Bellaliz Gonzalez had never heard of Midland, Michigan, before a white van dropped her off there in late May, 2020. The journey from her home in Miami, with twelve colleagues, had taken around twenty-two hours. She arrived to a region devastated by a recent flood: cracked roads, collapsed bridges. Gonzalez, a fifty-four-year-old asylum seeker from Venezuela, with neatly coiffed auburn hair, prided herself on remaining calm in dangerous situations. In Venezuela, she had worked as an environmental engineer and run several of the country’s national parks. But for the past three years, living in the U.S., she had turned to manual labor to make money. Earlier that week, she had been recruited to work with a franchise of a disaster-restoration company called Servpro, to help Midland recover. She carried her go bag, which contained steel-toed boots, thick jeans, and gold hoop earrings that helped her feel elegant while doing backbreaking work. At the job site, she received a neon-yellow vest that featured Servpro’s name on the back, and the words “Safety Starts with You.”

Gonzalez and her colleagues had rushed to Midland after a torrential downpour—the effects of Tropical Storm Arthur—had burst through two hydroelectric dams. Governor Gretchen Whitmer described the damage as “unlike anything we’ve seen in five hundred years.” Eighteen inches of water flooded the local courthouse; vehicles from a nearby vintage-car museum escaped, belly-up, from the destroyed showroom. Whitmer declared that restoring the region would be a “herculean undertaking.”

Gonzalez and her daughter, Angelica, lived in Florida with Gonzalez’s sister, Enilsa. For months, Enilsa had been begging her to quit chasing catastrophes, and, after the pandemic began, she got a job at a McDonald’s. But the work was tedious, and paid poorly. Gonzalez and her daughter slept on twin couches in Enilsa’s living room. Angelica, a senior in high school and an aspiring graphic designer, hoped to go to college, but Gonzalez wasn’t sure she could afford it. In May, 2020, working an all-night shift, Gonzalez burned her forearm baking apple pies, and took it as a sign. Soon after, she saw a WhatsApp message from a group of Venezuelan
One seasoned laborer observed that news cameras descend when a storm or a wildfire arrives but move on before the work of recovery—often its own disaster—begins.
storm workers noting a job offer from a small disaster-recovery labor broker called Back to New, based in Houston, that provided “on-demand workers, nationwide, 24/7.” It had a contract with a Servpro franchise and put out an urgent call for workers. The opportunity, the company promised, was “COVID-19 ready.”

Back to New sent more than a hundred workers to Midland from Florida and Texas, most of them Venezuelans. Many were experienced disaster workers, but some had recently been pushed into the work by pandemic debts. Leyda Yanes, a former attorney from Caracas, had worked at a bakery in Miami until it closed during the lockdowns. She had seen an ad from Back to New, and persuaded her husband, Jesús Delgado, an Uber driver, and their extended family to go to Midland. Workers told me that they had not been tested for COVID or made to wear a mask. Gonzalez wore one, and, in the van, a young woman scolded her: “Don’t you know that you’re breathing your own air in that thing? You’ll cause permanent lung damage.”

In Midland, the group found conditions that were far from “COVID-19 ready.” They were taken to a local hotel, where they learned that they’d be sleeping four to a room, two to a bed. Gonzalez and others would be cleaning floodwater and damaged goods out of the Midland hospital, including its morgue. Workers said that daily meetings were held indoors and were crowded, as was the group’s work area; they were given inadequate protective gear that quickly ran out. (Back to New denied any wrongdoing during the project.) At the end of Gonzalez’s shift, she and Yanes would scour the ground for discarded latex gloves to wash and reuse.

Still, Gonzalez couldn’t let go of her worries. She asked a supervisor why they weren’t having the temperature checks they’d been guaranteed. “The thermometer’s broken,” the woman replied, shrugging. One day, around 6 A.M., Gonzalez and other workers climbed into vans bound for the hospital. “Where’s Reinaldo?” Delgado asked. Someone replied, “He’s not feeling well.” Gonzalez’s bedmate was also ill. “Maybe it’s just the changing weather?” Gonzalez suggested. She soon learned that Quintero had been tested for COVID-19. Later, she felt a pounding headache.

On Saturday night, Gonzalez and several other workers decided to call Saket Soni, an organizer whom Gonzalez had met a few years earlier. Soni runs a nonprofit, called Resilience Force, that advocates for the fast-growing group of disaster-restoration laborers. As the workers follow storms, the organization follows them, trying to fight wage theft, avert injury, and generally prevent the kinds of disasters-within-disasters that pervade the industry. Soni is forty-three, with dark hair and owlish glasses, and an air of intense curiosity. That night, he was at his apartment in Washington, D.C., cooking an elaborate meal of octopus vindaloo. When he answered the phone, a group of workers clamored on the other end. Then Gonzalez came on the line. “Saket, it’s bad,” she said. “I think we’re contaminados.”

Apocalyptic weather has pushed many Americans into a belated recognition of the climate emergency. In the Pacific Northwest, temperatures surged past a hundred and ten degrees in June, killing more than two hundred people. In the Southwest, a “megadrought” dropped water levels to a once-in-a-millennium low. This past summer, Hurricane Ida sent Biblical rains through the roofs of homes across the Gulf Coast, then pushed north, killing at least eleven people in flooded basement apartments in New York City. But, even as awareness grows about what President Joe Biden calls our “code red” extreme-weather threat, most Americans know little about the labor crisis tucked within it.

