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SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

FOR THE COUNTY OF SANTA CLARA

ALBERTO CONCHAS JIMENEZ, individually, and on behalf of all others similarly situated,

Plaintiff,

v.

THE CASTINE GROUP; and DOES 1 through 10, inclusive,

Defendant .

Case No.: 21CV375173

CLASS & REPRESENTATIVE ACTION

[*Assigned for all purposes to Hon. Charles F. Adams, Dept. 7*]

PLAINTIFF'S NOTICE OF MOTION AND MOTION FOR FINAL APPROVAL OF CLASS ACTION SETTLEMENT; MEMORANDUM OF POINTS AND AUTHORITIES

FINAL APPROVAL HEARING
Date: February 6, 2025
Time: 1:30 p.m.
Dept.: 7

Complaint filed: January 12, 2021
FAC filed: April 26, 2024
Trial date: Not set

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NOTICE OF MOTION AND MOTION

TO ALL PARTIES AND THEIR COUNSEL OF RECORD:

PLEASE TAKE NOTICE that on February 6, 2025 at 1:30 p.m., in Department 7 of the Santa Clara County Superior Court, located at 191 North First Street, San Jose, CA 95113, Plaintiff Alberto Conchas Jimenez ("Plaintiff") will, and hereby does, move for an order as follows:

1. Certifying the Class for settlement purposes;
2. Approving the settlement as fair and reasonable and finding that class members were given notice of the settlement, and advised of their rights to participate in the settlement, object to the settlement, or exclude themselves from the settlement, in a reasonable manner;
3. Appointing Plaintiff as the Class Representative for settlement purposes, and approving a Class Representative Service Award of $10,000.00 to Plaintiff;
4. Appointing Plaintiffs' Counsel, Benjamin H. Haber and Daniel J. Kramer of Wilshire Law Firm, PLC as Class Counsel for settlement purposes, and approving payment of $161,666.67 in attorneys' fees, which is 33 1/3% of the Gross Settlement Amount;
5. Approving costs in the amount of $48,631.42 for litigating this action to Class Counsel;
6. Approving payment of administrative expenses to ILYM Group, Inc. as the Settlement Administrator in the amount of $4,500.00;
7. Directing that the clerk of the Court to enter the Court's order as a final judgment; and,
8. Without affecting the finality of the final judgment, reserving continuing jurisdiction over the parties for the purposes of implementing, enforcing and/or administering the Settlement or enforcing the terms of the judgment.

This motion will be based on the accompanying Memorandum of Points and Authorities, the Declarations of Benjamin H. Haber and Cassandra Polites, and such oral argument as may be heard by the Court, and all other papers on file in this action, including but not limited to the Declaration of Plaintiff that was previously submitted in support of Plaintiffs' Motion for Preliminary Approval of Class Action Settlement.

///

///

Dated: January 14, 2025

Respectfully submitted,

WILSHIRE LAW FIRM, PLC

By: ______________________________

Benjamin H. Haber
Daniel J. Kramer

Attorneys for Plaintiff

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MEMORANDUM OF POINTS AND AUTHORITIES

I. INTRODUCTION

Plaintiffs Alberto Conchas Jimenez ("Plaintiff") seeks final approval of a proposed $485,000.00 non-reversionary, class action settlement with Defendant The Castine Group ("Defendant" or "Castine," and collectively with Plaintiff, the "Parties"). The Settlement will provide substantial monetary payments to approximately 78 class members and, as set forth more fully below, satisfies all the criteria for settlement approval under California law.

A presumption of fairness exists as the Settlement was reached through extensive, mediated arm's-length negotiations, sufficient investigation and discovery allowed Class Counsel to act intelligently, and Class Counsel is experienced in similar wage-and-hour litigation. Upon the Court's approval of the settlement, participating class members will receive an ***average estimated individual <u>net</u> settlement payment of approximately $2,997.86***, with the ***highest individual <u>net</u> settlement payment to be paid of approximately $11,735.68***. (Declaration of Cassandra Polites on Behalf of ILYM Group, Inc. ["Polites Decl."], ¶ 16.) As of filing this Motion, there **<u>no</u> objections to the settlement** and **<u>no</u> requests for exclusion**. (*Id.* at ¶¶ 11-12.) Indeed, this proposed Settlement is fair, reasonable, and adequate, and is in the best interests of the Settlement Class Members who will receive timely relief.

Final approval of the settlement is warranted as it satisfies all the criteria for approval under California law. As demonstrated in the motion for preliminary approval, the proposed Settlement provides ***excellent*** **benefits to the class**, particularly considering the complexities and risks of the case. Accordingly, Plaintiff requests that the Court grant final approval of the proposed Settlement.

II. SUMMARY OF THE LITIGATION AND SETTLEMENT

A. Plaintiff's Claims

This is a wage and hour class action and PAGA representative action. Plaintiff and other class members worked in California as hourly-paid or non-exempt employees for Castine during the class period. Castine is based in Sunnyvale, California and provides electrical construction work to clients throughout Northern California. (Declaration of Benjamin H. Haber in Support

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of Plaintiff's Motion for Final Approval of Class Action Settlement ["Haber Decl."], ¶ 2.)

