

Undocumented workers in Houston face hazardous conditions and unpaid wages

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According to a report published by the University of Illinois at Chicago, day laborers in Houston are being exploited amid recovery efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. The report highlights the economic exploitation of these workers and the hazardous working conditions they face.

The report surveyed 361 workers in the Houston area in October, approximately one month after the hurricane. The vast majority of them engaged in disaster relief in the area were from Mexico and Central America, 72 percent of them undocumented.

In Houston, undocumented workers are hired on an as-needed basis for manual labor in construction, landscaping, loading and moving. In most cases, undocumented workers are hired at some 20 informal hiring sites in the Houston area, located near building supply stores, gas stations and along major roads and intersections.

According to the report, 26 percent of undocumented workers reported wage theft—nonpayment of wages for work completed—in the period following Harvey. The unpaid wages among the 361 workers surveyed exceeded \$20,000, with an average of \$212.48, a median of \$85 and a maximum amount of \$2,700. Furthermore, 44 percent of undocumented workers reported wage theft in previous months, and 57 percent in the past year.

The report establishes that workers did not know where to report wage violations and wage theft. The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) is the agency responsible for assisting workers in recovering denied wages. Among all workers surveyed, including both documented workers and American citizens, not a single one identified the TWC as an organization to seek assistance with wage claims.

The workers have also been forced to work under hazardous conditions and do not receive training

needed to protect themselves from hazards during disaster relief. Eighty-five percent reported that they have not received any training for the worksites they are involved in. Eighty-seven percent have not been informed about risks related to unsafe buildings, 85 percent have not been informed about risks of mold and working in contaminated water and 83 percent have not received training for working around fallen trees and electrical lines.

More than one-third of workers reported being injured while employed in Houston. Of those injured, 67 percent said the workplace was unsafe, 63 percent said the injury was due to lack of protective equipment and 52 percent said that they were injured due to pressure to work faster.

The report also indicates that most undocumented workers in Houston do not have proper safety equipment. Forty percent of undocumented workers in Houston do not have protective eyewear, 61 percent reported not having a respirator to protect them from mold and chemicals and 64 percent reported not having a hard hat. These items are all basic safety equipment imperative to the type of work the laborers are asked to do.

The study is limited and cannot capture the full scope of exploitation, as there are over 600,000 undocumented immigrants in Houston alone. After the hurricane, many immigrants were afraid to ask for government assistance or evacuate damaged homes for local shelters. Although local officials, such as Mayor Sylvester Turner, assured immigrants that they would not be targeted during disaster recovery, many still feared deportation. Of the undocumented workers surveyed in the report, 64 percent said they were not comfortable seeking government assistance after the disaster.

Texas Senate Bill 4, which went into effect in September, prohibits the adoption of policies that prevent police from questioning the immigration status of someone they have detained. Officials who fail to comply with the law could face jail time and a fine up to \$25,000 for repeated violations. The law, aimed at outlawing “sanctuary cities” in Texas, has been upheld by an appeals court and is the source of much fear in undocumented communities.

The wage theft and abysmal working conditions relief workers are facing in Houston further reveal the criminality and gross negligence of the response of the American ruling class to natural disasters. The xenophobic mass deportation program, intensified under the Trump administration, subjects already exploited immigrant workers to police state repression and abuse.



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