

WORKING CONDITIONS CITIES SILICON VALLEY

The Silicon Valley Union Victories You Haven't Heard Of

No matter how futuristic their headquarters, tech companies still require workers driving buses and staffing their dining rooms to exist.

By Michelle Chen

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Protesters march at the Unite Here! Local 19 rally outside Intel in Santa Clara in support of cafeteria workers. (Tri Nguyen / Working Partnerships USA)

Tech firms have flooded Silicon Valley with speculative capital, but labor is pouring sweat equity into the Bay. Recent labor victories in Big Tech's heartland show that

front-line workers of the “innovation” sector’s lunch lines and bus lines still hold leverage in keeping the corporations humming.

Cafeteria workers are relishing a win at Intel’s Santa Clara headquarters with a 31-12 vote to join UNITE HERE Local 19. During the months-long organizing drive, the union filed a federal complaint alleging that Intel’s dining contractor, Eurest, suppressed campaign activities, including cracking down on workers wearing pro-union buttons. Eurest was also accused of violating state regulations by restricting workers’ bathroom breaks, though it has agreed to recognize the union.

Toxic labor relations at Intel’s cafeteria predated Eurest’s management; in 2014, a previous contractor had scrapped a workforce—a move that prompted the union to launch a fresh organizing campaign with the new workers, who earn about a quarter of the typical hourly wage of a local software developer. According to organizer Joyce Chen, in the lead-up to the vote, “Eurest offered many workers a 20 percent raise and workers won free individual health insurance. We hope to negotiate an initial contract with Eurest in the coming months to build from there.” (Intel claimed in May it was looking to resolve the dispute with the parent company, Compass, and holds its vendors to the voluntary standards established in the Electronic Industry Citizenship Coalition Code of Conduct, which includes guaranteed freedom of association).

The Teamsters got a boost with a card-check vote at Bauer’s Intelligent Transportation, which operates commuter shuttles for mega-brands like Cisco, Zynga, and Intuit.

Though the Teamsters have organized other tech contract drivers, the Bauer's battle was especially rough, culminating in a mandate for "labor harmony" issued by San Francisco's Municipal Transportation Authority. The unique labor peace requirement, backed by the City Council, was partially spurred by demonstrations against Bauer's at (where else?) muni-bus stops.

Drivers accused Bauer's of aggressive union busting, including establishing a "company union" to preempt the formation of a real union. One driver told *Mother Jones* that workers had been coerced to join the management-controlled organization by a supervisor who "pretty much just pushed me a blank sheet of paper and said, 'Here, sign this and I will see if I can get you better benefits.'"

But drivers resisted the pressure tactics, eventually leading the city to punish Bauer's, which boasts ultra-efficient "green" fleets with luxurious WiFi-equipped interiors, by threatening to deny an operating permit because of both poor performance and failure to resolve labor disputes. The sanction, apparently an unprecedented local regulation on tech bus operators, ostensibly aimed to avoid "disruption of the orderly operation" of bus services, but with a clear pro-worker bent. To the Teamsters, the measure made sense logistically and ethically, given the perils of angry labor protests combined with road rage on crowded streets.

"We were disrupting Bauer's buses, and it doesn't take very long during rush-hour traffic in San Francisco to back up traffic," says Doug Bloch of Teamsters Joint Council 7. "The MTA's interest was not really to wade into our labor relations, but to make sure that if there are labor disputes with these

private shuttle bus companies...that doesn't interfere with the regular buses that hundreds of thousands of people ride every day."

But beyond the Loop, can labor-community alliances really counterbalance the power of Big Tech? With 34,000 commuters daily, Silicon shuttles amount to one of the region's largest private transit systems. Many community advocates resent what they see as the tech sector's privatization of local transit, which is fundamentally neither fair nor environmentally sustainable. Bloch acknowledges that while private buses help by reducing reliance on individual cars, mass transit solutions are lacking: "we don't have public buses, we don't have trains, we don't have light rail, we don't have other alternatives for people, and every rider we put in a Google bus is somebody who's not putting money into a fare box."

Still, while the Teamsters generally advocate expanded public investment in mass transit, Bloch argues labor can drive socially responsible transportation infrastructure development, by serving as "the fallback for when work get privatized." For example, thanks to the unionization of relatively high-paid tech shuttle drivers, who can earn about \$30 an hour, local paratransit drivers, whom the union also represents, have been offered raises of over 40 percent in the forthcoming contract.

"My bad joke has been rising road lifts all buses," Bloch says. As unionization spreads across public and private transit, "it has changed the market for bus drivers in the Bay Area, and raised the standard of living, which is what we're supposed to do as a union."

Derecka Mehrens, executive director of Working Partnerships USA, the community-labor coalition behind the Silicon Valley Rising campaign, says that in segregated cities like San Francisco, “The Google bus phenomenon became an important and powerful symbol of inequality.” Amid rising gentrification and economic segregation, resentment boils among struggling Black and Latino workers as they watch corporate caravans “pulling up to public transit stops, and mostly white, well-educated workers were getting on them, while other folks were waiting for the other bus.” As shuttle drivers started to organize, however, “we started to put the face of those shuttle bus drivers , who were living in their cars and not earning enough to survive, and by the way, commuting hours themselves into San Francisco to get to their job...because they can’t afford to live in San Francisco.”

The challenge is orchestrating a broad-based response to what Mehrens calls San Francisco’s “mixed consciousness” toward the tech industry’s coveted yet resented wealth. In an effort to leverage the local community’s power to get Big Tech’s wealth to trickle down, activists frame bus-stop class wars and cafeteria labor fights as critical interfaces between divided workforces.

But as workers and unions seek to build power in Silicon Valley, Mehrens adds, “in order to solve these big problems with inequality...we can’t do it without this sector and employers at the table, unionizing, and workers rising up—coming together collectively.”

Unions, communities, and technology may not be uniting in a seamless mesh yet, but cross-sector organizing can link workers under a democratic agenda to diffuse Big Tech’s

power across the urban grid. ●

I COMMENT

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