Plaintiff alleges that Castine's payroll, timekeeping, and wage and hour practices resulted in Labor Code violations. (Haber Decl. ¶ 3.) Plaintiff further alleges that Castine failed to pay for all hours worked. (*Id.*) Plaintiff further alleges that Castine failed to provide employees with legally compliant meal and rest periods, and Castine failed to reimburse business expenses. (*Id.*) Based on these allegations, Plaintiff asserts related claims for failure to provide accurate wage statements, failure to pay all final wages at termination, unfair business practices, and civil penalties under PAGA. (*Id.*)

On January 12, 2021, Plaintiff filed a putative wage-and-hour class action complaint against Defendants M.D.E. Electric Company and The Castine Group (collectively, "Defendants") for: (1) failure to pay minimum and straight time wages (Labor Code §§ 204, 1194, 1194.2, and 1197); (2) failure to pay overtime wages (Labor Code §§ 1194 and 1198); (3) failure to provide meal periods (Labor Code §§ 226.7 and 512); (4) failure to authorize and permit rest periods (Labor Code §§ 226.7 and 512); (5) failure to timely pay final wages at termination (Labor Code §§ 201-203); (6) failure to provide accurate itemized wage statements (Labor Code § 226); and (7) unfair business practices (Business and Professions Code 17200 et seq.). Plaintiff sent a notice to Defendants and the California Labor & Workforce Development Agency ("LWDA") alleging similar wage and hour violations pursuant to PAGA (Cal. Lab. Code §§ 2699, *et seq.*) on January 13, 2021. (*Id.* at ¶ 4.) On April 26, 2024, Plaintiff filed a First Amended Complaint, which included an additional cause of action for civil penalties pursuant to PAGA. (*Id.*)

B. Discovery and Investigation

Following the filing of the Complaint, the parties exchanged documents and information before mediating this action. (Haber Decl. ¶ 5.) Castine produced a sample of time and pay records for class members. (*Id.*) Castine also provided documents of its wage and hour policies and practices during the class period, and information regarding the total number of current and former employees in its informal discovery responses. (*Id.*) Plaintiff also appeared for a deposition and Plaintiff's counsel deposed multiple individuals employed by Defendant. (*Id.*)

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After reviewing documents regarding Castine's wage and hour policies and practices, analyzing Castine's timekeeping and payroll records, and interviewing Class Members, Class Counsel was able to evaluate the probability of class certification, success on the merits, and Castine's maximum monetary exposure for all claims. (Haber Decl. ¶ 6.) Class Counsel also investigated the applicable law regarding the claims and defenses asserted in the litigation. (*Id*.) Class Counsel reviewed these records and prepared a damage analysis prior to mediation. (*Id*.)

C. Settlement Negotiations and Agreement

On December 6, 2021, the parties participated in private mediation with experienced class action mediator, Lisa Klerman, Esq. (Haber Decl. ¶ 7.) However, the mediation failed. (*Id*.)

On September 1, 2022, Defendant M.D.E. Electric Company ("M.D.E.") filed a Motion for Summary Judgment to have M.D.E. dismissed from the case. (Haber Decl. ¶ 8.) On December 1, 2022, after the Parties conducted extensive discovery into the issues and after fully briefing the motion, the Court denied M.D.E's Motion for Summary Judgment. (*Id*. at ¶ 9.)

On April 27, 2023, the parties participated in another private mediation with experienced class action mediator Jason Marsili, Esq. (Haber Decl. ¶ 10.) The mediation was conducted via Zoom. (*Id*.) The settlement negotiations were at arm's length and, although conducted in a professional manner, were adversarial. (*Id*.) The parties went into the mediation willing to explore the potential for a settlement of the dispute, but each side was also prepared to litigate their position through trial and appeal if a settlement had not been reached. (*Id*.) After extensive negotiations and discussions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of Plaintiff's claims and Castine's defenses, the Parties reached a settlement the material terms of which are encompassed within the Settlement that was executed in December 2023. (*Id*. at ¶ 11, **Ex. 1** [Class Action and PAGA Settlement Agreement and Class Notice].)

Class Counsel has conducted a thorough investigation into the facts of this case. (Haber Decl. ¶ 21.) Based on the foregoing discovery and their own independent investigation and evaluation, Class Counsel is of the opinion that the Settlement is fair, reasonable, and adequate and is in the best interests of the Settlement Class Members in light of all known facts and

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circumstances, the risk of significant delay, the defenses that could be asserted by Castine both to certification and on the merits, trial risk, and appellate risk. (*Id.*.)

D. <u>Preliminary Approval and Overwhelming Support for the Settlement</u>

The Court granted Plaintiffs' Motion for Preliminary Approval of the Settlement on July 26, 2024. (*Id.* at ¶ 13.) On September 19, 2024, this Court modified the preliminary approval order to adjust the end date of the class period to November 15, 2023 pursuant to the Parties' joint stipulation and Defendant's election to shorten the class period according to the settlement agreement. (*Id.*)

The deadline for class members to opt out or object to the Settlement was January 6, 2025. (*Id.* at ¶ 14.) The reaction of the Class to the settlement has been overwhelmingly positive. Indeed, as of the filing of this Motion, no Class Member has opted out of the settlement, and no Class Members have objected to the settlement. (*Id.*)

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E. <u>Key Terms of the Proposed Settlement</u>

Under the Settlement Agreement, Defendants will pay $485,000.00 to resolve this litigation. The key terms include:

1. <u>Settlement Class</u>: For purposes of this Settlement Agreement only, the Parties agree to the certification of the classes pursuant to California Code of Civil Procedure § 382 defined as: "all persons who worked for Defendant in California as an hourly paid or non-exempt employee during the Class Period." (Settlement, § 1.5.)

2. <u>Class Period</u>: means the period from January 12, 2017 to November 15, 2023. (Settlement, § 1.12; see also Stipulation Modifying Preliminary Approval Order and Approving Class Notice; Order Thereon, filed on September 19, 2024.)

3. <u>Participating Class Members</u>: "means a Class Member who does not submit a valid and timely Request for Exclusion from the Settlement." (Settlement, § 1.35.)

4. <u>PAGA Members</u>: means all persons who worked for Defendant in California as an hourly paid or non-exempt employee during the PAGA Period, from November 24, 2020 to July 26, 2024. (Settlement, §§ 1.4, 1.31.)

