteria from World War I and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan reinforced conservative ideology and demonized socialism in the city, shutting the door on Dallas’ labor movement. While labor’s political power in Dallas was diminished, the conservative dominance that followed only underscores the previous era’s thriving labor-led coalitions. Despite Dallas’s reputation as a conservative stronghold, the period from 1886 to 1917 demonstrates that progressive leaders in Dallas forced their way into the Democrats’ system of one-party rule. In an era of incredible growth for the city, a commercial elite were concerned primarily with Dallas’ prosperity. Community leaders recognized that the city would benefit from the input of working-class influences, effectively instituting a standard of union acquiescence across all levels of civic affairs. Reputable labor leaders displayed a political individuality that earned them renown among the likes of socialists, conservative sympathizers,

⁶⁰ *Dallas Morning News*, November 27, 1919, p. 10, <https://www.genealogybank.com/nbshare/AC01121008130402203481683288689>; Hill, *Dallas*, 86-87.

and middle-class residents. Patrick Henry Golden, John Francis Reiger, James William Parks, and James Florer epitomize this trend, as prominent Dallas union members to be elected to the state legislature.

Disregarding Dallas' reputation, the broader county's geography poised it for an effective Farm-Labor alliance. Early progressive legislators including Patrick Henry Golden connected heavily with a populist heritage that fought for the betterment of agriculturalists and factory and railway workers through statewide legislation, because local level politics did not always have the necessary scope. Dallas Democrats certainly constituted the majority of the city's political influence, but the careers of these four legislators cannot be overlooked. The steady impact of labor, and its coalition-building across ideological lines, reveals a thorough history of cooperative politics at play in Dallas during an era of Democratic dominance between 1886 and 1917.

Throughout their careers in Austin, the Dallas union-labor representatives proved to be able advocates for the working man. Pursuing legislation that empowered the producer, the quartet fought for lien guarantees, eight-hour workdays, compulsory education, workplace protections for women, protections for unionizing, among other initiatives, all of which were key tenants of the labor platform. In the second wave of labor legislators, Parks and Florer found success working alongside fellow Dallas legislators, suggesting further collaboration between conservatives and labor. The number of Dallas-specific bills, such as improving roadbuilding laws or expanding the county's criminal court, suggests that labor and conservative legislators alike recognized the need to first guarantee the continued success of a burgeoning Dallas. Furthermore, while many important bills put forward by the likes of Golden, Reiger, Parks and Florer did not find their way into lawbooks, their introduction marked their influence in the

legislature and paved the way for the passage of future labor bills. Dallas may continue to be regarded historically as a bastion of pro-business conservatism, but the careers of these four men reveal a much more complicated story.

Appendix

Table I: Labor Legislators Representing Dallas County, 1893 – 1918

Legislator	Years Served	Legislature(s)	Reason for leaving office
Patrick Henry Golden	1893	23rd	Accepted position as Dallas Street Superintendent.
John Francis Reiger	1895 – 1897	24th, 25th	Did not seek third term, circumstances unclear.
James William Parks	1913 – 1918	33rd, 34th, 35th	Lost nomination to Frank Barton Horton. Support of Gov. Ferguson seemed to cost him support.
James A. Florer	1915 – 1918	34th, 35th	Killed in car accident February 26, 1918.

Table II: Bills Authored by Patrick Henry Golden

Bill	Session Introduced	Contents	Status of Bill
HB 46	23	“An act to create and establish eight hours as a legal day’s work on all State and municipal work.”	Died in House
HB 267	23	“An act to establish a bureau of statistics upon the subject of labor. . .”	Died in House
HB 474	23	“Compensation of county and district officers.”	Died on calendar
HB 581	23	Amendments to Dallas City Charter	Died in House
HB 582	23	Amendments to Dallas City Charter	Vetoed by Governor
HB 587	23	“A bill to regulate the practice of dentistry in the state of Texas.”	Died in House
HB 652	23	“An act to protect employees and guarantee their right to belong to labor organizations.”	Died in Senate

Table III: Bills Authored by John Francis Reiger

Bill	Session Introduced	Contents	Status of Bill
HB 47	24	“An act to protect persons, associations, and unions of workingmen, incorporated or unincorporated, in their labels and trademarks and forms of advertising and names.”	Signed into law
HB 514	24	“Providing for the deposit of certain funds coming into the hands of receivers, etc., during the progress of any cause.”	Died on Speaker’s table

