

The Tech Workers Helping to Unionize Big Tech

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If you need more proof that nothing in politics is predictable anymore, look no further than the April 2017 meeting of the Tech Worker's Coalition — about 35 people, most of them software engineers, many from household-name tech companies in Silicon Valley, sitting in a run-down union hall in the Tenderloin, talking about the evils of capitalism and organizing the workers from below to take on the bosses.

It would be difficult to take this seriously if the group were arguing for better working conditions for themselves, but organizers are quick to emphasize the group isn't here to unionize software engineers.

"That's not even a goal for me," said Ares Geovanos, chemical engineer and member of the Tech Worker's Coalition. "I'm interested in immediate wins and building from there." The wins they're after are better pay and working conditions for Silicon Valley's service workers: janitors, cafeteria workers, security guards, and others, especially those working on tech company campuses. Despite working for some of the most profitable companies in the world, these workers are routinely paid less than the basic cost of living in Silicon Valley and rarely receive benefits.

Andrew Barney, a cafeteria worker at Intel in Santa Clara, was used to the relatively low pay in the food service industry before he moved to the Bay Area in 2013. But he said the high cost of living was still a shock.

Barney's high hopes for improvement when he started working at Intel in 2015 were quickly let down. His starting pay, \$11.65 an hour, didn't leave him much breathing room, and many of his co-workers commuted from as far away as Stockton to find affordable housing. Barney and his co-workers voted to unionize last September. Their campaign won them wage increases, paid vacation, sick leave and health care benefits. Those new benefits came in handy when Barney was injured in a car crash in February, leaving him with medical bills he said would have crushed him otherwise.

Service worker unions UNITE HERE and SEIU, part of a coalition called Silicon Valley Rising, have won a handful of these campaigns in the last several years. TWC's members have served as fixers — when union organizers can't get onto tech campuses, TWC members have connected with service workers and directed them to information about the union.

Unite Here: hotel and restaurant workers' union of San Francisco and San Mateo counties

"We've played kind of a peripheral role in a lot of things," Geovanos said. "I wouldn't say we've won anything for anybody."

But the person-to-person organizing work has been a valuable education for the group, said Matt Schaefer, one of the Tech Workers Coalition's founders.

"I've talked with other workers at tech companies who've been learning more about these things too, and they've had a similar experience — they're seeing the workers that maybe in the past blended into the background for them," he said.

"Blending into the background" is sometimes intentional — Barney said his supervisors told him to "be seen and not heard" whenever he worked a catered event in the Intel offices. He said the rare chance he had to talk to engineers as in the cafeteria, and even then he faced possible repercussions.

But the social divide between the different groups of workers also plays a role, he said. "A lot of well-intentioned good people struggle with basic interactions with service workers, and that is a little distressing".

That divide between tech workers and everyone else has become a well-known fact of life over the last few years in the Bay Area. It's always in the background, sometimes in wildly contradictory ways, like "QUEERS HATE TECHIES" stickers on the backs of MacBooks in coworking spaces.

While the Tech Worker's Coalition has grown exponentially since Trump took office, it has its roots in the moment when that simmering resentment against tech workers boiled over into the streets in the form of the tech bus blockades in late 2013.

Peter Gabel, an academic, author and community organizer who's lived in San Francisco's Noe Valley neighborhood since 1979, said for his neighbors, the buses were one more sign they were being replaced by newcomers whose identities didn't match the "ethnically diverse, artistic, political" profile the neighborhood was used to, who had no apparent desire to be a part of the existing social fabric.

Just as the bus blockades broke out, Gabel was promoting his new book of essays, *Another Way Of Seeing*, which argues that all people have a longing for community and mutual recognition. During a launch event at a Noe Valley book store, an audience member challenged him on that point — didn't these techie newcomers disprove that idea? Here was a group of people who didn't know the community, didn't want to be a part of the community, and were displacing the community — what about them?

Gabel said he believed there were progressive people in the tech industry buried under a negative stereotype, and believed it was important to make space for their politics to emerge. "The risk is that they'll get buried under the stereotype and just say 'to hell with it,'" he said. "She sort of challenged me and said 'How are you going to do that?'"

The next morning, he got his chance. He encountered a neighbor in a coffee shop, who said he was afraid to go to his bus stop because of the ongoing protests. Gabel suggested they have a meeting and talk about it. His neighbor declined, but suggested he talk to Matt Schaefer Instead.

Schaefer, who grew up in rural Minnesota, moved to San Francisco in 2012, partly for work and partly for the city itself. “I wanted to be a part of a vibrant and progressive city, but I understood that the money coming in was creating a lot of problems,” he said.

