**Headline:** ‘Only the People Can Save the People,’ Say Migrant Workers

**Teaser:** The National Day Laborers Organizing Network (NDLON) embodies an ethos of “solidarity, not charity,” in both fire relief and immigrant rights.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

When the Eaton Fire began on January 7, 2025, in Altadena, California, it blazed through residential neighborhoods, destroying thousands of family homes. On the morning of January 8, as businesses burned on North Lake Avenue, a group of migrant workers met 2 miles to the south in neighboring Pasadena. They gathered at 6 a.m. to discuss an emergency response to the fires.

For the past 25 years, the [Pasadena Community Job Center](https://tinyurl.com/njv7ash4) on South Lake Avenue has connected employers with skilled migrant labor, ensuring safe work environments, a living wage for workers, and quality work for customers.

Run by the [National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON)](https://ndlon.org/), the job center has also been a hub for much more: strengthening rights and protections for migrant workers, being of service to the local community, and sharing the culture, stories, and music of its members. NDLON’s work is intersectional, bringing together labor rights, fair pay, immigration, racial justice, climate resiliency, and community solidarity.

Less than two weeks before Donald Trump’s January 20 inauguration, migrant workers, who were poised to oppose the incoming administration’s anti-immigrant agenda, quickly pivoted to emergency fire relief. Omar Leone, NDLON’s arts director, helped organize “fire relief brigades,” to clear debris and brush from burned and smoke-damaged areas in the wake of the deadly 100 miles per hour winds.

NDLON put the call out for volunteers and workers and, over several weeks, trained members of the brigades outfitted them with protective gear and cleaning equipment, and sent them to impacted neighborhoods with trucks bearing the slogan “*Solo El Pueblo, Salva Al Pueblo*,” translated to “Only the People Can Save the People.” Immigrants worked alongside citizens, and workers stood shoulder to shoulder with employers. Leone, in an [interview](https://risingupwithsonali.com/migrant-workers-lead-cleanup-efforts-in-altadena/) on *YES! Presents: Rising Up With Sonali*, explained how the brigades consisted of “day laborers, household workers, and many community volunteers from various areas of the greater Los Angeles area.”

On the morning of January 10, as I surveyed the damage in the smoke-filled air of my North Pasadena neighborhood, I hailed such a group working on my street and requested their help to clear my backyard of debris.

The fire danger was still high, and in the horror-filled aftermath of the devastating tragedy, the fire relief brigades engaged in a simple act of solidarity that I will not soon forget. A group of well-trained young people—non-immigrants working under the leadership of immigrants—expertly cleared my backyard of dangerous debris, fallen fence panels, tree branches, and broken light bulbs, and hauled it all away in trucks.

At the same time, as it was overseeing such brigades, the Pasadena Community Job Center set up a donation hub in an empty lot next to its offices where community members dropped off food, clothing, and other necessities, and migrant workers organized to distribute them to impacted families. It became the largest hub in Pasadena during the early days after the fires. Its ethos was distinct from other donation centers, offering “[solidarity, not charity](https://www.pasadenastarnews.com/2025/01/26/migrant-workers-lead-cleanup-crews-distribute-supplies-after-the-fires/)”—a slogan emblazoned on the Pasadena Community Job Center’s wall.

The Pasadena Community Job Center had all the expertise necessary to mobilize skilled workers in the wake of the disaster. Leone explained how members of the fire brigades were required to sit through a day-long formal OSHA training to ensure they understood how to safely work and dispose of materials.

Pablo Alvarado, NDLON’s co-executive director, pointed out in an [interview](https://risingupwithsonali.com/how-migrant-workers-are-organizing-against-trumpism/) on *YES! Presents: Rising Up With Sonali* that, “It’s impossible to rebuild Los Angeles without migrant labor.” He explained, “A significant segment of people who work in the construction industry are undocumented immigrants.”

Yet, at the same time as migrant workers were volunteering their time to clean up Altadena, NDLON was engaged in rigorous “Know Your Rights” workshops and trainings in Pasadena and around the country in preparation for the coming onslaught of federal immigration enforcement agents. Vulnerable workers were learning how to defend themselves from government forces while being of service to a devastated region.

“Before the fires, I was feeling really unsafe. I was having so much anxiety about what’s coming from the Trump administration, preparing for it,” said Alvarado. “There was so much stress. And when we saw people from all walks of life coming together… I just know that the world is better than what the political leaders are saying.”

The story we are told about immigrants, primarily by conservative leaders, but also increasingly liberal politicians, is antithetical to the reality. It is a false narrative that immigrants are a burden on society. In such a context NDLON’s transformative work tells the opposite story, a true narrative of immigrants being indispensable members of our communities.

Take the anecdote Alvarado related to me about a pro-Trump volunteer with NDLON’s fire relief brigades. Early on during the clean-up effort, Alvarado led a large crew of about 100 people to clean Pasadena’s Central Park of fallen trees. A young man who had helped to lift and move large tree trunks was so moved by his experience that he approached the NDLON leader and asked for a hug. “We embraced and I thanked him,” said Alvarado. “After the embrace, I looked at him and he was wearing a ‘Make America Great Again’ hat.”

To Alvarado, this was proof that “the divisions [between people] are imposed from the top-down.”

NDLON’s efforts have not only helped to demonstrate to conservative pro-Trump voters just how essential immigrant workers are to U.S. towns and cities but also solidified ties between Black and Brown communities. Altadena is a [historically Black town](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/18/altadena-fire-black-families), one where home ownership was within reach.

According to Leone, “The Pasadena [Community Job] Center has built strong relationships with the Black community, and this is something we feel very proud of.” He sees a common cause between migrant workers and Black residents, “because the Black community also faces a lot of challenges, a lot of discrimination.”

Solidarity is the antidote to division. NDLON’s work at the Pasadena Community Job Center offers a model for a path out of the Trump administration’s fascism. It is strategic, effective, and counteracts the propaganda of hate.

Most of all, NDLON’s work offers a sense of hope to those who are tempted to give up in the face of authoritarianism, hate, and climate catastrophe—in the same vein as Altadena’s residents hoping to rebuild and rise from the ashes of the Eaton Fire.

Leone, who leads NDLON’s music band, [Los Jornaleros del Norte](https://tinyurl.com/5bh5fnb9), wrote a Spanish-language [song](https://www.instagram.com/reel/DFs9LDIS6x4/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==) about the fires called simply “Fuego.” He explained that the song, based on testimonies of people who lost their homes, roughly translates into the following:

“This is everything I worked for my entire life, and I lost it in the blink of an eye. But I’m going to get up from this… I’m going to start from scratch. I don’t know how I’m going to do it. I’ve done it in the past and I’m going to do it again.”