HB 590	24	“To regulate the sale of wearing apparel in private or public by itinerant vendors.”	Died in House
HB 663	24	“An act to regulate the hours of labor of women and children in cotton mills. . .”	Special Order
HB 687	24	“To provide for the payment of an occupation tax by railway photographers. . .”	Died on Speaker’s table
HB 420	25	“To protect workingmen in the right of organization. . .”	Died on Speaker’s table
HB 423	25	“An act to provide for the making, development, and improvement of public roads.”	Died on Speaker’s table
HB 444	25	“To define and punish vagrancy.”	Died in House

Table IV: Bills Authored and Coauthored by James William Parks

Bill	Session Introduced	Contents	Status of Bill
HB 17	33	“. . .to license, tax, and regulate places of amusement.”	Died in House
HB 208	33	Amending the Criminal Code relating to receiving stolen property and “providing what shall constitute a prima facie case.”	Did not become law
HB 487	33	“Providing for the equipment of certain buildings with fire escapes.”	Did not become law
HB 488	33	"Providing for the maintenance of healthful conditions in mercantile establishments and workshops.”	Did not become law
HB 784	33	"An act to define and license and regulate peddlers and to provide a punishment for peddles who peddle without a license...”	Died in House
HB 30	34	"To permit certain cities to allow conduct of places of amusement on Sunday.”	Did not become law
HB 61	34	“Requiring railroad companies to construct car sheds for the protection of employees.”	Did not become law
HB 62	34	"An act to protect those engaged in the erection or construction of buildings three or more stories in height...”	Did not become law
HB 63	34	"An act to protect mechanics, artisans, laborers, and materialmen for labor performed and material furnished in any building, improvements, fixtures, or articles on which they have performed any labor...”	Signed into law as Senate Bill 79
HB 64	34	"An act to make it compulsory to provide adequate fire escapes upon all buildings of over two stories in height...”	Signed into law as Senate Bill 50
HB 72	34	"Regulating the employment of children in certain occupations.”	Died in Senate; Senate Bill 63 signed into law in 1917

HB 141	34	"Providing for the licensing of persons who may engage in business of installing electrical features."	Did not become law
HB 182	34	"Authorizing cities over five thousand inhabitants to regulate and prohibit Sunday amusements."	Died in House
HB 259	34	"An act prescribing the number of employees on all trains of more than five cars transporting passengers."	Did not become law
HB 351	34	"Regulating private employment agencies. . ."	Signed into law as Senate Bill 203
HB 352	34	"Amending the anti-free pass law."	Died in House
HB 441	34	Revised Dallas roadbuilding law; "defining powers and duties of the commissioners. . ."	Signed into law
HB 479	34	". . .all elections shall be held in some school house, fire station, or other public building within the limits of the election precinct. . ."	Died on calendar; House Bill 117 passed in next session
HB 613	34	"Increasing the jurisdiction of the criminal court of Dallas County."	Signed into law
HB 20	35	"Regulating the conduct of an electrical contracting business."	Did not become law
HB 54	35	"Regulating private employment agencies."	Did not become law
HB 122	35	"Regulating the practice of chiropractic."	Did not become law
HB 363	35	"Authorizing the incorporation of farmer's cooperative societies."	Signed into law as Senate Bill 183
HB 460	35	"Regulating the number of hours patrolmen in certain cities may be required to remain on duty."	Signed into law
HB 505	35	"To provide for the safety and the protection of the health of employees in factories, mills, workshops, and mercantile establishments."	Did not become law
HB 560	35	"Providing an annual paid vacation to firemen in cities of over 25,000 inhabitants."	Signed into law
HB 684 / HB 686	35	"Preserving defenses in libel suits;" "Fixing the venue of suits for damages for libel and slander."	Did not become law
HB 702	35	"Amending the special road law for Dallas County."	Did not become law
HB 32	35-1	"To amend the law relating to the powers and duties of the Live Stock Sanitary Commission."	Did not become law
HB 94	35-4	"To protect health, etc., of female employees in various private establishments."	Signed into law
HB 100	35-4	"To provide for official stenographers to grand juries."	Did not become law

*Bills highlighted in grey indicate that James William Parks was the bill's primary sponsor.

