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USA

Making Care Work Green

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“Domestic workers arrive to smoke, ash,” the headline in the Los Angeles Times read on October 29, 2019. [1] Unaware of mandatory evacuations from a fire sweeping through exclusive enclaves near the Getty Museum, domestic workers had trudged up deserted streets and through particle-filled air not wanting to be late to their jobs; losing even one day’s pay could make it impossible to afford housing, food, or medicine. [2] They discovered that their employers had fled hours earlier without notifying them or advising them to stay away from the evacuation zone.

Such scenes have become more salient in recent years. Similarly, in 2018, amid a massive mudslide that stranded hundreds of people and killed over twenty, home aides in affluent Montecito, CA, sheltered in place to care for the elderly. Domestic workers remained behind to clean and tend to the grounds. Some were directed to guard property while everyone who could escaped. For all the reporting on structures destroyed and neighborhoods uprooted, few have questioned what happens to household workers when their workplaces are in the middle of disaster zones. Most only get paid when they show up. Many lack health insurance. Those who are undocumented may be afraid to enter evacuation centers. Some cannot access or understand emergency alerts, since governments have failed to address linguistic and cultural gaps in their response systems. [3] Those who are live-in employees depend on their jobs for shelter.

While care workers—predominantly immigrants and women of color—play a critical role in the economy by enabling their employers’ own economic participation, their low wages compel them to labor even amid grave danger. Thus, domestic workers themselves have built a movement to improve health and safety protections in their workplaces, and disseminate information to workers. While some narrowly associate the “Green New Deal” with clean manufacturing and environmentally friendly infrastructure, domestic and care workers draw important links between environmental and economic justice. They bring sustainability into the home—both figuratively by maintaining daily life and aiding elders, and materially by doing so healthfully. Their efforts to eliminate toxic household cleaning products and improve fire safety communicate a message at the heart of the Green New Deal: that better working conditions and environmental protection are intertwined.

In the 2000s, domestic workers organized into associations, unions, cooperatives, and worker centers throughout the United States. Under the leadership of the umbrella National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), they lobbied for various Domestic Workers Bills of Rights, seeking overtime pay, paid sick days, meal and rest breaks, written contracts, fair scheduling, and basic protections against sexual harassment and gender and racial discrimination, among other measures. [4] As of Fall 2019, nine states and two municipalities have passed various versions, with ongoing campaigns elsewhere. Senator Kamala Harris and Representative Pramila Jayapal (D-Washington) have also introduced federal legislation. [5] More recent bills compare favorably with Convention #189, “Decent Work for Domestic Workers,” which U.S. workers and their counterparts from over forty nations won at the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2011. Two years later, delegates from the NDWA helped transform the International Domestic Worker Network—the formation assembled to push for the ILO convention—into the International Domestic Worker Federation (IDWF), the first woman-led global trade union federation.

The ILO convention specifies that “every domestic worker has the right to a safe and healthy working environment.” Drawing upon this provision, its accompanying advisory recommendation, and national and local laws, organized domestic workers have worked to expand protections against both daily environmental challenges and disasters. [6] At its second Congress in November 2018, the IDWF identified environmental sustainability as a workers’ rights issue. The delegates understood that climate change affects their work. For example, water shortages can render domestic workers unable to wash clothes. On the other hand, they know that how they clean and cook impacts the larger environment and their own health. Their work, after all, exposes them to health and safety risks, including

illnesses among those they care for, toxic chemicals in cleaning agents, and environmental hazards like the Getty fire.

Thus, domestic worker activists have offered a broad vision of clean communities, pure air and water, healthy children, and “respect for all living things.” [7] To this end, the Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California, an immigrant rights NGO, established an environmental justice committee that connects decent working conditions to sustainability. It aims to educate the larger Latina community about the toxicity of commercial cleaning supplies, healthful alternatives, and the need for political action to force companies to list the ingredients in their products. Further, the California Domestic Workers Coalition—“in conjunction with the Center for Environmental Health and other advocates”—successfully lobbied for passage of the Cleaning Product Right to Know Act in 2017. [8] And the proposal for a national bill of rights would “make[] cleaning supply safety information more transparent and provide[] safety and health education grants for domestic workers to community-based organizations.”

Domestic workers have successfully engaged feminist, worker, and immigrant rights allies to transform the legacies of sexual and racial oppression that have historically stripped them of critical labor protections. [9] These allies now turn to countering the aftermath of wild fires. After brutal 2017 conflagrations, the Graton Day Labor Center and North Bay Jobs with Justice in Sonoma County, and Central Coast United for A Sustainable Economy in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, spearheaded funds to aid immigrant families who did not qualify for government disaster relief. [10] In addition, Hand in Hand, a domestic employer organization, partnered with the California Domestic Worker Coalition to issue, “In the Age of Climate Change, Fires & Post-Fire Cleaning Tips for Housecleaner Employers & All of Us.” Calling on readers to “put health first,” this guide offers best practices for domestic employers and others to support workers during and after climate-related natural disasters. [11] It advises employers on compensating employees who miss workdays due to environmental risks, on the proper tools to provide workers for safe clean-ups, and on preparing for future disasters.

In seeking to revalue the care work economy, we should consider how it is embedded not only in the state, family, and market, but also the ecosystem writ large. In caring for planet earth, we can create the conditions for sustaining a more caring society.

PS:

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[1] <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-10-28/getty-fire-housekeepers-arrive-to-work>.

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/oct/30/california-fires-workers-kincade-easy>.

[3] <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-11-04/wildfires-immigrants-housekeepers>.

[4] <https://www.domesticworkers.org/>.

[5] <https://www.vox.com/2019/7/15/20694610/kamala-harris-domestic-workers-bill-of-rights-act>.

[6] https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C189.

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[7] <https://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/20498/house-worker-domestic-labor-toxic-cleaning-products>.

[8] [<https://www.cadomesticworkers.org/policy-advocacy/victories/>-< <https://www.cadomesticworkers.org/policy-advocacy/victories/>].

[9] https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190
<https://time.com/3664912/flsa-home-care-history/>.

[10] <https://undocufund.org/>.

[11]

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Aqm4eM36P7zhNsoMsBNla4ZImansaam8/view?link_id=1&can_id=ff424362b6bfaa53c3857d6ee1e66a1a&source=email-protecting-your-family-and-cleaner-during-fire-season&email_referrer=email_652200_subject_848186&email_subject=protecting-your-family-and-cleaner-during-fire-season.