

INTERVIEW: Inside the Movement For Silicon Valley’s “Invisible Workforce,” Part II by Maria Noel Fernandez & Julian Posadas & Matt Schaefer

Silicon Valley’s tech economy has meant jobs, wealth and security for many of its most privileged workers... but it’s left behind hundreds of thousands of the service and support workers that form tech’s “invisible workforce.” [In the first part of our interview, which you can read here,](#) we discuss the Silicon Valley Rising coalition, the biggest issues facing this class of workers, and how the tech wealth gap is affecting workers and their families. In this second part, we dive deeper into the subcontracted workforce and the state of gentrification today, 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 these movements. Interview participants are Julian Posadas, ground organizer with the UNITE HERE union, Maria Noel Fernandez, campaign director for Silicon Valley Rising, and Matt Schaefer, organizer with the Tech Workers Coalition.



MVC: Sometimes it seems that tech companies are evading responsibility by using so many subcontracting companies — you have many people who are technically employed by subcontractors, but are spending day in and day out at the same tech company the way a full-time worker would. Is there a push to have these workers become full-time employees at the companies themselves?

Maria: The idea of having the workers be employees of the large tech companies is tricky. The trickiness is when that happens, it doesn’t necessarily mean that workers suddenly have a voice on the job. It may mean

that you've gotten a wage increase, but absent a union, it still doesn't guarantee that voice. That's where I think there's more for all of us to do and really figure out what that right equation is.

Julian: It's super complicated. There are many examples of where a tech company will say "We are self-op" [self-operated], meaning that we employ our food service workers, our cooks, our cafeteria workers directly. But then when you dig deeper, they do have a core group, a skeleton crew that does work directly for tech company, but the workers themselves — the actual cooks, the baristas, they're not employed directly, they're actually agency workers. And so that just draws another level of complication. Self-op to me is when I was at school at UC Santa Cruz as a student, but also as a food service worker, and we actually got rid of the food service company and we were workers working directly for the university. That to me is self-op. You have examples where tech companies are trying to do that, but there are still outside companies trying to also make a profit: for example, they can charge close to \$35 dollars an hour for a temp worker, and obviously that money could be given to the worker directly if they were self-op.

Matt: We've talked a lot about large tech companies, but we also have to look at small organizations that are leasing out a small office in a building and who can't really support full-time work in these areas, but instead go through their building's management, which is using subcontractors. I think it would be really positive if we could find a way to push companies to work with their landlords and their building management to change those working conditions as well.

Maria: Specifically for janitorial, you have many cases where there's two women who get in at 9 pm and clean the entire floor with different companies there. In that case, the companies definitely have a tremendous amount of power to make sure that the building management is hiring a contractor that's union, and doing the right thing by the workers.

MVC: **We've touched on this a bit but we wanted to take the time to go into the topic of gentrification in a bit more depth. It's obviously a huge question and a complicated issue, so to scope it down, maybe we can talk about how gentrification is affecting this class of invisible workers, and specifically, what are some of the main focuses of the labor movement and workers' organization when it comes to gentrification?**

Maria: What we're seeing, is that we're having to leave. I know that's such a basic answer but it's just real. Workers are having conversations about just how much longer can they hold on. It's a question so many people across the board here are asking themselves. There's not the luxury of being able to transfer to another tech company in another city, so there's this question of: what do you *DO*?

We ask ourselves weekly how to fix the housing problem. What we've come up with is, of course, that there's not one thing. Having strong renter's protections is critical. There's so many campaigns happening across Silicon Valley, there's ballot initiatives from Mountain View to Santa Rosa to Oakland, all happening around renter's rights. We've got to make sure that the tech industry realizes that the problem of housing and gentrification isn't just a problem in terms of housing their engineers. If they don't have that person who's a barista, or that person who is opening the doors every day as a security officer, then how are they going to be able to operate? I know the tech industry is working on housing in some ways, but they really need to expand the way they see WHO they're working for.

Julian: There's no one magic pill. It's a multiple approach, and it's an ongoing cycle of organizing that's going to make a difference. There's obviously a lot of obstacles to overcome when you talk about creating a broader movement, but some of the work Silicon Valley Rising is doing is a good example of how we can take on this kind of issue: Where workers who are trying to unionizing, workers who already have a union, and tenants are coming together and pushing on this issue. That's where the power lies.

MVC: So looking back, what are the major gains that worker organization and union organization have had in the past 5 years in Silicon Valley? Then, going forward, what are the biggest obstacles that are still facing those movements?