5. <u>Gross Settlement Amount</u>: This amount is $485,000.00, for all claims, including

wages, interest, the Class Counsel Award, Litigation costs, Settlement Administration Costs, payment to the Labor and Workforce Development Agency ("LWDA") for the alleged PAGA penalties, all other penalties, and the Class Representative Service Award. (Settlement, § 1.22.)

6. Uncashed Checks: If a settlement check is returned to the Settlement Administrator as undeliverable, the Settlement Administrator shall promptly attempt to obtain a valid mailing address by performing a skip trace search and, if another address is identified, shall mail the check to the newly identified address. Any settlement checks remaining uncashed after one hundred and eighty (180) days shall be transmitted to Legal Aid at Work, located at 180 Montgomery Street, #600, San Francisco, California 94104, consistent with Code of Civil Procedure Section 384, subd. (b). (Settlement, § 4.4.3.)

7. Release: "Effective on the date when Defendant fully funds the entire Gross Settlement Amount and employer payroll taxes owed on the Wage Portion of the Individual Class Payments, Plaintiff and Participating Class Members release the Released Parties from all Released Class Claims that arose during the Class Period. The "Released Class Claims" include all claims that were asserted in the Action, or that arise from or could have been asserted based on any of the facts, circumstances, transactions, events, occurrences, acts, disclosures, statements, omissions or failures to act alleged in Plaintiff's Complaint, regardless of whether such claims arise under federal, state and/or local law, statute, ordinance, regulation, common law, or other source of law. The Released Claims specifically include, but are not limited to Labor Code §§ 201, 202, 203, 204, 210, 226, 226.7, 510, 512, 1174, 1194, 1194.2, and 1197 and the related IWC Wage Order No. 16-2001 and Business & Professions Code §§ 17200, et seq., and include claims based on alleged violations of these Labor Code and Wage Order provisions) and all other claims, such as those under the California Labor Code, Wage Orders, regulations, and/or other provisions of law, that could have been pleaded based on the facts asserted in the Action, including: (1) failure to timely pay employees upon separation or discharge; (2) failure to pay all wages due and owing for time worked; (3) failure to provide meal or rest periods of compensation in lieu thereof, (4) failure to provide accurate itemized wage statements, (5) all related violations of the applicable Wage Orders; (6) all related violations of California's unfair competition law; and (7) interest, fees, and costs ("Released

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Claims"). The enumeration of these specific statutes shall neither enlarge or narrow the scope of res judicata based on the claims that were asserted in the Action or could have been asserted in the Action based on the facts and circumstances alleged in any Complaint on file in the Action. Plaintiff's Release does not extend to any claims and causes of actions related to the case entitled *Alberto Jimenez v. M.D.E. Electric Company, Inc., et al.*, case number 21CV385485." (Settlement, § 5.2.)

8. No Reversion: "None of the Maximum Settlement Amount will revert to Defendant." (Settlement, § 3.1.)

9. PAGA Allocation: The settlement includes $25,000.00 allocated to Plaintiff's claims under PAGA, with 75% of which ($18,750.00) being paid to the LWDA and 25% ($6,250.00) being paid to the Aggrieved Employees. (Settlement, § 1.34.) Class Counsel submitted the proposed settlement to the LWDA before filing this Motion for Preliminary Approval. (Haber Decl., ¶ 16.)

10. Net Settlement Amount: the "Net Settlement Amount" is the amount that remains and that shall be paid to Settlement Class Members after the following amounts are subtracted: (1) Class Counsel Fees Payment and Class Counsel Litigation Expenses Payment, (2) Administrative Expenses Payment, (3) Class Representatives Service Payments, and (4) the LWDA PAGA Payment. (Settlement, § 1.28.)

11. Distribution Formula: "The Administrator will calculate each Individual Class Payment by (a) dividing the Net Settlement Amount by the total number of Workweeks worked by all Participating Class Members during the Class Period and (b) multiplying the result by each Participating Class Member's Workweeks." (Settlement, § 3.2.4.) As to PAGA: "The Administrator will calculate each Individual PAGA Payment by (a) dividing the amount of the Aggrieved Employees' 25% share of PAGA Penalties ($6,250) by the total number of PAGA Period Pay Periods worked by all Aggrieved Employees during the PAGA Period and (b) multiplying the result by each Aggrieved Employee's PAGA Period Pay Periods." (Settlement, § 3.2.5.1.)

12. Tax Allocation: "23% of each Participating Class Member's Individual Class Payment will be allocated to settlement of wage claims (the "Wage Portion"). The Wage

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Portions are subject to tax withholding and will be reported on an IRS W-2 Form. 10% of each Individual Class Payment will be allocated to the settlement of claims for interest and 67% of each Individual Class Payment will be allocated to the settlement of claims for penalties (together, the "Non-Wage Portion")." (Settlement, § 3.2.4.1.)

13. <u>Class Representative Service Awards:</u> Subject to Court approval, Plaintiff shall be paid an enhancement award not to exceed $10,000.00. (Settlement, § 3.2.1.) This amount is for Plaintiff's time and effort in bringing and presenting the action, and in exchange for a general release of all claims, known or unknown, pursuant to Civil Code Section 1542. (Settlement, § 5.1.) If the Court approves a lesser enhancement, then the unapproved portion or portions shall revert into the Net Settlement Amount to be distributed between the participating Settlement Class Members on a pro-rata basis. (Settlement, § 3.2.1.)

14. <u>Attorneys' Fees and Costs:</u> The Settlement provides that Defendant will not oppose a fee application of up to 33 1/3% ($161,666.67) of the Gross Settlement Amount, plus out-of-pocket costs not to exceed $50,000.00. (Settlement, § 3.2.2.)

15. <u>Notice of Proposed Class Action Settlement:</u> The Notice set forth in plain terms, a statement of the case, the terms of the Settlement Agreement, the approximate amount of attorneys' fees, costs, and service award being sought, and an explanation of how the settlement allocations are calculated. (Polites Decl., ¶ 7, **Ex. A**.) Class Members were also notified by first-class mail of the settlement. (*Id.*) ILYM Group, Inc., the proposed Settlement Administrator, undertook its best efforts to ensure that the notice is provided to the current addresses of class members, including conducting a national change of address search and re-mailing the notice to updated addresses. (*Id.* at ¶¶ 6-10.)

