Turn Mutual Aid Into Meaningful Work

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Community care as formal employment seems necessary in the face of a disaster-prone future. It could also feel a lot better than any large-scale employment on the table now.

Zoë Schlanger ▪ Summer 2020

Looking over donated supplies for a neighborhood mutual aid project in Bushwick, Brooklyn on May 7, 2020 (Stephanie Keith/Getty Images)

This essay is part of a special section on the pandemic in the Summer 2020 issue.

When people ask me, as a climate reporter, what I think will happen next, my answer has been cruel and blasé in its bluntness: "More pandemics." There will be more pandemics, driven by deforestation, habitat destruction, and disease vectors extended due to warming climates, all egged on in their spread by the global nature of our economy. We also know there will be an increase in other kinds of climate

disasters: wildfire, drought, hurricane, flood. The future is pocked with relentless catastrophe.

As of now, we have nowhere near the workforce needed to respond to this new reality. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was already running short on staff by April, with only the coronavirus on its hands. With the wildfire and hurricane seasons both set to peak over the summer, overlapping crises are inevitable, but there isn't a plan for how to cope. "It's an unimaginably complex set of problems," Irwin Redlener, a physician and the director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University, told me in an interview for the *New York Times* in early April. He wondered what would happen if New Orleans was hit with a storm surge; at the time, it was becoming one of the cities hardest hit by coronavirus. "I'm just cringing to think of what happens," he said. "This is one of those questions we haven't even thought about yet. . . . I think we're out of steam."

Elsewhere, though, we have steam in abundance. In her 2009 book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit recounts the phenomenon of mutual aid that emerges in the wake of disasters. I read that book the year before Hurricane Sandy struck New York and then watched as its thesis came alive in hard-hit neighborhoods like the Rockaways. My friends with cars shuttled other friends to parking lots near the beach to deliver prescriptions and hand out food. Today, mutual aid has returned. Everyone I know is joining neighborhood aid groups, getting trained to make deliveries and welfare checks. Most of them are newly unemployed. The relief at having a sense of purpose is palpable. The logic is reflexive, simple, obvious: when disaster strikes, we learn how to take care of each other. And it feels incredibly good to do.

What if that drive to care could be the new meaning and substance of work at a mass scale?

Saket Soni, the longtime labor organizer and founder of the National Guestworker Alliance, has lately put his focus on advocating for a "resilience force"—a New Deal–style federal jobs program designed to staff disaster recovery efforts. He and his colleagues at Resilience Force originally imagined their initiative as a response to wreckage caused by climate change. Crucially, it would do away with the citizenship requirement currently barring non-citizen workers from joining FEMA's ranks. Already, the workers hired in places like coastal Florida to rebuild after storms tend to be undocumented, and as the *New York Times* has reported, they are prone to abuse by their employers, who can withhold pay without consequence. These workers are crucial to recovery; they're often the first to arrive to scenes of devastation. They cart away the rubble.

When the pandemic struck, it was obvious that the same structure ought to encompass jobs to respond to this type of disaster, too. "We think that's really the missing piece in the American recovery plan, and business leaders agree that it's

necessary. Every industry on the front lines is talking about the labor shortage," Soni told me recently.

One of the roles he envisions for the resilience force reminds me of the mutual aid groups currently operating in nearly every New York City neighborhood. He pictures a new fleet of community health workers who would do welfare checks and guide people to medical resources they need, relieving pressure on the overwhelmed healthcare system. "It's a very broad role, but it's a rigorous role. People are already doing it; caring for each other," he said. Another role would be an "emergency navigator," modeled after the jobs of those hired in the Obama era to navigate insurance exchange portals. "They would figure out how to get your FEMA check, or an assessment on your broken roof." Coastal areas are already home to people who, after previous storms, became experts in these byzantine systems out of necessity.

Once one imagines the government as an employer that turns mutual aid into meaningful work, it's not hard to imagine it also employing thousands of people to transition the country off of fossil fuels, too. As Kate Aronoff wrote in the *New Republic*, these jobs would be meaningful beyond providing a reliable paycheck: They "could provide an alternative to low-paid work bound up in carbon-intensive supply chains like those at McDonald's and Walmart—currently the only employment on offer in many communities around the country."

In 1915, Louis Brandeis, still a year away from his appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court, said that life in an industrial nation ought to support "living not existing." Work should be stable, safe, and well-paid enough to leave the worker with the "freshness of mind" to be able to "work at some thing besides breadwinning." While he was speaking about having sufficient leisure time to meaningfully pursue self-education, I can't help but connect it to the "freshness of mind" so clearly being experienced by my friends suddenly finding purpose in community work. Yes, give us the time to self-educate. But what if the work itself could support a state of "living not existing" too? Community care as formal employment seems obviously necessary in the face of a disaster-prone future. It might also feel a hell of a lot better than any large-scale employment on the table now.

Zoë Schlanger is an environment reporter based in New York.

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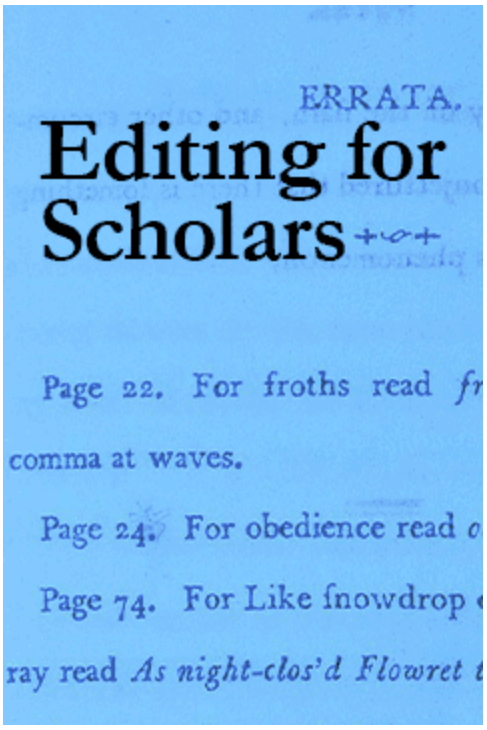
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