

State Legislature Campaigns?

December 23, 2024

The People Demand Housing, Not Punishment

By Luis Ángel Soberanis-Pacheco

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Updated: October 9, 2023

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Editor's Note: This article was contributed from the Laney College Chapter, Poor People's Campaign

Being homeless at the end of my high school senior year had me prioritizing my grades a lot more closely than I ever did in previous years. I turned in my assignments earlier, made up as much work as I was allowed to, and took as much time as I could to study for classes I knew I needed help in. Although I was sleeping in parks and staying in houses that belonged to my friends, I felt assured knowing I had a chance to make it out of my situation thanks to the opportunities I had in school and the staff that was there to support me. Whether it was programming fruit to act as a musical instrument to impress my creative technology teacher or trading sci-fi authors like baseball cards with my English teachers, there was always an outlet for me and my interests. Most of which I couldn't find anywhere else growing up in East 14.

Right before my high school graduation, I used to carry around this duffel bag full of clothes and hygiene supplies around campus along with my other backpack already full of textbooks. Worried about what others might think, I would try to convince my classmates and teachers that I was 'just trying out for sports' —even if it was the end of the year and I didn't sign up for a single sports team. Some teachers knew or at least had an idea of the fact that I wasn't staying with my family. Especially after staff intervened in a physical altercation on campus that had my parents escorted into a separate room for my safety. Most just trusted my word when I said that 'everything was fine'. Regardless of what was going on in the background, I never let it get in the way of pursuing an education in computer science. With what I learned from creative technology classes and a summer coding job during my junior year in high school, I decided to work full-time for multiple virtual reality startups across San Francisco in order to support myself throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

At 18 years old, I began working full-time for a leading virtual reality startup while part-timing for a virtual reality workout gym. Not only did it cover tuition, it was enough to be able to move into an apartment right outside of Lake Merritt. It was everything I thought I'd never have growing up. That is until the non-disclosure agreements and investment pools began showing the market for what it really was.

As the leading virtual reality startup developed proprietary assets that investors considered 'cutting-edge' technology, competing companies made an effort to reverse engineer those assets and trade secrets by any means necessary. I'll never forget being told by management to watch out for potential competitors purchasing tickets as a way to see what kind of technology we had behind the scenes. Especially the ones taking notes while pretending to look for a bathroom.

Nevertheless, we always assured our investors that our assets and experiences were in fact the best in the market. Many who were lucky enough to see it during its opening still believe that it had some of the greatest experiences that virtual reality could offer.

In November of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the startup and all its locations after transferring their IP to a holding company. It gave me the opportunity to find work as a brand ambassador for another VR company, which led to another offer at the competitor to my first virtual reality job. They managed to keep afloat throughout the pandemic as they offered hours at minimum wage and catered especially to workers from their former competitors as they had the capacity to handle heavier tasks.

Switching my position with a former coworker from the virtual reality gym, I took an offer to open and close two e-commerce stores in Hayes Valley and Mission Bay. Both of which belonged to a company that reopened its stores during the pandemic. Six months later, that same e-commerce company shut down its operations across all its stores at a moment's notice. All without a warning to its management or bottom line workers. As of today, the company continues to expand its operations across the Japanese retail market.

Asking the coworker I swapped places with for help, he lets me know that he was promoted to manager during the time I worked at the e-commerce company. He sent me the onboarding paperwork through private messaging on social media and hired me in less than a week. In hindsight, it should've been the first sign that something was different about the company. He described the place as a "fast-fire, fast-hire environment," and to not worry since he ensured I'd be "looked out for."

My first paystub read "\$0.00" as my manager described a "glitch" in our payment system as we switched from one system to another during my onboarding. Nonetheless, I was assured I'd be "looked out for." It later had me witnessing a lot of calculated layoffs based on the decisions my manager and I made together as we reasoned and negotiated layoff plans for coworkers under his management. It was the first time I witnessed a high turnover rate used to reduce expenses associated with long-term employee benefits. Those expenses included healthcare and retirement plans for employees that work roles with limited durations and minimal training. This especially affected the cycle of minimum wage workers across all 40 locations of the franchise.

Faster turnover rates at the company also allowed managers to test different approaches and experiment with untested technologies on paying and unknowing customers without the risk of slowing down operations. These were cases where I thought hiring contractors would've made more sense but it only proved that ethics and what 'makes sense' was not mandatory when selecting what kind of employees to hire for the company. It was only made more apparent when my manager laid me off the first day I

moved into my apartment I had told him about months prior. His final words being, "You should go back to Meta."

Reducing another set of long term expenses for the company, he was promoted to IT Deployment Technician shortly after my departure.

Applying to any job I could find, I was offered my first 1099 contract for a startup developing AR cloud software. If I had known of the requisitions the company implemented for its employees, I would've used my right to void the contract along with my NDAs. Unfortunately, it was done for me by the CEO himself before the contract expired. His final words of advice behind closed doors being "College is just a place where teenagers use their parents money to go on vacation after high school. I was flipping pizzas when I was your age and learned a lot through watching YouTube videos and Googling everything. I'd recommend you do the same."

Throwing that recommendation out the window had me immediately enrolling in a spring semester at Laney College in pursuit of a degree in Business Administration and courses in Artificial Intelligence.

It wasn't long until I was on-boarded by another VR startup in Ghirardelli Square. A movie theater concept with a business owner as present and assuring as the one before. My first day there, I reunited with an old coworker there after he had been let go during our time at the VR franchise. A tall kid who spoke French and preferred to be called Max over his longer name.

We both finally had another chance to work at a startup with more opportunities than most.

He was let go within the hour I met back with him. His first day was only a few days before mine.

As the CEO took me home in an empty semi-truck after unloading Russian space equipment at Ghirardelli Square, he mentioned how he knew my boss from my previous contract. It only raised more concerns regarding the standards and precedents set for some contracts found in San Francisco's XR industry. It wasn't too long until an online article shut down the location with an honest review from a local news journalist who visited the place. In hindsight, I would've definitely voided that first contract.

It would've kept Max at that theater.

Moving back home, I faced many claims from my parents and sister that I was never working and didn't attend school at all. Convinced that I was photoshopping my class schedule and student ID to avoid paying rent to my parents, my items were thrown into the street weeks before the start of my fall semester. With the help of my uncle and mentor Muteado, I was more than grateful to have been introduced to and taken care of by the community over at Homefulness and their media outlet, Poor Magazine (Prensa Pobre). All thanks to a community leader we all know and love back home; Lisa Gray-García —The Poverty Skola.

Over at Homefulness, everyone taught me how to give back to my community with weekly food drives while our community leader Muteado showed me how to edit and broadcast shows for Poor Magazine's Revolutionary Radio on KEXU 96.1FM. They even educated me on the issues and values held by houseless, poor, and indigenous folks across the bay as part of the Poverty Scholarship program.

With enough love, support, and a whole lot of patience, I eventually found my way back to Laney College in time for their debut Artificial Intelligence and Machine learning courses for the fall semester.

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