III. <u>THE SETTLEMENT MERITS FINAL APPROVAL</u>

The law favors the settlement of lawsuits, particularly in class actions and other complex cases. (*See e.g., Neary v. Regents of Univ. of California* (1992) 3 Cal.4th 272, 277-81.) Factors to be considered in evaluating a class action settlement include "the strength of plaintiffs' case, the risk, expense, complexity and likely duration of further litigation, the risk of maintaining class action status through proceedings, the experience and views of counsel, the presence of a

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government participant, and the reaction of the class members to the proposed settlement." (*Kullar v. Foot Locker Retail, Inc.* (2008) 168 Cal.App.4th 116, 128.) A presumption that a settlement is fair and reasonable exists where, as here, the following four factors are present: "(l) the settlement is reached through arm's length bargaining; (2) investigation and discovery are sufficient to allow counsel and the court to act intelligently; (3) counsel is experienced in similar litigation; and (4) the percentage of objectors is small." (*Wershba v. Apple Computers, Inc.* (2001) 91 Cal.App.4th 224, 245.)

Whether a class action settlement should be approved is a question committed to the trial court's broad discretion. (*Id.* at pp. 234-35.) In exercising its discretion, the Court should give "[d]ue regard ...to what is otherwise a private consensual agreement between the parties." (*Dunk v. Ford Motor Co.* (1996) 48 Cal.App.4th 1794, 1801.) "The inquiry 'must be limited to the extent necessary to reach a reasoned judgment that the agreement is not the product of fraud or overreaching by, or collusion between, the negotiating parties, and that the settlement, taken as a whole, is fair, reasonable and adequate to all concerned." (*Id.* [internal citations omitted].)

A. The Settlement Reflects a Reasonable Compromise

A settlement is not judged against what the plaintiff might recover had she prevailed at trial, nor does the settlement have to provide 100% of the damages sought to be fair and reasonable. (*Wershba, supra,* 91 Cal.App.4th at pp. 246, 250 ["Compromise is inherent and necessary in the settlement process…even if the relief afforded by the proposed settlement is substantially narrower than it would be if the suits were to be successfully litigated, this is no bar to a class settlement because the public interest may indeed be served by a voluntary settlement in which each side gives ground in the interest of avoiding litigation."].)

The settlement obviates the significant risk that this Court may deny certification of all or some of Plaintiff's claims. (Haber Decl., ¶ 10.) While Plaintiff is confident in the merits of his claims, a legitimate controversy exists as to each cause of action. (*Id.*) Plaintiff also recognizes that proving the amount of wages due to each class member would be an expensive, time-consuming, and uncertain proposition. (*Id.*) Furthermore, even if Plaintiff obtained certification of all or some of the claims, continued litigation would be expensive, involving a trial and possible

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appeals, and would substantially delay and reduce any recovery by the class. (*Id.*)

Because of the proposed Settlement, class members will receive timely, guaranteed relief and will avoid the risk of an unfavorable judgment. When considering the risks of litigation, the uncertainties involved in achieving class certification, the burdens of proof necessary to establish liability, the probability of appeal of a favorable judgment, it is clear that the settlement amount of $485,000.00 is within the "ballpark" of reasonableness, and preliminary settlement approval is appropriate. (*Id.*) ***Indeed, each Settlement Class Member is eligible to receive an average benefit of approximately $2,997.86, and the highest estimated net payout is expected to be approximately $11,735.68.*** (Bench Decl., ¶ 16.)

B. <u>The Settlement was Reached After Arms-Length Negotiations Following Formal and Informal Discovery</u>

The Settlement was reached following extensive negotiations following multiple mediations conducted with the assistance of experienced class action mediators, Lisa Klerman, Esq. and Jason Marsili, Esq. (Haber Decl. ¶¶ 7, 10.) The settlement negotiations were at arm's length and, although conducted in a professional manner, were adversarial. (*Id.*) The parties went into the mediations willing to explore the potential for a settlement of the dispute, but each side was also prepared to litigate their or its position through trial and appeal if a settlement had not been reached. (*Id.*) After extensive negotiations and discussions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of Plaintiff's claims and Castine's defenses, the Parties reached an agreement. (*Id.* at ¶ 11.)

Prior to reaching this settlement, Class Counsel conducted informal discovery concerning the claims set forth in the Litigation, such as a sample of class member timekeeping and payroll records, Castine's policies and procedures concerning the payment of wages, the provision of meal and rest breaks, issuance of wage statements, and providing all wages at separation, as well as information regarding the number of putative class members and the mix of current versus former employees, the wage rates in effect, and the amount of meal and rest period premium wages paid to class members. (*Id.* at ¶¶ 5-6.) In conjunction with their extensive factual investigation, Class Counsel investigated the applicable law regarding the claims and defenses asserted in the litigation.

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(*Id.*) Thus, Plaintiff and his counsel were able to act intelligently and effectively in negotiating the proposed Settlement. (*Id.*)

C. Plaintiffs' Counsel Has Substantial Class Action Experience

Class Counsel also has considerable experience and has demonstrated competence with litigating wage and hour class actions. (*Id.* at ¶¶ 32-39; *see also* Declaration of Justin F. Marquez, filed previously on June 25, 2024.) Class Counsel has substantial experience in all facets of litigation in state and federal court, including discovery, law and motion, trial, appeals, arbitration and mediation. Class Counsel has litigated numerous class actions on behalf of plaintiffs and have been lead counsel or otherwise exercised significant case handling responsibilities in numerous cases resulting in millions of dollars in class action settlements. (*Id.*)

Based on Class Counsel's experience as employment and class action attorneys, Class Counsel is eminently qualified to evaluate the strength of Plaintiffs' claims, the strength of Defendant's defenses against certification, the strength of Defendant's defenses on the merits, and the fairness of the Settlement. Their opinion that final approval of the Settlement would be in the best interests of class members in light of the significant risks of litigation is entitled to great weight. (*See Kullar, supra,* 168 Cal.App.4th at p. 129 ["The court undoubtedly should give considerable weight to the competency and integrity of counsel and the involvement of a neutral mediator in assuring itself that a settlement agreement represents an arms' length transaction entered without self-dealing or other potential misconduct"].)