Maria: We've seen very tangible gains in terms of people's income, in terms of people being able to be with their families, take vacation leave, being able to be home when you're sick or a loved one is sick through paid sick leave. We've seen this across the board. The shuttle bus drivers, janitors, and security officers have won contracts, where you can compare what was happening with their lives two years ago and compare where they are now, and you can see that tangible change.

As far as impediments, we continue to see retaliation, people being penalized for speaking up. There's a lot of fear. These workers I tell you about, they are so afraid. I met a few workers at a burger joint recently and I probably spent half-an-hour, 45 minutes convincing these workers — subcontracted for a big tech company, a famous tech company — that they could give me their actual names, and that I was someone they could trust. There's a very real fear that speaking out will lead to you losing your job. Another impediment is that tech is seen as this different entity where these things — worker's organization, labor issues — don't apply. But it's the same issues we've seen around health and safety, around union organizing that you think happened 60 years ago, but they're happening now. It just looks a little bit different.

Julian: The fear of losing your job for speaking your mind is real. It's when you see a leader stepping up in a shop and saying "we want these changes," and they get suspended for a day, because they're raising issues. These are real examples. We know our strength as a union, we know that we can always figure it out to bring these workers back. Yet it's the damage, it's the *message* these companies have to the rest of these workers: "see what happens when you speak out." It's this consistent culture of fear that workers face everyday they go to work. Yet we just keep pushing forward. We have plans to win, and there's always obstacles that come along, but we keep moving forward.

Some of the gains that are very important: the National Labor Board came out last week affirming that [temp workers have the right to organize](#). Before we knew we could try, yet the strength that these companies had over temp workers was incredible. That's a real example of how we are able to take on issues around temp workers, real examples of victories, how we create hope for workers. It's about how do we disseminate *more* of that hope to the rest of the workers, who are *not* hearing the message of the union, not hearing the message that there's allies in the community that really want to help you out. We have a challenge of communication to those who are not hearing the positives. When you're in a shop in some of these tech companies, you aren't hearing anything outside of the negativity sometimes, and that's one of the challenges.

MVC: It's so interesting to see that in all parts of the tech industry among people who are trying to create change, we see so many of the same issues, people losing their jobs, getting harassed... the culture of fear against speaking out. Thank you so much for speaking with us today. That issue, of

shared ground, really brings us to our next and final question which is: what do you wish tech workers in more privileged and highly paid positions at tech companies knew, and how can they ally more effectively and support your cause?

Matt: The challenge that we've seen is that these movements have flown under the radar of most tech workers. I'm of the belief that once you can see one another and know one another, it becomes a lot harder to ignore injustice. So I want to see is folks in the tech world meeting the contract workers at their organizations, get to know them, say hi. Learn about what their working conditions are like, because the more you can learn the more likely it is that you can get behind people and help. A specific thing people can do is attend a rally. I didn't come from a community where labor organizing was a thing, I came from the suburban Midwest, and I had never been to a rally before. They're really powerful experiences, to stand with other people and just be there and support them in their efforts. And start talking with your other coworkers about the things you're seeing and you're hearing. The more conversations we have within the tech community at the worker level the better

Julian: You said some really powerful stuff, because I think sometimes it's like, we organize a union, then we move onto the next campaign, then the next, and sometimes it feels like that. But it *is* about empowerment and it is about relationship building, which comes back to participating. One of the things I feel very strong about is that we will always win when we take on fights or campaigns like this, because we know that our fight is relational. We can build coalitions, we can build relationships, and that's what makes us twice as strong. The opposition is about dollars and figures. What's really instrumental is solidarity. That's why we create these spaces, like panels, where people from Tech Workers Coalition like Paige Panter come into community meetings, and she shares, we share, and we build this coalition.

We always say, it's also a push about vulnerability, it's being able to share about ourselves with others that will help us build bridges.

Maria: In terms of allies, what's on my mind is how REAL solidarity is, and how critical it is to really build a movement. It's been critical for tech workers that are part of the coalition to stand in solidarity and begin to use their power as the "talent" that tech companies want to retain, to say they want to have a company that respects people's work, that ensures they have a voice. I think solidarity is something we've seen throughout history being that tipping point in key movements, where the problem no longer is about just one set of workers or people, but that the problems being faced are seen as *all* of our problems, and that we're truly in it together. Very simply, that we're inextricably linked. I also think having "techies" ask questions of their employers is a great way to find out what's happening at their campus, and also demonstrates that these issues are a part of how people decide where they work and where they will use their talent.

Next steps: *Learn more about Silicon Valley Rising, read their latest reports, and join their ongoing campaigns [on the coalition website](#). Tech workers who want to ally with worker's movements in Silicon Valley can sign up for the [Tech Workers Coalition newsletter here](#), or follow them on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#). And more information on UNITE HERE can be [found here](#).*