The work of disaster recovery has always been gruelling. When the most lethal storm in U.S. history hit Galveston, Texas, in 1900, as Al Roker describes it in his book “The Storm of the Century,” “white soldiers forced Black men at gunpoint to the front lines of the most horrifying labor that any city could ever face,” which included loading hundreds of corpses onto a barge to be dumped at sea. After the Great Okeechobee Hurricane struck southern Florida, in 1928, three-fourths of those killed were migrant agricultural workers, most of them Black. Local officials conscripted the survivors to bury the dead in mass graves—pine coffins were primarily reserved for white victims—and, when some refused,
they were denied food, or shot dead. Today, the structure of the industry has radically transformed. For much of the twentieth century, many disaster-restoration businesses were mom-and-pop shops; they earned mostly modest revenues for repairing mostly modest problems (a house burned down by a stray cigarette, a chimney felled in a storm), and occasionally got windfalls when an outsized catastrophe struck. The work was done mainly by local laborers. In recent years, though, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, greenhouse-gas emissions from human activities have made extreme weather more common and more intense. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration noted a new U.S. record in 2020: a total of twenty-two “billion-dollar disasters.” Insurance companies paid out at least seventy-six billion dollars for repairs that year, and the government paid more than a hundred billion. “We’re going to spare no expense,” Biden told the Federal Emergency Management Agency this past May, announcing that he would double its funds to prepare for extreme weather.

As money poured in, companies consolidated, and began to chase extreme weather across the country, competing for insurance payouts and government contracts. Quality Awning & Construction was founded in 1946 in Dearborn, Michigan, to handle small fix-up jobs around town. By 1989, the firm had changed its name, and the brothers who ran it began sending caravans of workers to storms in other states. In 2001, the firm was sold for an estimated two hundred million dollars to Belfor USA Group, an emerging industry heavy weight then run by Mark Davis and Jeff Johnson. Today, the company does up to two billion dollars in business annually. As Forbes put it, “Climate change is good for Belfor.” Servpro, similarly, was founded as a family-owned painting business in 1967, and now has nineteen hundred locations across the U.S. and Canada.

In the past five years, private-equity firms have acquired dozens of disaster-restartion companies. In 2019, Blackstone, one of the world’s largest private-equity firms, acquired a majority stake in Servpro Industries, reportedly for more than a billion dollars. The same year, American Securities, a Manhattan-based firm, acquired Belfor. If you run a local fix-em-up firm, you can now attend a workshop in Las Vegas called “Why, How, and When to Sell Your Restoration Business,” which promises “the only sure bet in Vegas—you will come away a winner.”

Chasing disasters requires a labor force that is open to arduous work and is instantly mobile. Servpro promises to furnish workers to crisis sites within days, or even hours; one of its slogans is “Faster to any size disaster.” To marshal this force, many companies turn to an ill-regulated group of subcontractors and labor brokers, which, in turn, cultivate social networks of migrants and other people seeking economic opportunity. As demand has grown, many of these workers have come to travel a yearly catastrophe circuit.

Sergio Chávez, a sociologist at Rice University, has surveyed more than three hundred roofers from Mexico in the course of the past nine years. “At one point, they were all local roofers, stationed in Houston or Austin or San Antonio,” he told me. “Now they’re national storm chasers.” Some men see hurricane jobs as a life-transforming boon. “But the work is devastating on the body,” Chávez said. “The majority of these guys don’t have access to health insurance or paid leave.” When they’re hurt or sick, he continued, “they have informal mechanisms to recover. They’ll pool their resources and give an injured colleague as much money as possible.” The life style is also isolating: “One of my guys, a storm chaser named Juanito, died of a heart attack in his mid-thirties, from substance abuse. He was without his wife, following storms, and he was so lonely.” Existing laws to protect these workers are widely under-enforced. “After a disaster, the contractors will owe thirty thousand dollars by the time the last paycheck is due,” Chávez said. “Instead of paying, they’ll call ICE or the police.”

In the past year, I followed Resilience Force through more than twenty disaster recoveries during one of the fiercest periods of extreme weather on record. I spoke with more than a hundred workers, storm survivors, advocates, and climate-change experts, and reviewed thousands of pages of Department of Labor records, death-and-injury reports, and documents emerging from worker-mistreatment litigation. All told, I found more than two thousand credible claims of harm to workers, including instances of fatal or injurious working conditions, stolen wages, assaults, and labor trafficking. I often thought of a worry that preoccupied Gonzalez in midland: that news cameras descend when a storm or a fire arrives but move on before the work of recovery—often its own disaster—begins.

Saket Soni first encountered this nascent workforce in 2005, after Hurricane Katrina. He had grown up in New Delhi, and studied English literature and theatre at the University of Chicago. He graduated in 2000, on the eve of 9/11 and the subsequent creation of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. He bungled his immigration paperwork, an error that he thought would be "a minor thing, like an overdue library book." Instead, he became undocumented, and was dropped from his job and evicted. "I lost my foothold on normal life," he said. He assumed the alias Aram on official paperwork, a name he borrowed from a book of short stories that features migrant watermelon harvesters. Eventually, he got his visa issues resolved and found work as a community organizer. When Katrina hit, he moved to New Orleans and fought on behalf of Black residents who’d been displaced—many of them living in FEMA trailers—arguing for their right to return to their neighborhoods.