D. There Are No Objections to the Settlement

No class member has objected to the Settlement, and no class members has requested exclusion from the Settlement. (Polites Decl., ¶¶ 11-13.) The overwhelmingly positive response of the class strongly supports final approval of the Settlement. (*See, e.g., In re Lifelock, Inc. Marketing and Sales Practices Litigation* (D. Ariz. 2010) 2010 WL 3715138, *6 [relatively few objections and requests for exclusion support approval].)

Factors to be considered in evaluating a class action settlement include "the reaction of the class members to the proposed settlement." (*Kullar, supra,* 168 Cal.App.4th at p. 128.) The reaction here has been overwhelmingly positive. Courts have approved class action settlements in

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lesser circumstances. (*See, e.g., Hughes v. Microsoft Corp.* (W.D.Wash. 2001) 2001 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 5976, 2001 WL 34089697, *8 [court found that the "class members overwhelmingly support[ed] the settlement" where there were over 37,000 notices sent out, 2,745 class members participated in the settlement, "only nine objections were submitted", and there were 86 timely opt-outs and over 20 additional defective or untimely opt-outs, "these indicia of the approval of the class of the terms of the settlement support a finding of fairness under Rule 23"], *citing Hanlon v. Chrysler Corp.* (9th Cir.1998) 150 F.3d 1011, 1027 [despite vigorous objections and appeal by objectors, the "fact that the overwhelming majority of the class willingly approved the offer and stayed in the class presents at least some objective positive commentary as to its fairness," and the court did not abuse its discretion in approving settlement].)

IV. **THE COURT SHOULD AWARD PLAINTIFFS THE REQUESTED AMOUNTS OF FEES, COSTS AND ENHANCEMENT PAYMENTS.**

Under the Settlement, subject to the Court's approval, Defendant has agreed to pay Class Counsel reasonable attorneys' fees in the amount of $161,666.67, which is 33 1/3% of the Gross Settlement Amount, costs up to $50,000.00 for litigating this Action, and an enhancement award of $10,000.00 to Plaintiff. Defendant has also agreed that it would not oppose an application for these payments addressed above, and no class member has objected to these amounts.

In common fund cases like this one, the primary method California courts use for calculating attorney's fees is the percentage of the common fund method, which may be followed by a lodestar cross-check. In *Laffitte v. Robert Half Int'l Inc.* (2016) 1 Cal. 5th 480, the California Supreme Court affirmed an award of 33 1/3% of a $19 million wage-and-hour class action settlement with a 2.03 to 2.13 multiplier. (*Id.* at p. 506.) In doing so, the California Supreme Court explained:

> As to the incentives a lodestar cross-check might create for class counsel, we emphasize the lodestar calculation, when used in this manner, ***does not override the trial court's primary determination of the fee as a percentage of the common fund*** and thus ***does not impose an absolute maximum or minimum on the potential fee award***. If the multiplier calculated by means of a lodestar cross-check is extraordinarily high or low, the trial court should consider whether the percentage used should be adjusted so as to bring the imputed multiplier within a justifiable range, but the court is not necessarily required to

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> make such an adjustment. Courts using the percentage method have generally weighed the time counsel spent on the case as an important factor in choosing a reasonable percentage to apply.

(*Id.* at p. 505, emphasis added; *see also Beaver v. Tarsadia Hotels* (S.D. Cal. Sept. 28, 2017) 2017 WL 4310707, at *9 [applying *Laffitte* standard to fee request for 33 1/3% of common fund].)

A. <u>A Fee Award Based on One-Third of the Common Fund is Standard</u>

According to a leading treatise on class actions, "No general rule can be articulated on what is a reasonable percentage of a common fund. Usually 50% of the fund is the upper limit on a reasonable fee award from a common fund in order to assure that the fees do not consume a disproportionate part of the recovery obtained for the class, although somewhat larger percentages are not unprecedented." (*See* Conte & Newberg, *Newberg on Class Actions* (3rd Ed.) § 14.03.) Attorneys' fees at fifty percent of the fund are typically considered the upper limit, with ***thirty to forty percent*** commonly awarded in cases where the settlement is relatively small. (*See Id.*; *see also, Van Vranken v. Atlantic Richfield Company* (N.D. Cal. 1995) 901 F. Supp. 294 [stating that most cases where 30-50% was awarded involved "smaller" settlement funds of under $10 million].)

The settled-for 33 1/3% fee award is consistent with the average fee award in class actions. Indeed, the custom and practice in class actions is to award approximately one-third of a fund as a fee award. (*See Chavez v. Netflix, Inc.* (2008) 162 Cal.App.4th 43, 66, n.11 ["Empirical studies show that, regardless whether the percentage method or the lodestar method is used, fee awards in class actions average around one-third of the recovery."].) Thus, Plaintiffs' fee request is in line with the prevailing guidelines established in California case law and academic literature and is consistent with awards in California. Accordingly, the Court should approve the attorneys' fees requested herein.

