INTERVIEW: Inside the Movement For Silicon Valley's "Invisible Workforce" by Maria Noel Fernandez & Julian Posadas & Matt Schaefer

Silicon Valley's tech economy has meant jobs, opportunity, wealth and security for many of its most privileged workers… but it's left behind hundreds of thousands of service and support workers that form the industry's "invisible workforce." Across the region, janitors, shuttle drivers, cafeteria workers, security guards and other workers face poor working conditions, sub-livable wages, displacement and community erosion. Denied the wealth, benefits and upward mobility that so many tech workers enjoy, these workers bear the brunt of an ever-growing wealth gap, even as they provide vital labor holding up the tech economy. Against profound challenges, workers, organizers, activists and unions are fighting for a better working conditions, affordable housing, livable wages… and a voice. In this two-part interview, we talk with some of the leading organizers from Silicon Valley Rising, a broad-based coalition focusing on raising wages, creating affordable housing and growing the region's middle class. We met with Julian Posadas, ground organizer with UNITE HERE; Maria Noel Fernandez, campaign director for Silicon Valley Rising; and Matt Schaefer, organizer with the Tech Worker's Coalition to discuss the current state of worker's organization in Silicon Valley, the major challenges and opportunities facing tech's invisible workforce, and how privileged tech workers can ally with the coalition and other parts of this vital movement.

MVC: Thank you so much for joining us today, we've been incredibly excited to talk with you all after viewing the recent [Fighting for Justice panel at AlterConf.](#) Let's start out with some introductions! Can each of you tell us a bit about yourselves, your background, and what you've been focusing on in this space?

Maria: So I'm the campaign director for [Silicon Valley Rising](#). To give some background, Silicon Valley Rising is a coalition made up of different organizations, unions, faith leaders and business leaders, all coming together to address some of the biggest problems that working people are facing across Silicon Valley. I got involved through my work at [Working Partnerships USA,](#) which is a non-profit and now one of the organizations that helps hold this coalition.

When we started Silicon Valley Rising two years ago, we had housing groups doing really great work in a silo, unions doing incredible work in a silo, faith-based institutions figuring out what their roles were, and some progressive business leaders figuring out what *their* roles were as well. Silicon Valley Rising brought everyone together to say, we might not all agree on everything, but we can agree that we're in a crisis in Silicon Valley. What can we all work on and throw down on, and what can we engage the tech industry on and inspire them to do something different? At the time, a lot of the tech companies were talking about diversity and inclusion, and we really wanted to flip the conversation to be not just about engineers and coders, but also about the workers on tech campuses every single day, the cafeteria workers, janitors, security officers, and more that are predominantly people of color making tech work possible.

We focus on a few areas. One is the impact of the tech industry on housing, displacement and gentrification, and specifically on renter's rights. Second, is about making sure that these workers have family-supporting jobs. For every one tech job that's created, there's four support jobs that are created in the economy, so it's about figuring out how we make sure those four support jobs are actually good, family-supporting jobs. One of the key ways we see that becoming possible is through a unionizing, making sure we get to a $15 minimum wage regionally, looking at access to hours, and how we raise industry standards around sub-contracts.

Julian: I'm an organizer for [UNITE HERE](#) – a union of workers in food service and hospitality in the US and Canada. I've been working with them for close to a year now. Before then, I did two years of community organizing in San Jose, and prior to that I was doing labor organizing with a union representing service workers out of the University of California system. My current role is organizing cafeteria workers at Intel. The contracting company that runs the service there now is called Eurest, which is part of a broader company called Compass Group, and that has been taking on more and more accounts in tech companies.

Matt: I'm a tech worker, working as a software engineer and most recently as a UX designer in San Francisco before taking a year off to live in Tokyo. Prior to Tech Workers Coalition, I didn't have any kind of experience working with community groups. The [Tech Workers Coalition](#) didn't really "start" as much as coalesce slowly over the last couple of years. We're a small group made up of people who work in all parts of the tech industry, and we have some folks who joined us very early on who work in labor organizing as well. We started because we were talking about how to bridge some of the divide between new tech workers coming into the Bay Area and existing communities. There didn't seem to be a clear home for progressive tech workers who wanted to engage the neighborhoods, engage their cities, in a way that was different than what tech companies are doing. Our focus early on has been supporting a lot of the labor organizing efforts with Silicon Valley Rising and UNITE HERE. Over the last year or so we've organized a couple panels, we've been writing about these topics, and we've been attending rallies and trying to start conversations between tech workers and labor organizers and other community groups.

MVC: One term that we hear a lot with respect to all of these issues and sites of organization is the term "invisible workforce." In your minds, who is that workforce, and what are some of the top issues and challenges that workforce is seeing?

Julian: As one of our community members, Maria Guerrero has expressed, it's a term that captures the feeling that at times she is invisible in her own shop. Even though she's a barista inside Intel, she sometimes feel like her voice is not heard. Changes we want in the cafeteria are as simple as having breaks — having meal breaks, having a restroom break — these are issues that still exist in these big profitable companies. And sometimes the workers — janitors, groundskeepers, cafeteria workers — are not being heard. Our work with organizing as a labor union has been not only effective, but has been able to empower them as workers and leaders in the community as well.