At the same time, Soni got to know the workers who were helping to rebuild the region. In City Park, hundreds of migrant laborers were sleeping in tents beneath the oak trees. One of them, Mariano Alvarado, had been a shrimper back in Honduras, until droughts tied to climate change made his livelihood untenable; in New Orleans, he spent his days clearing spoiled food from a storm-ravaged elementary school and dealing with wage theft and verbal lashings from bosses. At a boutique hotel,
Soni met Daniel Castellanos, a tall Peruvian, who had paid four thousand dollars to a labor broker on the promise of a well-paid post-Katrina construction job. When he arrived in the city, he was pressed into cleaning hotel toilets and floors for paltry wages, and sleeping on a cot alongside rats in the hotel’s basement. “We mortgaged our homes, sold property, and plunged our families into debt to pay the fees,” Castellanos said. “When I first got here, others told me, ‘Welcome to the United Slaves of America.’ And, for me, it was true.”

Soni soon got a call from an Indian pipe fitter. The man said that he had been promised a lucrative gig for a company called Signal International: he would receive a green card and temporary housing in comfortable quarters while he worked to repair Gulf Coast oil rigs damaged by the storm. He’d paid a labor broker more than ten thousand dollars for the opportunity. When he arrived, he found himself with a guest-worker visa, living with twenty-three other men in a labor camp, a squalid space the size of a double-wide trailer, paying more than a thousand dollars a month for the privilege. Soni and other organizers soon discovered that recruiters had ensnared hundreds of Indian laborers in a similar scheme. If the men protested, they were threatened with deportation; three of the group’s leaders were held under the watch of armed guards. Soni helped the workers travel to the White House and stage a hunger strike. Eventually, a broad coalition, including the American Civil Liberties Union and the Southern Poverty Law Center, sued, and secured one of the largest human-trafficking settlements in U.S. history: twenty million dollars, plus a formal apology from Signal International, which declared bankruptcy. “Signal was wrong in failing to ensure that the guest workers were treated with the respect and dignity they deserved,” the company admitted.

Soni thought that, as the Gulf Coast recovered from Katrina, the calls might fade. Instead, panicked workers dialled his number after flooding in Baton Rouge, in 2016, and after Hurricane Harvey hit Texas, in 2017. He noticed that, following Katrina, many workers had begun to live on the road, making use of the skills they’d acquired while rebuilding New Orleans. “I realized a new identity was forming among these workers, who regarded themselves not just as day laborers, but as people who repair after disasters,” Soni said. He started calling them “resilience workers,” and conducted a series of in-depth interviews for a document he titled “A Taxonomy of Jobs at the End of the World.”

Around the country, advocates were noticing new links between climate change and labor exploitation. Nadia Marín-Molina, who co-directs the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, told me, “After Katrina, we realized that we needed to reach out and support immigrant workers during disaster recovery, and also to create longer-term structures across the country, like local workers’ centers.” The workers lacked a shared shop floor or a consistent employer, but Soni, too, believed that they needed to be organized. He came to see their fates as entwined with those of the people disproportionately affected by disasters, including low-income survivors of hurricanes and wildfires. He started to advocate for those people as well. In the fall of 2017, Soni, Castellanos, and others formed Resilience Force.

Over the next few years, Soni and Castellanos hopscotched between disaster zones, slipping onto job sites to speak to workers and hand out flyers, bottled water, and beef jerky. (Often, Castellanos carried a Bible in his bag, so that, if challenged by management, he and Soni could pretend to be Seventh-day Adventists.) After Hurricane Irma hit the Florida Keys, in 2017, a tip led them to Gonzalez.

In Venezuela, Gonzalez had balanced her job as a conservationist with life as a single mother. She often brought Angelica with her into open fields to plant mahogany trees—“the lungs of the earth,” she called them. But in early 2017 she got into a series of clashes at work, including when she fought against the deforestation of a bird sanctuary. She faced threats of violence, and fled to Miami. A friend soon told her about a disaster-restoration opportunity at the Hyatt Residence Club Key West, Windward Pointe. “I’ve been an office worker my whole life,” Gonzalez protested. But she signed on with a fly-by-night labor broker that supplied low-wage workers to Cotton Commercial USA, a behemoth disaster-restoration firm. The labor broker drove her to the country’s southernmost tip, where a sign read:

**END OF THE RAINBOW**
**UNLIMITED OPPORTUNITIES**
**TROPICAL VACATIONLAND**

When Gonzalez arrived at the battered hotel, she was put to work stripping soggy carpets and carrying broken fans out of mold-ridden rooms. She was euphoric when she received her first check, but her second bounced, as did her third. She also wasn’t paid for overtime, a considerable portion of her earnings. Other workers were being cheated, too; when colleagues texted to complain, they later alleged, their boss responded, “I am American,” and “I owe you nothing ok stop bothering [me] or immigration will come to your house.”

When Castellanos got in touch, Gonzalez thought, “The last thing I’d want is for immigration to come and put me in prison.” But her mother had always told her, “If a man treats you poorly, speak up.” That week, she began gathering evidence, turning over faulty checks and time stamps to Resilience Force. The team filed a class-action suit against Cotton and its subcontractors, and the workers received fifty thousand dollars plus legal fees in a settlement with Cotton. (A spokesperson for Cotton said that it conceded no wrongdoing and had paid the labor broker for the work, adding that the company “believes workers are entitled to just compensation and has a more than twenty-year history partnering with third-party labor providers.”) The labor broker could not be reached for comment. Gonzalez told me, “After that, I stopped being afraid that we didn’t have papers, and started realizing that we could organize together.”