B. <u>While the Lodestar Method is Not Necessary in Common Fund Cases, Courts May Perform a Cross-Check to Award Fees.</u>

Although California supports the common fund doctrine, the lodestar method can be used to cross-check fee awards. "It may be appropriate in some cases, assuming the class benefit can be monetized with a reasonable degree of certainty, to "cross-check" or adjust the lodestar in comparison to a percentage of the common fund to ensure that the fee awarded is reasonable and

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within the range of fees freely negotiated in the legal marketplace in comparable litigation." (*In re Consumer Privacy Cases* (2009) 175 Cal.App.4th 545, 557.)

Applying the lodestar method requires a two-step process. The first step is to multiply the number of hours reasonably expended by a reasonable hourly rate. The second step is to apply a multiplier to the lodestar to take into account various factors. "The purpose of such adjustment is to fix a fee at the fair market value for the particular action. In effect, the court determines, retrospectively, whether the litigation involved a contingent risk or required extraordinary legal skill justifying augmentation of the unadorned lodestar in order to approximate the fair market rate for such services." (*Id.* at pp. 556-57.) "Under certain circumstances, a lodestar calculation may be enhanced on the basis of a percentage-of-the-benefit analysis." (*Id.* at p. 557.)

Detailed timesheets are not necessary to a lodestar cross-check. "The law is clear … that an award of attorney fees may be based on counsel's declarations, without production of detailed time records." (*Raining Data Corp. v. Barrenechea* (2009) 175 Cal.App.4th 1363, 1375.) As the California Supreme Court explained in *Laffitte*:

> With regard to expenditure of judicial resources, we note that trial courts conducting lodestar cross-checks have generally not been required to closely scrutinize each claimed attorney-hour, but have instead used information on attorney time spent to "focus on the general question of whether the fee award appropriately reflects the degree of time and effort expended by the attorneys." (5 Newberg on Class Actions, *supra*, § 15:86, p. 331; *see, e.g., Goldberger v. Integrated Resources, Inc., supra*, 209 F.3d at p. 50 [2d Cir.; "where used as a mere cross-check, the hours documented by counsel need not be exhaustively scrutinized by the district court"]; *In re Prudential Ins. Co. America Sales Practice Litigation Agent Actions* (3d Cir.1998) 148 F.3d 283, 342 [agreeing with district court that "detailed time summaries were unnecessary where, as here, it was merely using the lodestar calculation to double check its fee award."]; *Barbosa v. Cargill Meat Solutions Corp.* (E.D.Cal.2013) 297 F.R.D. 431, 451 ["Where the lodestar method is used as a cross-check to the percentage method, it can be performed with a less exhaustive cataloguing and review of counsel's hours."].)

(*Laffitte, supra,* 1 Cal.5th at p. 505.)

Class Counsel's lodestar is at least $246,400 based on at least 280 hours of work performed thus far. (Haber Decl., ¶ 24.) Accordingly, the requested fee of $161,666.67 is reasonable and fair as it is based on an approximate multiplier of 0.65. To be sure, trial courts have substantial discretion in adjusting the lodestar to account for various factors. (*See Lealao v. Beneficial*

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California, Inc. (2000) 82 Cal.App.4th 19, 26, 39-45; *see also Serrano*, *supra,* 20 Cal.3d at p. 49.) In addition, it has been held that "[m]ultipliers can range from 2 to 4 or even higher." (*See Wershba*, 91 Cal.App.4th at p. 255; *see also Van Vranken*, *supra,* 901 F. Supp. At p. 298 ["[m]ultipliers in the 3-4 range are common in lodestar awards for lengthy and complex class action litigation."] Similar multipliers have been found to be reasonable for Class Counsel. (*See, e.g., Moreno v. Pretium Packaging, L.L.C.* (C.D. Cal. Aug. 6, 2021) No. 8:19-cv-02500-SB, 2021 WL 3673845, *3 [finding Wilshire Law Firm's multiplier of 2.57 reasonable "in light of the contingent nature of recovery, the complexity of the issues, and the result obtained"].)

1. Class Counsel's Rates Have Been Approved by Several Courts.

Class Counsel provides a declaration to support their lodestar hourly rates. "Affidavits of the plaintiffs' attorney and other attorneys regarding prevailing fees in the community, and rate determinations in other cases, particularly those setting a rate for the plaintiffs' attorney, are satisfactory evidence of the prevailing market rate." (*United Steelworkers of America v. Phelps Dodge Corp.* (9th Cir. 1990) 896 F.2d 403, 407.) Class Counsel has received final approval of their hourly rates in other wage and hour class action settlements.

For example, Mr. Marquez' hourly rate was recently approved in *Suarez v. Bank of America, N.A.* (N.D. Cal. Jan. 11, 2024), No. 18-cv-01202-LB, 2024 WL150721. There, the court held that "[a]s for the lodestar cross-check, the billing rates are normal and customary for timekeepers with similar qualifications and experience in the relevant market." (*Id.* at p. *3.)

2. Class Counsel's Requested Fees are Derived Using a Negative Multiplier.

Once this lodestar figure has been determined, the Court may take into account other "enhancement" factors to adjust the lodestar award. While Plaintiff seek a negative multiplier of 0.65 here, the overall reasonableness of Plaintiff's request is underscored by the fact that a significantly higher multiplier would be justified under applicable law.

Multiplying the total hours billed by Class Counsel to the litigation by their reasonable hourly rates yields a lodestar of $246,400, which is more than the $161,666.67 in attorney's fees Class Counsel are requesting. This disparity is important to note because when plaintiffs seek an amount in fees that is less than what they actually billed, the requested fee amount is

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generally considered reasonable. (*Chun-Hoon v. McKee Foods Corp.* (N.D. Cal. 2010) 716 F. Supp. 2d 848, 854 [finding that, if the court is asked to apply a negative multiplier, it "suggests the negotiated fee award is a reasonable and fair valuation of the services rendered to the class by Plaintiff's Counsel."].) Indeed, there is no reason for the Court to reduce Class Counsel's lodestar with a negative multiplier. (*Roos v. Honeywell Int'l., Inc*. (2015) 241 Cal. App. 4th 1472, 1495 ["a trial court acts appropriately . . .when it accepts in a common-fund case a cap on fees . . . when the application of the cap results in a lower award than would be authorized under the lodestar method."], disapproved on another ground in *Hernandez v. Restoration Hardware, Inc*. (2018) 4 Cal.5th 260.)

