

The Invisible Silicon Valley

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"I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." – Ralph Ellison, *"Invisible Man"*



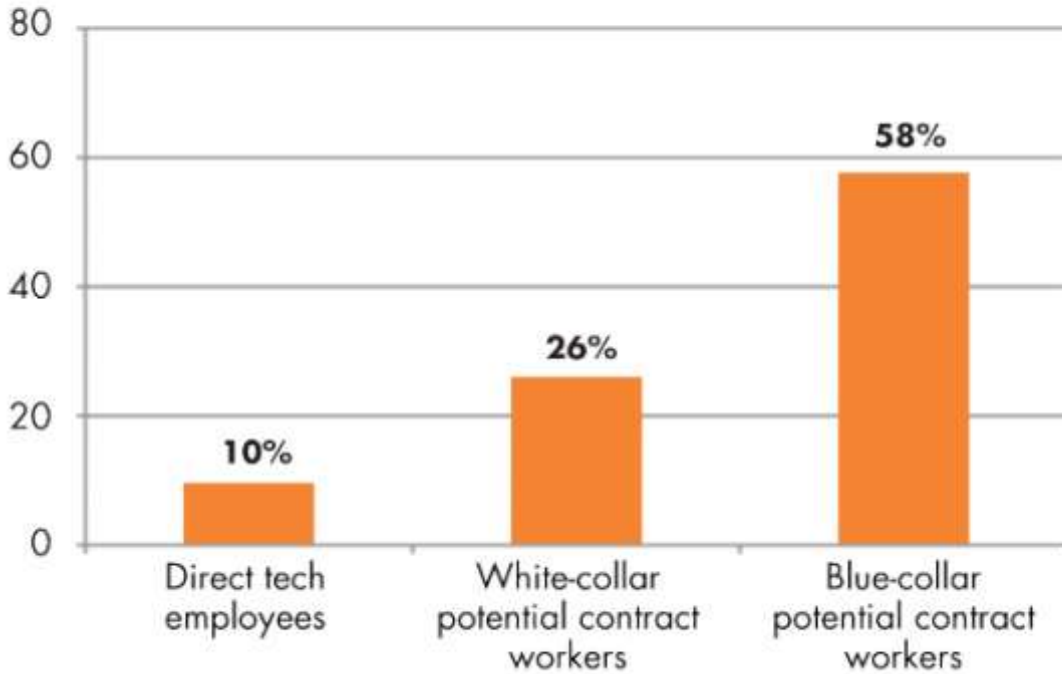
Nahima Aguiniga (right) and a coworker after meeting with an Intel executive in February 2016. Credit: Silicon Valley De-Bug.

Invisible. That's how Nahima Aguiniga feels at work. She works as a cashier in the cafeteria run by food service company Eurest at Intel, one of the world's most visible tech brands. She rings up free food for the "blue badges" – direct employees of the company, many earning six figures – and collects payment from the other "green badges" – the subcontracted workers like her.