“Not a lot of conversation was happening, at least within groups in our neighborhood, in Noe Valley, between newcomers to the neighborhood, who might be riding the shuttles, and community members who’d been living there a long time,” Schaefer continued, “There was no place for progressive tech workers, people who were interested in improving their communities, improving their neighborhoods... there was no place for those folks to find each other, and no clear place for community members or community organizations to engage those people.”

So they arranged a meeting. Gabel said it was clear that Schaefer had the motivation, but had no idea how to act on it. “The main thing was, ‘How do you organize a meeting? Who do you invite? What does the agenda look like? What should our name be?’”, he said.

The answer to all those questions came from Rachel Melendes of UNITE HERE, who was actively looking to connect with tech workers. Melendes moved to San Jose from the Southwest in 2012 to organize hotel workers in the South Bay and the Peninsula. She wanted to start approaching the big customers of the hotels, many of which were major tech companies, but she was hamstrung by the same social and cultural divide faced by everyone else.

“There’s how many thousands of people who work in tech in the area, and I had no clue as to how to start looking for them,” Mendes said. “So I just started asking everybody that I knew and that I work with, and who they know, if they knew anybody who worked in tech who would be into doing stuff with us. And into organizing. And into being a part of taking back power in the city.”

Melendes followed a few “false leads” before Jakes arranged an introduction to Schaefer, and they became the nucleus of the Tech Worker’s Coalition.

Now, the group regularly has between 30 and 50 people at its monthly meetings, and a little over 100 people active on its Slack channel. Recruitment at first was slow and sporadic, and spiked in the second half of 2016. Melendes said the “big bang” happened after the election — the December and January meetings were the biggest the group ever had.

Some members, like Paige Planter, who works for a company promoting diversity in tech, joined out of their disillusionment with the industry. She saw Melendes speak on a panel at a Rainbow/PUSH Coalition event, where she pointed out that there’s already lots of racial

diversity at companies like Google when you include cafeteria workers and janitors. “I was like, ‘Well that’s kind of a more interesting problem,’” Planter said. “Who cares about diversity or equal representation for the top 1% of America?”

Others, like Geovanos, found the group through their existing class-oriented politics. He said he read about worker retaliation against cafeteria workers at Intel and contacted UNITE HERE with his own plan to mobilize tech workers when Melendes reached out to him to invite him to a meeting.

Since then, Geovanos has helped recruit tech workers already engaged in class-oriented politics, especially from Bay Area chapters of Democratic Socialists of America, which have also surged since the election, and reading groups for the socialist magazine Jacobin.

He said it’s not as strange as it might look for tech workers, especially people new to the industry, to identify with the working class.

“Not everyone went to the Stanford CS program,” he said. “We organize with people who have been baristas their whole lives and then went to a [coding] bootcamp and now have a steady income. This is one of the only stable sectors of the economy — that’s why people move here.”

Geovanos himself worked in construction before the 2008 financial crisis hit, wiping out most of his work, prompting him to go back to school for engineering and move to the Bay Area.

He also said there’s a larger variance in salary than most people outside the industry realize. “We had a meeting the other day where we talked about our salaries — it went from \$40,000 to \$200,000,” he said.

As tech CEOs have moved to define the political alignment of the tech industry in the Trump administration, the Tech Worker’s Coalition and other groups like it are arguing for a seat at the table, taking the position that the people building the tech industry’s products should have a say in what gets built, and to what end.

In January the TWC held a protest at the headquarters of Palantir, a provider of data mining software to law enforcement and intelligence agencies, demanding the company commit to not cooperate with the Trump administration’s plan to build a Muslim registry.

In late April the large tech incubator YCombinator held an invite-only event called the Tech Worker’s Values Forum. In response the TWC held its own event, called “Tech Worker’s Values: An Open Forum” at the same time, mere blocks away, and invited all tech workers and community members to talk about what the tech industry’s values should be.

There's almost certainly trouble ahead as the TWC moves to take on these larger goals, Melendes said.

"My inclination is that these companies are going to retaliate against them standing up. Because that's what companies do with labor organizing — they don't want workers talking to each other. They don't want workers sharing their opinions about how to do things," she said.

But perhaps the biggest challenge of all is the social and cultural divide that persists in the Bay Area. The Tech Worker's Coalition is still building trust among other progressive groups and organizers, and the group's activity on the Internet frequently attracts comments from people doubting that the group is acting in good faith.

And the basic challenge of relating across the social divide remains a problem. Baristas and cafeteria workers on tech campuses say they still deal with disrespect and entitlement from the people they serve, and better pay and benefits won't fix that. Many white collar tech workers say they still have trouble forming relationships with service workers on their campuses, especially since there aren't many places workers of all kinds can mingle with each other.