Contingency fees should be higher than fees for the same legal services paid concurrently with the provision of the services. (*Ketchum v. Moses* (2001) 24 Cal.4th 1122, 1132-33.) "A lawyer who both bears the risk of not being paid and provides legal services is not receiving the fair market value of his work if he is paid only for the second of these functions. If he is paid no more, competent counsel will be reluctant to accept fee award cases." (*Id.* at p. 1133.) Application of that rule is particularly appropriate where the case is brought to redress important rights of vulnerable persons. (*Id*.) A risk enhancement is "earned compensation; unlike a windfall, it is neither unexpected nor fortuitous. Rather it is intended to approximate market-level compensation for such services which typically pay a premium for the risk of nonpayment or delay in payment of attorney's fees." (*Id*. at p. 1138.)

"Multipliers can range from 2 to 4 or even higher." (*Wershba*, *supra,* 91 Cal.App.4th at p. 255; *see also Sutter Health Uninsured Pricing Cases* (2009) 171 Cal. App. 4th 495, 512 [applying a 2.52 multiplier on a cross-check in an antitrust class action]; *Chavez, supra,* 162 Cal. App. 4th at p. 60 [applying a 2.5 multiplier on a lodestar cross-check]; *Vizcaino v. Microsoft Corp.* (9th Cir. 2002) 290 F.3d 1043, 1051 n.6 ["most" common fund cases apply a multiplier of 1.0-4.0]; *Been v. O.K. Industries Inc.* (E.D. Okla. 2011) 2011 WL 4478766, *11 [citing a study "reporting [an] average multiplier of 3.89 in survey of 1,120 class action cases" and finding that a multiplier of 2.43 would be "per se reasonable"].) The intermediate court in *Laffitte*, after finding that "2 to 4" is a reasonable range for multipliers on a cross-check,

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affirmed a 2.13 multiplier. (*Laffitte v. Robert Half Int'l* (2014) 231 Cal. App. 4th 860, 881-82.) The intermediate court opinion was affirmed in full by the California Supreme Court in its new decision guiding lower courts on assessing fees.

Factors considered in determining whether a lodestar multiplier is appropriate generally include: (1) the risks presented by the contingent nature of the case; (2) the novelty and difficulty of the questions involved and the skill requisite to perform the legal service properly; (3) the nature of the opposition; (4) the preclusion of other employment by the attorney due to acceptance of the case; and (5) the result obtained and the importance of the lawsuit to the public. (*Serrano, supra,* 20 Cal. 3d at pp. 48-49.) All of these factors favor approval of a multiplier along the lines of those approved in the cases above.

The major consideration in determining the necessity of a multiplier is the contingent nature of the award. (*Ketchum, supra,* 24 Cal.4th at pp. 1132-33.) Further, the possibility of no recovery is only one of the uncertainties involved in taking on such a case. Other uncertainties are the amount that will be recovered, uncertainty as to the cost, both in effort and expenses, and uncertainty about how much time will pass before the recovery is obtained. (*Id.* at pp. 1132-1133, 1138.) Here, Class Counsel have been the only counsel to represent Class Members in this matter and have borne the entire risk and costs of litigation purely on a contingency basis. Class Counsel's outlay of time and money in this case has been significant.

The other factors are also present here. Class Counsel are skilled attorneys who have had success in wage-and-hour class actions. This case required experienced and competent lawyers and expertise in the issues presented herein. Defendant's contentions underscore the risk of prevailing at class certification and trial, and any of these obstacles could have prevented recovery completely. Further, proceeding to trial would have added years to the resolution of this case because of the difficult legal and factual issues raised and the likelihood of appeals. Despite these risks, Class Counsel took this case on a contingency basis. Yet, there are only so many cases that Class Counsel can take at any one time. Consequently, there were other meritorious cases presented to Class Counsel that would have generated substantial fees, but were declined, during the pendency of this action in order to devote the attention necessary to

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achieve favorable results. (Haber Decl., ¶ 25.) Considered against the risks of continued litigation, and the importance of the employment rights and a speedy recovery, the relief provided under the Settlement represents a very strong result for the Class.

C. <u>Costs Are Reasonable.</u>

As of the date of filing this Motion, Class Counsel has incurred around $48,331.42 in costs, and they anticipate incurring at least $300 in combined additional costs up to the time the Court enters a judgment in this action and schedules a hearing on distribution. (Haber Decl., ¶ 31.) Accordingly, Class Counsel respectfully requests reimbursement of up to $48,631.42 in costs. Notably, Defendant has agreed that they will not oppose any cost award request up to $50,000. The categories of costs are set forth in the accompanying Declaration of Benjamin H. Haber, and these costs are seen to be both reasonable and necessary.

Counsel can recover "out-of-pocket expenses that 'would normally be charged to a fee paying client'" including costs for "service of summons and complaint, service of trial subpoenas, fee for defense expert at deposition, postage, investigator, copying costs, hotel bills, meals, messenger service and employment record reproduction." (*Harris v. Marhoefer* (9th Cir. 1994) 24 F.3d 16, 19.) Such costs are properly recoverable on motions for settlement approval. (*See Nunez v. BAE Sys. San Diego Ship Repair Inc.* (S.D. Cal. 2017) 292 F. Supp. 3d 1018, 1057; *Rutti v. Lojack Corp.* (C.D. Cal. July 31, 2012) No. CV 06–00350 DOC, 2012 WL 3151077, at *12 ["Expenses such as reimbursement for travel, meals, lodging, photocopying, long-distance telephone calls, computer legal research, postage, courier service, mediation, exhibits, documents scanning, and visual equipment are typically recoverable."].)