Members of Resilience Force often noticed tensions between residents and the workers coming to rebuild their towns. In 2018, after Hurricane Michael hit the Florida Panhandle, undocumented workers fixed the homes of Donald Trump supporters who wished to see them deported; Confederate flags sometimes flew out front. “We wanted to build relationships between the work-
ers and the beneficiaries of their labor,” Soni said. The team canvassed residents and found that many felt left behind by FEMA. A white father of three told Soni about being evicted from government housing for storm survivors and having to move his family into a tent outside a church, saying, “It feels like we went through a hurricane twice.”

Resilience Force began recruiting workers to rebuild the homes of local residents in need, without charge, after which they’d share a big dinner and talk. Soni recalled that, after one such meal, which Gonzalez attended, a white mortician who’d hung a sign reading “Strangers Will Be Shot” on his door quietly took it down. “It’s not inevitable that the traumatic experience of a disaster will lead to more solidarity between political adversaries,” Soni said. “But at the micro level it creates an opening.”

In the days after the storm, law enforcement had tacitly accepted the presence of undocumented workers. As the Panhandle regained its footing, though, Soni saw a change. A task force, including the Bay County Sheriff’s Office, staged a series of undercover sting operations: when workers came to fix houses with damaged roofs, and quoted a price, the “homeowners” arrested them for “contracting without a license”—a felony during a state of emergency—then, if they were undocumented, turned them over to ICE for deportation. (A spokesperson for the sheriff’s office wrote to me, “It was NEVER about immigration. It was about non-licensed, substandard work on the homes of our residents already suffering the loss of their property.” Unscrupulous contractors have, in some cases, preyed on storm survivors.) Workers, prepped by Resilience Force, testified at county-commission meetings against the crackdown and spoke with local officials to convince them that they were vital to the region’s economic recovery.

The physical perils of resilience work became increasingly evident to Soni. A forty-three-year-old roofer stepped on a skylight and fell to his death; three utility workers were struck and killed by a pickup truck while repairing power lines. Resilience Force often encountered the same people doing dangerous tasks in storm after storm. One afternoon, a man named Gustavo, in a panic, told Soni about a co-worker with whom he had been fixing a nearby roof. Their boss had urged them to continue through a rainstorm without safety harnesses, and the colleague had slipped and fallen fifteen feet to the driveway beneath. “Blood was coming from his mouth like a faucet,” Gustavo said. Looking at a picture, Soni instantly recognized the man: it was Mariano Alvarado, the Honduran shrimper he had met in New Orleans after Katrina. He and Castellanos rushed to the hospital, where they found Alvarado in a coma; when he finally woke up, two days later, he learned that he’d ruptured a disk in his back, lost thirty per cent of his vision, and developed blood clots in his brain. Doctors later removed the clots, an expensive procedure for which he had no insurance coverage. For days, he was unable to talk or walk. To Soni, it was “an instant, horrible vindication of why Resilience Force was on the right track.”

In the years that followed, Soni and his colleagues met some five thousand disaster workers. They recruited many, including Gonzalez, to be informal member-advocates—what Soni called “our eyes and ears on the ground”—sharing screenshots of job advertisements, sending updates about their work-site conditions, and reminding co-workers of their rights. Soni bought a corkboard map of the United States for charting workers’ journeys, and devoted a red pushpin to Gonzalez. When the pandemic began, he learned that she and dozens of other Venezuelans were heading to Michigan, the site of

Gonzalez worked several disasters last year, including hurricanes, floods, and fires.
one of the first major pandemic-era climate disasters, and worried about how the two crises might collide.

By the time Gonzalez called Resilience Force from her hotel room in Midland, she had a fever and a painful ache spreading up her spine. She and the other workers demanded COVID tests, but the county health department was closed during their off-hours, and workers told me that Back to New made it difficult for them to go during the workday. When some of the workers did manage to make the trip, twenty-two tested positive. One of Back to New’s co-owners was asked to convey the Governor’s order that they quarantine for fourteen days. Instead, workers said, he told many of them that they were fired. He was sending them back to Florida and Texas, workers said, cramming the sick together with the healthy for the journey.

Gonzalez had once helped Resilience Force to craft a comic-book-style manual that they handed out in disaster zones, teaching laborers how to document job-site abuses. (“Get the terms of your employment in writing.” “Take pictures of license plates of your employers if you are able.”) Now she tried to put this advice into practice. That Sunday morning, hardly able to move, she was thrown out of her hotel with her colleagues. Standing in the parking lot, she filmed a dispatch on her cell phone. “My name is Bellaliz Gonzalez, and I’m fifty-four years old,” she said. “Here, they treated us like animals.” She panned across a parking lot, filming her sick colleagues, who were being put into vans in defiance of the Governor’s orders. (Some were taken to Indiana, to work another disaster for Back to New.) “They didn’t care about our lives,” she said.

Resilience Force forwarded Gonzalez’s footage to authorities and the local press. The organization took up the job of contact tracing and rented Airbnb’s so that workers could quarantine once they reached home. Gonzalez hole up alone and shooed with fever, not telling Enisa or Angelica; Cynthia Hernandez, a Resilience Force organizer who’d grown close to Gonzalez, bought her soup. She slowly recovered. Help reached Yanes and Delgado too late, and the couple soon fell ill, as did their grandchildren. Yanes recovered quickly, but Delgado had to be hospitalized. On oxygen in the emergency room, he hallucinated that he was stuck in a singing contest, just as Quintero had encouraged him to perform at the Midland morgue. In order to stay alive, he had to prod himself and say, “Keep singing! Keep singing!” He eventually returned home and began driving an Uber again, with an oxygen tank in the passenger seat.