Table V: Bills Authored and Coauthored by James A. Florer

Bill	Session Introduced	Contents	Status of Bill
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HB 108	34	“. . .requiring any child between the ages of eight and fourteen to attend school for a session of not less than 120 school days. . .”	Died in House
HB 162	34	“An act to protect and preserve the public health.”	Died in House
HB 168	34	“Relating to amending a certain Statute providing for a notarial seal and what it shall contain and administering oaths, taking acknowledgments and giving certificates thereof by notaries public.”	Did not become law
HB 170	34	“Relating to the sale of habit-forming drugs.”	Did not become law
HB 173	34	“Providing that taxes declared delinquent for any year prior to 1905 shall never be collected.”	Did not become law
HB 272	34	“Providing for the regulation of the operation of ‘jitney’ automobiles.”	Did not become law
HB 273	34	“Requiring textbooks used in Texas to be printed in Texas.”	Signed into law
HB 310	34	Re-enacting and amending the Dallas County road law.	Did not become law
HB 311	34	Relating to amending certain laws relating to the offense of swindling. . .”	Did not become law
HB 315	34	“Relating to amending certain laws defining the offense of Barratry. . .”	Did not become law
HB 364	34	“Providing for the establishment of a State Department of Charities and Correction.”	Did not become law
HB 375	34	“Relating to amending certain laws relating to the registration and endorsement of bonds issued by towns, cities and districts.”	Died in House
HB 376	34	“Authorizing the issuance of funding bonds by towns, cities, and districts.”	Died in House
HB 377	34	“Amending the law relating to the per diem pay of county commissioners.”	Did not become law
HB 381	34	“. . .amending certain laws relating to the registration and endorsement of bonds issued by towns, cities, and districts.”	Died in House
HB 382	34	“Relating to fixing the maturities of bonds issued by counties, towns, cities, and districts.”	Died in House
HB 386	34	“Relating to authorizing the recording of the ownership of municipal bonds.”	Died in House
HB 402	34	“. . .compelling children between the ages of 8 and 14 to attend school.”	Signed into law
HB 441	34	Revised Dallas roadbuilding law; “defining powers and duties of the commissioners. . .”	Signed into law
HB 474	34	“. . .creating a Petroleum Commission”	Died in House
HB 477	34	“Requiring corporations organized for the purpose of generating, manufacturing, transporting and selling gas, electric current, and power in this State to make connections. . .”	Did not become law
HB 479	34	“. . .all elections shall be held in some school house, fire station, or other public building within the limits of the election precinct. . .”	Died on calendar; House Bill 117 passed in next session

HB 601	34	“Relating to amending a certain Statute providing for the appointment of a guardian for a person of unsound mind or a habitual drunkard.”	Did not become law
HB 608	34	“Amending provisions of law relating to levee improvement districts.”	Signed into law
HB 613	34	“Increasing the jurisdiction of the criminal court of Dallas County.”	Signed into law
HB 10	34-1	“. . .promoting, improving, and assisting in the development of country schools.	Did not become law
HB 17	34-1	“Relating to providing that any corporation now or hereafter organized authorized to construct, acquire and operate electric railways shall have the power to purchase, lease or acquire the physical property, rights and franchises of any other corporation organized for like purposes.”	Signed into law as Senate Bill 15
HB 34	34-1	Regulating co-operative savings businesses and contract loan companies.	Signed into law
HB 2	35	Establishing the State Highway Commission	Signed into law
HB 145	35	Regulating plumbing	Died in House
HB 146	35	“Relating to making the use of false statement to obtain money, property or credit a felony.”	Did not become law
HB 147	35	“Relating to providing for the use and operation of rent automobiles; requiring a license and bond and prohibiting the transportation of intoxicating liquors.”	Did not become law
HB 218	35	“Relating to providing for payment of a monthly pension to indigent, widowed mothers for the partial support of their children in their home.”	Signed into law as Senate Bill 13
HB 232	35	“Providing for rest days for certain employees of railroads.”	Died in House
HB 460	35	“Regulating the number of hours patrolmen in certain cities may be required to remain on duty.”	Signed into law
HB 508	35	Creating new jurisdiction from fortieth district	Signed into law in Senate Bill 375
HB 625	35	Regulating veterinary medicine and surgery	Died in House
HB 643	35	“. . . authorizing business partners, charitable organizations and educational institutions to be beneficiaries of insurance policies.”	Did not become law
HB 685	35	“Designating what proceedings are privileged for publication.”	Did not become law

*Bills highlighted in grey indicate that James A. Florer was the bill’s primary sponsor.

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