There's one notable exception: Andrew Barney said he doesn't recommend smoking, but he said the campus smoking section — outdoors, somewhere in the back of the building where nobody can see — remains one of the few areas of common ground for the entire working class.

Former residents of Albany Bulb among the ruins at SOMArts

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A surreal scene played out at the opening of *Refuge in Refuse*, an art exhibit featuring work by former residents of the Albany Bulb, as the former residents themselves walked among ruins which less than a year ago were part of their homes.

The presentation of the various pieces gave the impression of a museum, as if an archeological dig only recently turned up evidence of the community that inhabited the former landfill from the late 1980s until April of 2014.

Osha Neumann, one of the artists behind some of the Bulb's most iconic artwork, and a lawyer for the more than 50 evicted Bulb residents, said the Bulb was such a treasure precisely because of how different it was from the staid, academic, whitewashed atmosphere of SOMArts gallery.

"We have to defend these liberated spaces," Neumann said, "from the monster trying to consume us all."

"I have very mixed feelings about turning this catastrophe into an aesthetic experience," Neumann said in an interview. "For whom? For gallery goers. Voyeurs."

He said he wasn't sure how people would relate to the exhibit, and that there was a danger they would see the people as merely "raw material for an artistic experience," rather than being motivated to join the struggle to end homelessness.

"I hope I'm wrong, but I'm not optimistic that we're gonna get that kind of change out of this exhibit. We get that change out of very little these days."

The exhibit featured a variety of work in various mediums—paintings on found materials, photographs of residents in their homes, archaeological studies and speculative development plans from university students, as well as three documentary films made about the Bulb and its residents over the years.

Paintings by Jimbo The Hobo, also known as James Lee Bailey, are prominently featured in the exhibit. He painted scenes from the Bulb on pieces of wood found at the landfill.

"Most of the art is my own spiritual awakening after 2000, I started doing abstract art," he said. "If it hadn't been for art I wouldn't be here right now. It healed me."

Jimbo, who is 61, has been living on the streets since the most recent eviction.

"I need to get off the streets," he said. "I want to go back and do my art, and try to live the rest of my life out whatever I have left in kind of a normal atmosphere where I can get up make a cup of coffee and take a shit."

The exhibit also didn't elaborate on what happened to the people who lost their homes, and where they are living now.

Andy Kreamer, who lived at the Bulb for two years and produced a documentary titled *Where Do You Go When It Rains?*, volunteered to find and transport former residents of the Bulb to the opening reception of *Refuge in Refuse*.

“We were doing a little survey in the bus on the way over here... and the people were asking, ‘Is anyone better off now than they were before?’ and everybody said, ‘No.’”

During the eviction process in 2013, Albany spent more than \$500,000 to build a temporary shelter, which went largely unused, and to contract with the Berkeley Food and Housing Project to find housing for Bulb residents, with dismal results.

“One person got a house in Richmond. Nine people live there from the Bulb,” Kreamer said. “Realistically speaking, that’s temporary because they’re gonna get probably told they can’t do that and lose the house or something.”

Neumann said he’s still trying to find housing for many of the former residents.

“I’ve been working to try and get people into housing, with the assistance of people in Berkeley, and it’s a very slow and difficult process. There’s people that we don’t know where they are. There’s people we’ve lost,” he said.

One resident, Chester, who Kreamer said couldn’t be found in time for the exhibit, is still living on the streets near a highway onramp. Another is living in an RV in a fenced empty lot in West Oakland.

“She’s scared. She’s not feeling good there. She would love to leave. They offered her a housing thing, but you can’t have dogs there,” Kreamer said, “which is terrible for people who’ve been living on the streets because their pets are their main companions in life. So to not have them—they can’t make that choice, so they don’t get the housing. And the housing needs to be... It needs to be whatever people need. It needs to allow dogs if that’s what they need.”

Former resident Amber Whitson is also living in an RV in the East Bay. She said she’s a fan of the exhibit, and that curator Robin Lasser did an excellent job accurately conveying the landfill and the community that lived there as the community saw it. But she said the experience of seeing the exhibit is still difficult.

“It is bittersweet. It’s just a shame that more couldn’t have been done to save it by some people who are now lauding it and publicizing its former existence. Be them professors or artists or whatever—it’s just a shame that they didn’t feel that it was part of their itinerary, their plan, their duty to attempt to preserve this thing that they are now benefitting from and glorifying the remains of.”

The exhibit did not touch on the ongoing political struggle between the Bulb’s residents and the City of Albany.