Soni and his team drafted a legal strategy. They documented accounts from dozens of workers and tallied a series of alleged legal violations by Servpro Industries, their franchisees, and Back to New. All told, they said, it amounted to “highly unsafe and life-threatening conditions during the course of disaster recovery work.” They alleged that in Indiana, as in Midland, a mass infection occurred and many workers were sent back to Florida. This past April, Resilience Force was dealt a blow. In a hearing, Servpro Industries’ lawyer argued that the company “did not employ any of these Plaintiffs,” because its franchisees and their subcontractors are independently owned and operated. A week later, the judge agreed, dismissing the claims against Servpro Industries and allowing only the claims against the smaller entities to continue. (A spokesperson for Servpro Industries said that the company was “not in any way involved in the provision of these services.”) The local franchisees could not be reached for comment. The co-owner of Back to New wrote, in a statement, “We deny the specific allegations of wrongdoing.”) Servpro continued to make millions during the pandemic; vans travelled around the country emblazoned with another of its corporate slogans, “Like It Never Even Happened.” More than ever, Soni felt that

PENCIL & PEN

A minute is so long
on my birthday
snow feasts
on the open
air and she
bought me flowers
in my color
which is
orange
my color is orange
you don’t know
your color is
orange. I do
but it is such
a gift
Myra had snow
I said
I want that
and now it
has come
71 is a birthday
of tiny
gifts
crafts and tinkers
just like
this

—Eileen Myles
On a chilly Thursday in October, 2020, I met Soni in New Orleans, and we set out for Lake Charles, Louisiana. Hurricane Laura, a Category 4 storm, had just hit, damaging more than five hundred thousand houses and other properties. The region was full of oil refineries and chemical manufacturers, and, after the storm, black plumes of chlorine gas wafted over town. Right away, hundreds of resilience workers rushed in. (Gonzalez helped to clear debris from an airport before leaving to work in another part of the region.)

Soni was accompanied on the trip by Stephanie Teatro, an organizer with red-fringed bangs, and Osman, a roofer who moonlights as a preacher. Osman had been arrested in a sting operation in the Florida Panhandle, and was now awaiting deportation proceedings. Soni also introduced me to one of his newest hires, Mariano Alvarado, the Honduran man who had fallen from the roof in Florida. “He’s a Job-like figure,” Soni said. Alvarado still had nerve pain, poor balance, and post-traumatic stress, but his work with Resilience Force gave him a sense of purpose. “I think God made this happen,” he told me, “because people need to know our stories.”

When a storm descends on a town, many resilience workers converge on the parking lot of the nearest Home Depot—a spot they call the Corner—where some live out of their cars for weeks or months while hustling for jobs. (The Resilience Force crew often sleeps in the parking lot, too.) As we pulled into the Lake Charles Home Depot lot at dawn, Soni tallied at least fifty workers. Many had driven from Texas, Alabama, or Florida, and most spoke Spanish. Some had affixed hand-painted signs to their cars (“HANDYMAN”) or stencilled ads onto their vans (“Hot Patch / Holes in Walls / Give us a call, we do it all”). In the early-morning hours, prospective employers often arrived in flatbed trucks, shouting out job offers: did anyone want to gather bushels of shattered glass from a local business, for three hundred dollars a bucket? Food trucks follow workers to storm sites, serving traditional meals from their home countries. A group of Mexican women sold hot tamales from plastic coolers; an Afro-Honduran woman ladled Garifuna stew into disposable bowls. Soni enthusiastically devoured a chicken foot, saying, “Duty calls!”

At least half a dozen people recognized Soni and Castellanos from previous storms. Some showed them fresh injuries they’d got on the job. An undocumented worker from Honduras had an oozing wound in his foot but hadn’t gone to the hospital, because he didn’t have insurance. Omar, an undocumented roofer, said, “Look at my hands”; they glow red with friction burns from shovelling toxic silt out of a local home without proper gloves. Omar said, “I’m forty-five, and it’s too hard to keep sleeping in a car.”

Some workers lacked even a car to bed down in. Soni approached a man named George, a white worker with a scruffy beard, and asked, “Where are you sleeping?” The man pointed to a patch of pavement in front of a PetSmart. He had no tent, pillow, blanket, or tools. He’d recently got out of jail and hitched a ride to town, hearing that he might find work there even during the pandemic. Soni bought him two sausages from a food truck. “Here’s my cell-phone number,” he said, handing the man a card. “What you’re doing here is an important public service.”

Resilience Force was offering free laminated I.D.s for workers who lacked government identification. Castellanos carried a portable I.D.-maker in a canvas bag, taking names and personal identification photos of workers as they arrived. They’d then be able to work job offers: did anyone want to gather bushels of shattered glass from a local business, for three hundred dollars a bucket? Food trucks follow workers to storm sites, serving traditional meals from their home countries. A group of Mexican women sold hot tamales from plastic coolers; an Afro-Honduran woman ladled Garifuna stew into disposable bowls. Soni enthusiastically devoured a chicken foot, saying, “Duty calls!”

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Just before sundown, the Resilience Force crew gathered in the parking lot for a worker meeting. Castellanos created a semicircle of folding chairs, and Soni used bales of hay to build a staircase to a stage: the back of a pickup truck flanked by bags of onions. As laborers took their seats, Alvarado polled the group’s storm “résumés”: “Who worked Hurricane Harvey?” Four of them had. Michael? Five. The Baton Rouge floods? Twelve. The early part of the event centered around identity building. “Your work is honorable!” Soni told the group. “If you don’t fix the homes and the schools and the banks, how will people in Lake Charles get back to living?”