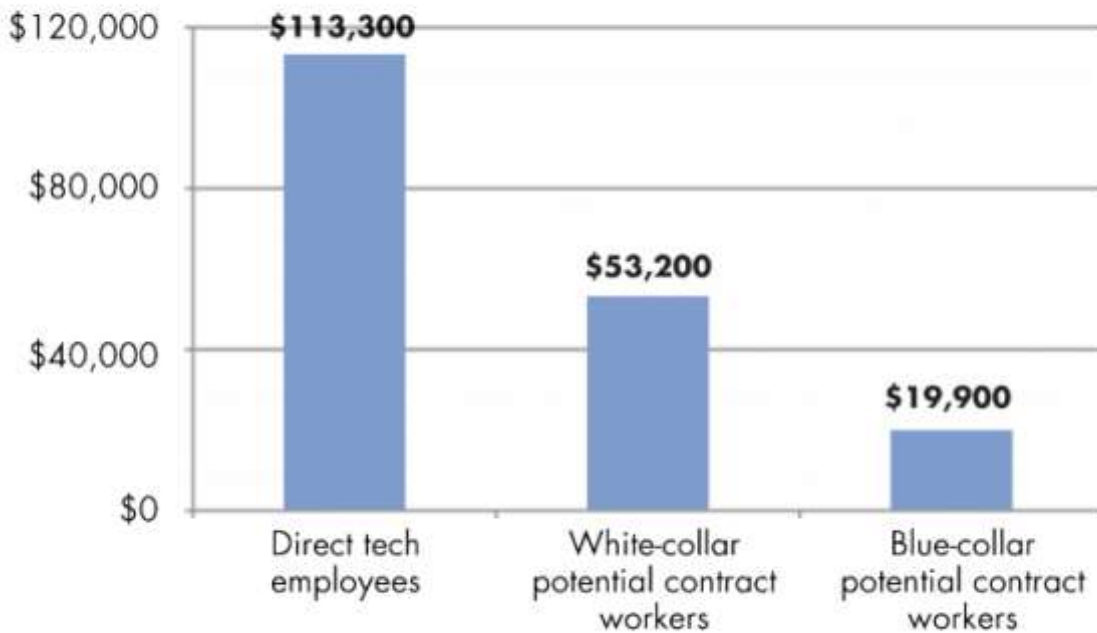
Too many of us in this country know what it's like to feel invisible. I felt it as an undocumented child growing up on San Jose's East Side, frightened every time a loud knock came on our door that this would be the time we would be taken away. The very nature of many jobs that are subcontracted, temporary or classified as 1099 independent contractors makes them invisible in our economy.

Tech struggles with the lack of diversity in its core workforce of direct employees – only 10 percent are black or Latino, and 25.8 percent in the white-collar occupations are female – and the numbers that companies share mask the reality of who's actually working on the campuses of this profoundly [segregated industry](#). The company forgets "that 78 percent of us [working in their cafeteria] are women because we don't count in their own diversity reports," Nahima explained.

Percent of Employees who are Black or Hispanic



Average Annual Earnings



58 percent of the workers in the low-wage contracting industries that provide these services to tech companies are black or Latino. These workers average \$19,900 per year, compared to \$113,300 average earnings for direct tech employees.* These low wages along with high Silicon Valley rents forced Nahima and her two children to move to the Central Valley, leaving her with a three- to four-hour daily commute to Intel and little time with her family.



I learned one night at the San Jose Greyhound terminal that there was another option. I was 8 years old, the drivers were on strike, and my father – a hotel dishwasher turned union leader – brought me with him to help on the picket line. A bus began to drive straight at the picketers. I remember seeing my father illuminated by the headlights as he stepped in front of it and hearing my own screams. But then the entire crowd surrounded him. They stopped the bus that a moment before had threatened to shatter my world.

Ralph Ellison wrote, “America is woven of many strands Our fate is to become one, and yet many.” And so we find visibility for each of our individual stories by standing together. [Silicon Valley Rising](#) was born two years ago when several dozen workers, housing and health care advocates, clergy members, women’s activists, civil rights representatives, union leaders and allies gathered on a Saturday to seek a shared strategy to address our region’s economic crisis, made invisible by the tech boom. We aim to inspire the tech industry to build an inclusive middle class in Silicon Valley.

Silicon Valley Rising community leaders stood with Nahima and her coworkers when they met with Intel management. “It was jaw dropping for me to see all the love and support from perfect strangers who simply believed in the same thing we do,” she said. “For once my voice as a woman was heard inside the walls of Intel; [I believe] that I can and will make a change.”

We call on tech to join with us in creating a new economic model for good jobs and responsible employers, raising wages and standards for all workers, and building and preserving affordable and accessible housing. We are standing with [food service workers](#), [shuttle bus drivers](#), [security officers](#) and janitors as they fight for better jobs. We are calling on tech companies to protect their subcontracted workforces by committing to [responsible contracting](#). We are fighting for a [\\$15 minimum wage by 2019](#) across Silicon Valley and [access to more hours](#) for part-time workers so that their paychecks can put food on the table. Together, we believe that we can disrupt inequality.



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** Data source: [Tech's Invisible Workplace](#) March 2016 report by Silicon Valley Rising.*