Maria: I think a key piece of that term "invisible workforce" is that we're talking about the folks that are being left behind. As folks talk about the booming economy and the wealth and incredible jobs that tech is creating, the folks that are being left behind are the invisible workforce, are people of color. We see with folks we work with every single day, that they are being pushed out of Silicon Valley, being pushed to have to live in Tracy and Modesto. Or when we go in to visit some of our folk's homes, we see a living room with a curtain that divides

into four or five, and we have different families living in one living room or renting out sofas. Those are people of color who are being displaced.

The call that we're making is that we need the tech industry to see this as part of their responsibility, but also an opportunity to re-build something different, so Silicon Valley isn't just about a segment of our population, but it's about all of us.

Matt: I don't think we generally include members of the gig economy when we talk about the invisible workforce, but if we were to step even beyond the invisible workforce concept a little bit, we can see the good jobs that tech is supposedly providing are not going to everyone. That these companies are really benefitting from the labor of people who aren't necessarily able to leverage any kind of power within that relationship. It's important to talk about gig economy workers and workers who are contracted within tech companies, which often includes people like technical support workers or customer support workers, people who are not in jobs that have a lot of leverage internally. This is another group of people who are not benefitting fully from the excess of the tech industry.

Maria: We recently released a report [PDF] and it looks at exactly what Matt's talking about. We're seeing that subcontracted jobs in tech are growing at a rate three times higher than other industries. Since we've released that report, I'm getting phone calls from exactly the types of people Matt is talking about, that say "Look, I may get a decent wage, but I have no benefits. I have no paid sick days except what's required by state law. I don't have a voice on this job." I'm talking engineers that call me, I'm talking folks that don't necessarily come to mind immediately when we think about folks that are struggling within the tech industry.

MVC: And it seems that not only are this group of people cut off from benefits, but also from equity; they have no stock in the company, which is a huge way that workers in the tech industry make money and even get wealthy. Which brings us to our next question, which is about wealth consolidation and the wealth gap we see at tech companies. When Twitter IPO'ed they minted 1600 new millionaires into the Tenderloin, most of whom were white men. We see that similar pattern with all types of other tech companies. So we wanted to ask each of you what the wealth gap looks like from your perspective, and how is that affecting workers and communities.

Julian: It's very visible. To put numbers into perspective, we know that here in Silicon Valley, it's roughly $52 dollars an hour that someone needs to earn in order to survive. For a family, that is living in a 2-bedroom apartment, 2-bedroom home… but you can't rent that for any cheaper than $2500 a month. So it's nearly impossible to find a home like that because there is a housing crisis in Silicon Valley. The other issue is entry-level work at companies like Facebook or Intel, is only $13 an hour, just doing your basic food serving in the cafeteria. Facebook, which you would assume is a more responsible tech company, has increased their minimum wage to $15 an hour, but the question is, is it enough? It's *still* not enough. The cost of living has gone so high, it's almost impossible to catch up, so workers are forced to work two jobs. Their partners are forced to work two jobs, just to be able to have a dignified life in this area.

Maria: Looking at some of the numbers, one out of three families in Santa Clara lives below the self-sufficiency standard [PDF], and that only calculates your basics, and doesn't account for trying to send your kids to college, for retirement, for any of that. A *third* of the families are below that standard, literally in poverty.

Matt: There's also been a lot of resistance by tech companies to making these changes. At Dell they [swapped out their subcontractor for a different subcontractor](#) in response to a new labor agreement that would have guaranteed a $15 minimum wage for members of the cleaning staff. Some of the numbers around what it would cost Dell to actually step up and pay those wages was just miniscule, and yet they decided to switch to a different sub-contractor. The janitors who had been working there lost their jobs or were forced to work for less than what they had been working for.

Maria: Sadly in that case, the union workers had won this incredible contract that would've given them a decent wage and Dell decided, nope, we're just going to get rid of the sub-contractor that has a union. And that's in Santa Clara, their own backyard. And you know, that's the power that these companies have. Just like they have the power to do right. We have seen Facebook do right by shuttle bus drivers for example, the bus drivers at Facebook were able to unionize, to get a bump up of almost 10 dollars, they have sick leave, they have vacation time. That's the difference that we're talking about, that makes absolute tangible change in the lives of families in the Valley.

It almost feels like when we talk about income inequality and all of these issues, it's easy to feel like they're so large and so hard to fix. I think what Tech Workers Coalition, UNITE HERE, all of us as part of Silicon Valley Rising, are pushing to demonstrate to these companies is that it actually isn't. Tech companies really have such a say, a responsibility, and opportunity to make sure that their subcontractors are allowing their workers to have a voice on the job, allowing their workers to have a decent wage, that they have benefits. Tech companies have the power to spend a portion of whatever they would spend on fancy coffee, and put that money and invest it in the workers that allow them to even survive here. So many jobs are created when you create tech jobs, so it needs to be not just about those direct engineering and coding jobs tech is thinking about, but what their effect is, and what they can do to make sure we're not destabilized, and our neighborhoods aren't completely torn apart, which is what we're seeing right now. Families are being torn apart because of this problem. **[In part II of this feature,](#) we dive deeper into the subcontracted workforce, how gentrification is affecting communities and families, and cover the major gains and ongoing challenges facing worker's movements and unionization efforts in Silicon Valley. Plus, how privileged tech workers can ally with those movements.**