Teatro described Resilience Force’s political vision. Locally, it was lobbying community leaders to recognize the value of protecting rebuilders’ rights. Nationally, it was pushing for a pathway to citizenship for undocumented resilience workers. A Honduran man called out, “It’ll never happen.” An older worker retorted, “I came here in the nineties, and I’m legal now. It takes time, but we have to dream big.” Osman asked the audience to share their struggles. One said, “Yesterday, cops came here targeting people with our color skin, as if we were trash.” Soni responded, “You won’t be safe and secure on your own—the cops are organized, ICE is organized.” He added, “If you want to enter a common fight, I ask you to stand.” Almost everyone did. Osman closed the meeting by lifting his arms. “Let’s pray,” he said. “Protect us from accidents, protect us from police. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.”

When getting an education in the lives of disaster-recovery workers, you encounter a diverse array of crises. Some of the most striking allegations I heard were of outright labor trafficking. David Gautreaux, a forty-four-year-old roofer, told me that, in 2017, he got excited about a job offer from a North Carolina company fixing roofs in the U.S. Virgin Islands after Hurricane Irma. He said that he was promised twenty-two hundred dollars a week. But, when he arrived, his employer put him in a remote hotel without access to potable water or transportation. He and some of his colleagues worked for nearly a month without pay, according to a lawsuit filed by eight workers last year. “Soon, I’d done gone through all the money I had,” Gautreaux told me. “I’m ashamed to say it, but one day, sitting there with nothing to eat, I stole pork chops to cook.”

Workers told me that one of Gautreaux’s group got a splinter of sheet metal...
implanted in his eye and was told to walk to the hospital. When members of the group spoke up about their conditions, according to the legal complaint, their bosses “threatened Plaintiffs with death or serious bodily injury, and coerced Plaintiffs to continue working or else they would never be paid.” Jeremy Santos, a foreman from Puerto Rico, told me, “Instead of sending the money back to our wives, our wives are the ones sending money to us, and we’re having to tell them to pawn our tools back home to keep the lights on.” He added, “This is a federal project of the U.S. government—this is FEMA money! And yet, they say no one is aware of this abuse?” (An attorney for the companies in the case said that they deny the allegations, and the suit has been ordered into arbitration.)

Another widespread threat is assault—physical, verbal, and sexual. In Grand Isle, Louisiana, a white businessman struck two Black women on a hurricane repair crew while shouting racist epithets. (He later pleaded guilty to federal civil-rights violations.) Last summer, after hailstorms struck Loveland, Colorado, two men assessing damaged roofs were reportedly held at gunpoint by a man in fatigues, who described them to police as “antifa guys.” A worker who cleaned out incinerated hotels and office buildings after a recent fire in California told me that the bosses on the project had sexually harassed several women workers, called the men “wetbacks,” and failed to pay them as promised. “Many of the guys had already just lost their homes in the fire, and they were sleeping in their cars, just trying to survive,” he said. “And then, to be cheated?”

Work sites are full of preventable dangers. Consulting with Matt Nadel of the Yale Investigative Reporting Lab, I tallied more than forty resilience workers’ deaths over the past ten years. They died of heatstroke, flesh-eating bacteria, falls, electrocution. Many more deaths have likely never been acknowledged. “There’s a total undercounting of the true number of injuries from disaster cleanups,” Debbie Berkowitz, who during the Obama years worked at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration protecting disaster-recovery workers, told me. “It’s an industry with an incredibly vulnerable workforce made up of many workers of color and immigrant workers who have very high rates of underreporting when they get hurt.”

Wage theft may be the most pervasive problem faced by resilience workers—an economic crime that law enforcement rarely chooses to prosecute. In a study for the National Day Laborer Organizing Network and the Fe y Justicia Worker Center, Nik Theodore, a professor at the University of Illinois Chicago, found that more than three-quarters of day laborers in Houston had experienced wage theft, and more than a quarter had been victimized in the month after Hurricane Harvey. Soni dislikes the term “wage theft,” because he believes that it fails to capture the full harm. “In a disaster zone, wage theft isn’t really just wage theft—it’s an index of forced labor,” he told me. If your employer owes you money, you’re paradoxically more, not less, likely to keep showing up to the job, holding out hope of being granted what you’re owed. After a major storm or fire, your only access to safe drinking water and food may come through your employer. “The fear of retaliation is strong, and, if you sit down to strike, you’ll be fired and lose all of your pay,” he said. “In these disaster environments, housing is often provided by the employer, and if you’re not paid you have nowhere else to go. You have no gas money, no car, no choice.”

Biden has spoken often of the jobs that can be created by investing in climate resilience but has said little about how to safeguard this workforce from abuse, which pervades many FEMA-funded projects. The Trump Administration gutted OSHA, an already poorly funded agency, and it now has fewer...
to recover.” Soni has also drafted a plan to make it more difficult—not less—for people to access disaster food assistance, making employers of disaster aid workers—such as barbers, bartenders, and massage therapists who had lost their jobs during the pandemic, retraining them as aid workers supporting storm evacuees.

A few minutes after the meeting in Lake Charles ended, the mood turned. Castellano’s phone was buzzing with texts warning of an altercation in a nearby Walmart parking lot. We drove over and found more than fifty workers scattered across the lot, distressed and outraged. About twenty had surrounded a car and were smacking the windshield like a young man—a manager from Contractor Support Group, a Texas-based company that delivers thousands of workers to disaster-repair firms—covered inside and tried to drive away.

“That bitch is gonna pay!” a young woman shouted at the vehicle.

“Give us what you owe us!” yelled another.