D. <u>The Enhancement Payment to Plaintiff is Reasonable.</u>

Named plaintiffs in class action lawsuits "are eligible for reasonable incentive payments to compensate them for the expense or risk they have incurred in conferring a benefit on other members of the class." *Munoz v. BCI Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Los Angeles* (2010) 186 Cal.App.4th 399, 412.) Courts routinely grant approval of class action settlement agreements containing enhancements for the class representatives, which are necessary to provide incentive to represent the class, and are appropriate given the benefit the class representatives help to bring

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about for the class. (*See Rodriguez v. W. Publ'g Corp*. (9th Cir. 2009) 563 F.3d 948, 958-59.) The California Supreme Court has also noted that "retaliation against employees for asserting statutory rights under the Labor Code is widespread," despite anti-retaliation statutes designed to protect employees. (*Gentry v. Super. Ct.* (2007) 42 Cal.4th 443, 460-61.) Plaintiffs should therefore be rewarded for assuming the risk of retaliation for the sake of class members. (*See Frank v. Eastman Kodak Co.* (W.D.N.Y. 2005) 228 F.R.D. 174, 187.)

Under the settlement agreement, subject to the Court's approval, Defendant agreed to pay a Service Award in the amount of $10,000.00 to Plaintiff. This amount is also in exchange for Plaintiff's general release of all claims against Defendant and is ***less*** than the highest net settlement amount that some class members will receive. Plaintiff previously submitted a declaration demonstrating his devotion to this case, including his efforts assisting counsel in the case, preparing for and appearing at a deposition, responding to written discovery, communicating with counsel frequently for litigation, preparing for mediation, and reviewing case-related documents. (*See, generally,* Declaration of Plaintiff previously submitted with Plaintiff's Motion for Preliminary Approval.)

When compared with the amounts awarded in typical class action cases, the amount requested here is particularly reasonable. Indeed, a **2006** study examining the average incentive award given to class action plaintiffs from **1993 to 2002** found that the "average award per class representative was $15,992 and the median award per class representative was $4,357." (Theodore Eisenberg & Jeffrey P. Miller, "Incentive Awards to Class Action Plaintiffs: An Empirical Study", 53 UCLA L. Rev. 1303, 1308 (2006).) Courts routinely approve a $10,000 enhancement award for plaintiffs represented by Class Counsel. (*See, e.g., Moreno v. Pretium Packaging, L.L.C.* (C.D. Cal. Aug. 6, 2021) 2021 WL 3673845, *3 ["The Court concludes a $10,000 incentive award is appropriate."]; *Suarez, supra,* 2024 WL 150721 at p. *4 ["The court approves awards of $10,000 for each class representative."].)

"Since without a named plaintiff there can be no class action, such compensation as may be necessary to induce him to participate in the suit." (*Clark v. Am. Residential Services LLC* (2009) 175 Cal. App. 4th 785, 804.) "[T]he rationale for making enhancement or incentive

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awards to named plaintiffs is that they should be compensated for the expense or risk they have incurred in conferring a benefit on other members of the class." (Id. at 806.) "An incentive award is appropriate 'if it is necessary to induce an individual to participate in the suit."' (*Cellphone Term. Fee Cases* (2010) 186 Cal. App. 4th 1380, 1394, quoting *Clark*, *supra*, 175 Cal. App. 4th at 804.) The "criteria courts may consider in determining whether to make an incentive award include: (1) the risk to the class representative in commencing suit, both financial and otherwise; (2) the notoriety and personal difficulties encountered by the class representative; (3) the amount of time and effort spent by the class representative; (4) the duration of the litigation; and (5) the personal benefit (or lack thereof) enjoyed by the class representative as a result of the litigation." (*Id.* at pp. 1394–95.) Plaintiff's declaration clearly describes how each of the five *Cellphone Termination* factors are present here.

E. **Administration Expenses Should be Approved.**

ILYM Group, Inc., the Settlement Administrator, estimates that it will incur a total of $4,500.00 in costs associated with the administration of this Settlement. (Polites Decl., ¶ 19.) These expenses are reasonable, based upon the size of the class, claim and exclusion tracking, and Class Member payment processing.

V. **CONCLUSION**

For the foregoing reasons, Plaintiffs respectfully request that the Court grant final approval of the proposed settlement.

Dated: January 14, 2025

Respectfully submitted,

WILSHIRE LAW FIRM, PLC

Benjamin H. Haber
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PROOF OF SERVICE

Jimenez v. The Castine Group, et al.
21CV375173

STATE OF CALIFORNIA)
) ss
COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES)

I, Rebeca Ramos, state that I am employed in the aforesaid County, State of California; I am over the age of eighteen years and not a party to the within action; my business address is 3055 Wilshire Blvd., 12th Floor, Los Angeles, California 90010. My electronic service address is rebeca.padilla@wilshirelawfirm.com.

On January 14, 2025, I served the foregoing **PLAINTIFF'S NOTICE OF MOTION AND MOTION FOR FINAL APPROVAL OF CLASS ACTION SETTLEMENT; MEMORANDUM OF POINTS AND AUTHORITIES**, on the interested parties by placing a true copy thereof, enclosed in a sealed envelope by following one of the methods of service as follows:

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Attorneys for Defendant,

(X) **BY UPLOAD:** I hereby certify that the documents were uploaded by my office to the State of California Labor and Workforce Development Agency Online Filing Site.

(X) **BY E-MAIL:** I hereby certify that this document was served from Los Angeles, California, by e-mail delivery on the parties listed herein at their most recent known email address or e-mail of record in this action.

I declare under the penalty of perjury under the laws of the State of California, that the foregoing is true and correct.

Executed on January 14, 2025, at Los Angeles, California.

Rebecca Padilla

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