Whitson, who, along with her partner and one supporter was among the last to leave the Bulb, said the Bulb might have been saved had supporters made more of an effort to build support in Albany.

“There was surprisingly few Albany residents who actually knew about the Bulb, let alone knew what was going on out there. And when we did explain to them what it is and what was

going on, there were very supportive,” she said. “It would have been helpful if there was more Albany residents that were actually showing up to City Council meetings, and speaking up on behalf of, at the very least, humane treatment of the people who lived there for so long.”

Neumann said that following the eviction, “Albany now is essentially a town without homeless people. It used to be all over this country what they would call ‘sundown towns’—towns where there is actually a sign on the edge of town saying that if you are black (although it didn’t say ‘black’) get out of town before sundown,” Neumann said. “Albany is essentially a sundown town for homeless people. They are essentially barred from any public space here,” he said.

“It’s the same struggle we’ve been in for centuries now—by ‘we’ I mean the people, the real people of the world,” Kreamer said. “The capitalists are the ones that decided to put fences everywhere and claim ownership of everything, and then sell it back to us, or rent it back to us, so that we’d be in debt to them, so far forever more.”

“Ever since they’ve been doing that there’s been people resisting them. So this thing at the Bulb—at least we know we’re part of a history of amazing people that are struggling to end capitalism,” he said.

After resisting the eviction for six months, some Bulb residents, including Jimbo, received a \$3,000 settlement from Albany in exchange for signing an agreement not to return for one year. As part of *Refuge in Refuse*, a group of former residents will go to the Bulb on April 25th, on the one year anniversary of the eviction, to stage an “artistic intervention”—planting signs made in the style of state park interpretive information honoring the memory of the community that once lived there.

Jimbo said he is looking forward to returning.

“I’m gonna go back to where the library is and reminisce, and just sit there, sleep overnight. Maybe I’ll get a ticket, whatever. But I’m gonna build a fire, I’m gonna stay there the night, I’m going to invite my friends over and we’ll go have a little celebration and see what happens after that. Because they sure in the hell can’t get the National Guard to come out there and take us all again.”

Jimbo said he took the settlement because his lawyer insisted, and so that he’d be able to live to fight another day.

“That way, we can all come back a year from that date, and say, ‘Look, give us three more grand, we might stay away a week! That’s three grand a day, not three grand a month!’”

SF rental subsidies program pushing poor renters out of SF

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Fifteen-year-old Lilliana Freites is a lot like most girls her age — she spends most of her time either hanging out with her friends or doing homework, she's constantly buried in her cell phone and she sometimes has trouble making her curfew.

But Freites and her mother, Margret Taylor, face a challenge that most families, yet still far too many, do not — they're currently moving from hotel to hotel, night by night, to avoid sleeping on the streets.

"It's really expensive and crazy. I'm trying to find something weekly, but I haven't been able to come up with a place," Taylor said.

Taylor and her daughter had to move out of the single room occupancy unit they were renting after Taylor lost two of her three jobs. "I at least needed two jobs," she said, to pay the weekly rent.

She said she started an application for a rental subsidy from First Avenues three months ago and just opened another application with SFHome. Both programs are administered by non-profits contracting with the city's Human Services Agency to provide homeless prevention and rapid re-housing services.

In the meantime, Taylor is struggling to find work and keep a roof over her and her daughters' heads. "It's just really impossible to move forward from your life if you don't have a stable place to live," she said. "You get stuck in the whirlpool of just spinning around and you can't get out of it."

HSA's website doesn't provide details of the available subsidies on its website, but according to a December 2012 report prepared for the city by Abbot Consulting, San Francisco's rental subsidy program is administered by five different non-profit organizations, each with their own focus, requirements, amount and duration of subsidies.

The maximum rental subsidy is \$1,000 a month (increased from \$800 in 2014), and the subsidy can be retained for up to five years. But these limits are up to the discretion of the agencies that administer them. The rental subsidy also cannot be used in shared housing — the subsidy can only go to a primary leaseholder.

Skyrocketing rents, especially for new leases, mean that many people receiving the subsidy are now being told to look outside the city, especially in Oakland. For people like Lidia Flores, moving even such a relatively short distance away just isn't practical.

Flores lives in a six-bedroom apartment in the Mission with her two children, an 11-year-old daughter and a 15-year-old-son. She said if her children were younger, she would have no problem moving, but she said it's different with teenagers.

Flores doesn't speak English and is unable to work due to psychological issues resulting from the domestic violence that drove her away from her home country of El Salvador in 2007.

She said the father of her children beat, shot and stabbed her, at one point putting her in intensive care in the hospital for 12 days. She moved away, but her abuser found her, broke into her new house and raped her. She then fled to the U.S., where her brother was already living.