The people in the lot had been working on a project run by Signal Restoration Services, a Michigan-based company. (It has no relation to Signal International, the corporation that trafficked Indian workers after Katrina.) Signal had landed a large deal to repair the Isle of Capri casino, whose gambling barge had broken free during the storm and hit a bridge, and another to clean up more than a hundred buildings for the parish school district. Some of the workers had found the job through Facebook; when they arrived, they were given Signal safety vests. But, weeks into the work, many complained that they still hadn’t been paid their full salaries, if they’d been paid at all. For days, representatives from Contractor Support Group had told the workers to show up at various locations—an abandoned movie theatre, a parking lot, a school—a safe bet.” Today, the company travels to all corners of the country with huge white trucks, carting an arsenal of specialized equipment (air scrubbers, moisture meters), and relies on subcontractors and manpower agencies to find general laborers.

In the parking lot, a man from Jeanerette, Louisiana, told me that he and his wife had been shovelling mud and other detritus out of a local elementary school for a month, and hadn’t been paid. “We drive two and a half hours every day for this job—it’s like we’re practically paying them!” he said. Misty Zeledon, a chain-smoking woman with glittery eye shadow, told me that she had been keeping a journal documenting verbal abuse, improper protective equipment, a lack of promised food, and withheld paychecks. “Me? I don’t work for free,” she said. (The C.S.G. spokesperson claimed that protective gear and food were provided for the workers.) A twenty-three-year-old local named Brian Williams had escaped his mobile home when the hurricane descended, and was living in a hotel hours away with his fiancée and infant daughter. For a month, he had been cleaning out insulation, which gave him hives, and said he still hadn’t been paid. “My baby is down to three cans of canned milk,” he said. (The C.S.G. spokesperson said that the company had not received a medical complaint about Williams’s hives.)

The manager in the car had contacted 911 for help, and local police rolled up. Williams helped defuse the situation, and the crowd agreed to disperse in accordance with a local curfew.
impressed, took down Williams's number as a potential organizing ally.

The next night, the tension escalated at a Signal command center, just outside the Isle of Capri casino. Castellanos, Soni, and I ducked past security guards and into an area that looked like a military encampment. Large trailers had been converted into sleeping quarters where a largely white, mostly male managerial class bedded down each night. (Many laborers were commuting from hours away, sleeping in cars, or paying for rooms in distant hotels, some sharing beds.) About eighty workers demanding their pay. One manager addressed the crowd: “I’ve got five minutes before I call the police on people.” When he spotted me taking notes, he told a colleague, “There’s a journalist here. Call the police.” Another boss said, between swigs of a bottle, “This is giving me erectile dysfunction.” When I asked his name, he replied, “Right now, no hablo English.” A third supervisor urged the protesters to go to the latest address that Contractor Support Group had issued, the parking lot of a second Walmart, for payment. “No more addresses!” someone shouted. “Give us our money!” I spoke to a dozen workers until Castellanos approached. “You look surprised,” he said. “This happens everywhere we go. Always.”

Soni spent the next few months at home, gathering evidence against Signal. He tapped at a computer on his standing desk facing an enormous bookcase filled with labor and climate-change literature, a whole shelf devoted to John Steinbeck. Nearby, he had a black go bag, stuffed with audio devices, a coffeemaker, a wireless hot spot, some cash, and a small container of cumin, his “survival spice” for bland hotel food. Just before last Thanksgiving, Soni faxed Davis, the Signal C.E.O., a copy of Resilience Force’s lawsuits against Cotton and Servpro.

When Davis first heard Soni’s name, he was at his home in Florida, icing a groin injury he had sustained in Lake Charles while overseeing company work; a trusted manager had called to report unrest among the workers, telling Davis, “It’s a mob mentality—this could be a powder keg,” and attributing the protests to Resilience Force. Davis read up on the group feeling irked, thinking, “These guys are all stick and no carrot. His frustration escalated a few weeks later, when he received a copy of a letter Soni had sent to the head of the

school board in the parish where Signal was contracted, asking that it not be paid until the wage-theft allegations were resolved. Davis believed that his company was providing a vital service to a community in urgent need. Disaster work, he told me, is “very similar to a military operation, but without the budget the federal government brings to a war.” It requires ingenuity just to recruit sufficient labor. “You can’t predict where a storm will hit, or when, or on what scale, so how do you prepare?” he asked.

The two men agreed to meet on Zoom. On the call, Soni told Davis about a migrant worker named Veronica who’d driven seven hours from South Texas to seek her unpaid wages, a trip that had cost her seven hundred dollars in transportation and hotel costs; she’d been selling apples on the street to cover it. (Her supervisor on the job had allegedly told her that she was “pretty but dumb.”) Eight subcontracted workers from out of town, Davis learned, were lodged in the same hotel room at one of his sites, sharing beds. (“That is against our hotel policy,” the C.S.G. spokesperson said. “Company policy is two people per room.”)

To Davis, the scale of the problem looked clear. He had already heard of such issues, and told Soni that he had begun to address them. “When I was nine years old, working the milo fields, I expected to get paid,” he said. “Having someone do a job and not get paid for it? I can’t wrap my arms around it.” His company relied on subcontractors, which he saw as a necessity, but he conceded that it left him little visibility into workers’ conditions. “When the sub hires a sub, that’s when it gets out of control,” he said. He asked Soni, “Who’s doing this better?” Soni replied, “But that’s the point. There’s no one.” Soni told Davis that he’d like to partner with him to create a new set of industry-wide standards for disaster work that would build accountability into the field’s supply chain.

In early May, Davis invited the Resilience Force team to join him at the headquarters of his and Torre’s newest business acquisition, PuroClean, in Tamara, Florida. The franchise specializes in fires and floods, and also cleans up meth labs, the homes of hoarders, and murder scenes, advertising a service for “deodorizing locations where traumatic
events have occurred." Davis showed Soni its Flood House, a fully furnished home that his colleagues routinely doused with tens of thousands of gallons of water to teach students the science of home restoration. Afterward, the teams sat down around a boardroom table and addressed four key issues affecting workers: wages, housing, safety, and food. At one point, Soni mentioned Gonzalez, who lived nearby. "She worked for eleven dollars an hour," he said. "Do you think these workers are more valuable than that?"

Davis's competitors, confronted by Resilience Force, had dodged and deflected. But Davis came to see basic labor protections as both fair and feasible. "Quite frankly, the insurance industry allows for the minimum standards these workers deserve—the overtime, the travel pay, the food, the safety training," he said, "and there's no reason not to meet them." By June, the two sides had a deal. Davis agreed to a fifteen-dollar floor wage for all "general laborers." Crucially, Signal would pay dues into a labor rights fund, which would include money for enforcement. In return, it would reap a range of benefits, including training sessions to build the skills of laborers for their projects. Seasoned worker-experts, like Gonzalez, could get certified to inspect Signal's sites and to lead the training.

This fall, as disaster season accelerated, Davis and Soni recruited other companies to adopt the standards. Right away, some of the industry's largest players agreed to talk. Soni hopes to cajole a dozen or more to sign on, leaning on the private-equity firms that own them. He agreed to talk. Soni hopes to cajole a dozen or more to sign on, leaning on the private-equity firms that own them. He agreed to talk. Soni hopes to cajole a dozen or more to sign on, leaning on the private-equity firms that own them. He agreed to talk. Soni hopes to cajole a dozen or more to sign on, leaning on the private-equity firms that own them. He agreed to talk. Soni hopes to cajole a dozen or more to sign on, leaning on the private-equity firms that own them. He agreed to talk. Soni hopes to cajole a dozen or more to sign on, leaning on the private-equity firms that own them. He agreed to talk. Soni hopes to cajole a dozen or more to sign on, leaning on the private-equity firms that own them. He agreed to talk. Soni hopes to cajole a dozen or more to sign on, leaning on the private-equity firms that own them. He agreed to talk. Soni hopes to cajole a dozen or more to sign on, leaning on the private-equity firms that own them. He agreed to talk. Soni hopes to cajole a dozen or more to sign on, leaning on the private-equity firms that own them. 

In Pensacola, Gonzalez had helped recruit more than twenty storm workers for an organizing dinner with Resilience Force. Many had survived the COVID outbreak in Midland. Reinaldo Quintero sang a ballad. Soni asked the group a leading question: "If you could have total stability, and guaranteed fair wages, would you make a career out of resilience work?" Most nodded, but Gonzalez said, "This work, it’s difficult—it means being far from my daughter. Honestly, if I could find some other way, I would."

Two days later, another hurricane approached Pensacola, and, after my phone buzzed with an evacuation order, I left town at 6 A.M. Gonzalez stayed for a while (storm workers are exempt from mandatory evacuations), then went to Colorado to help rebuild a town after a wildfire. She’d been assigned to restore a home but sat down on the owner’s couch at lunch to eat a sandwich and was instantly fired and made to pay her own way back to Florida.

In Miami, we went out to eat at an Olive Garden. Angelica sat with us, scrolling through her phone and eavesdropping. She said, "O.K., Mom, I’m actually learning about your life." She told me, "I’m not, like, ‘Save the trees’—that’s my mom’s thing." But she was impressed that her mother had confronted anti-immigrant families in Florida. "Yes, in the Panhandle, the white people changed their opinion of us," Gonzalez said. Still, she worried about the long-term toll of the job. Soni often argued that resilience workers were "like the early coal miners, the ones who got black lung disease—they knew they were breathing stuff that was bad for them, but they weren’t sure what it was, and Congress hadn’t yet acted to protect them."

Gonzalez had become fixated on what she could do to make people pay attention to workers like her. One night, she drafted a proposal. "Let’s just think what would happen without the presence of immigrants in restoration work," she wrote. "We risk our lives more, and yet, we are the ones who get the least well paid." She had ideas about what workers deserve: access to hygienic bathrooms, nutritious food, better wages. The people at the top, making the most money, she thought, ought to be accountable for what happens down the supply chain. "They’re responsible," she said. "I hope we can set a precedent to teach these companies about respect—like how to see us as more than just machines for our labor."

Gonzalez also hoped more people would realize how lonely disaster work could be. She had begun writing poetry infused with hurricane metaphors. (In one, "Imaginary Winds," she writes of how "the subtle breeze of a great love dissolves," replaced by gusts of "pain deep within the heart.")

As we spoke, Gonzalez's phone pinged. "Are you going to this year's hurricane season?" a friend she'd met in Pensacola texted. She paused. "Not this year," she wrote back, then turned to me, conflicted. "My mother’s heart feels good," she said, "but my adventurer’s heart aches." Gonzalez has been talking to Soni about becoming a trainer for resilience workers. In the meantime, she's found temporary work in the pharmaceutical industry, which allows her to live at home. I asked her whether she was sure that she'd never return to a storm job. "In Venezuela, there’s a saying," she told me. "Don't ever say, 'I won't drink that water. You never know how thirsty you'll get."