She said her children are also exposed to domestic violence in their new home — she said her children saw another resident of their apartment beat his wife, who took her husband to court and lost because her husband's family testified against her.

Flores said she wants to move, and has been approved for a rent subsidy, but, before she can receive it, she has to find a place she would be able to afford, and she said all the areas of San Francisco within her reach are too dangerous for her children.

She said she doesn't want to leave the city because her family, her therapist, and her entire support system are here, and she's especially fearful of the effect on her 15-year-old son, who she said would be exposed to gang violence in areas she could afford with the subsidy.

According to the 2012 Abbot Consulting study, the rental subsidy is an extremely effective homelessness prevention program — 95 percent of families and 89 percent of singles exited the program "stably housed." The Homeless Emergency Services Providers' Association 2014 budget request included changes that would enable the subsidy to help even more people, including Taylor and Flores.

The association requested an increase in the maximum subsidy to \$1,500 in special cases; it also asked that the city allow the subsidy to be used in shared housing, which would enable people like Flores to find appropriate housing in the city they can afford. The organization also requested that subsidy money be made available to at-risk housed families, which could have kept Taylor from having to give up her single room occupancy unit when she lost work.

The maximum subsidy was increased to \$1,000 per the association's recommendations, but the rest of its requests didn't make it into the budget, leaving families like Taylor's and Flores' to struggle against the limitations. In the meantime, people like lifelong San Francisco resident Jeanette Luna are looking outside the city for a stable home.

"I guess it's what's meant to be — I wish I could afford to stay, but I can't," she said. "I was looking on Craigslist, and it was like \$1,400 for a studio or something... I have three kids. You can't live in a studio, there's no room."

Luna was working before she became pregnant with her youngest daughter, now five months old. After going through a divorce, and alternating between sleeping in hotel rooms, her car and her uncle's house, she said she's ready to get back on her feet and focus on being a good mom.

Luna said the subsidy will enable her to "have a stable house for me and my baby, so we're very happy," she said. "I'm just grateful — what if I didn't have help at all?"

Influence Explored: Credit ratings agencies score the U.S. government, and lobby it, too
[Published in Influence Explored, July 15th 2011](#)

The ongoing negotiations in Congress over raising the U.S. debt ceiling have prompted Moody's Corp, a bond rating agency, to bring the rating of U.S. Treasury bonds up for review, according to an article from Bloomberg News.

U.S. Treasury bonds are currently rated "AAA", the highest possible rating, and are considered some of the safest investments available. If congress fails to raise the debt ceiling, the U.S. government would run the risk of defaulting on its debt for the first time in history, and bond rating agencies would likely lower the bond rating, making them less attractive investments and reducing the government's ability to borrow money.

Representative Peter Welch said in an interview with Bloomberg that Moody's is "sending a signal" to lawmakers with its warning on the bond rating. Moody's, along with the other companies mentioned in the article, have other methods of "sending signals" to congress as well. Below is a look at the influence profiles of the entities mentioned in the piece:

- Moody's spent \$2.77 million on lobbying from 2009 to 2010 and \$250,000 so far in 2011, 47 percent of all lobbying spending since 1991.
- Standard & Poor's spent \$60,000 on lobbying from 2009-10. McGraw Hill, Standard & Poor's parent company, spent \$3.09 million on lobbying in 2009-10 on some of the same bills and issues.
- Both Standard & Poor's and McGraw Hill's lobbyists registered to lobby on issues surrounding credit rating agencies, including a provision in Dodd-Frank that would hold credit ratings agencies liable for securities fraud. A bill was introduced by Rep. Steve Stivers (R-Ohio), H.R. 1539, to repeal that provision.
- Moody's lobbying disclosure forms only say they are lobbying for "Financial market regulation".
- Fannie Mae only made \$43,753 in political contributions in 2009-2010. That amount is far less than the \$1 million in contributions made in 2007-2008, the years the financial crisis began and just as banks began to fail.
- Likewise, Freddie Mac only made \$44,400 in contributions in 2009-2010, while in 2007-2008 the organization made just over \$443,000 in political contributions.
- According to the Bloomberg article, Moody's would downgrade U.S. bonds to AA, the rating just below AAA. Other ratings agencies are prepared to take more drastic measures, such as Standard & Poors, who warned the government on June 30th that it would drop its rating from AAA to D, the lowest possible rating.

Credit ratings agencies became the subject of regulation following the financial crisis in 2008, because credit ratings agencies like Moody's and Standard & Poor's rated financial instruments based on bad home loans as AAA, and many of them turned out to be much riskier than the rating implied.