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FILED
SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA
COUNTY OF SAN BERNARDINO
SAN BERNARDINO DISTRICT

DEC 29 2022

BY Maniah Moreu
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12 **SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA**

13 **IN AND FOR THE COUNTY OF SAN BERNARDINO**

14 FELIPE CHAVEZ, on behalf of the State of
15 California, as a private attorney general,

16 Plaintiff,

17 vs.

18 UTILITY TREE SERVICE, LLC, a Limited
19 Liability Company; and DOES 1 through 50,
20 inclusive,

21 Defendants.

Case No. **CIV SB 2228962**

REPRESENTATIVE ACTION
COMPLAINT FOR:

1. Civil Penalties Pursuant to Labor Code
§ 2699, *et seq.* for violations of Labor
Code §§ 201, 202, 203, 204 *et seq.*, 210,
218, 221, 226(a), 226.7, 227.3, 510, 512,
558(a)(1)(2), 1194, 1197, 1197.1, 1198,
2802, California Code of Regulations,
Title 8, Section 11040, Subdivision 5(A)-
(B), and the applicable Wage Order(s).

FAXED

1 Plaintiff Felipe Chavez (“PLAINTIFF”), on behalf of the people of the State of
2 California and as an “aggrieved employee” acting as a private attorney general under the Labor
3 Code Private Attorney General Act of 2004, § 2699, *et seq.* (“PAGA”) only, alleges on
4 information and belief, except for his own acts and knowledge which are based on personal
5 knowledge, the following:

6 **INTRODUCTION**

7 1. PLAINTIFF brings this action against Defendant Utility Tree Service, LLC
8 (referred to as “DEFENDANT”) seeking only to recover PAGA civil penalties for himself, and
9 on behalf of all current and former aggrieved employees that worked for DEFENDANT.
10 PLAINTIFF does **not seek to recover anything other than penalties as permitted by**
11 **California Labor Code § 2699**. To the extent that statutory violations are mentioned for wage
12 violations, PLAINTIFF does not seek underlying general and/or special damages for those
13 violations, but simply the civil penalties permitted by California Labor Code § 2699.

14 2. California has enacted the PAGA to permit an individual to bring an action on
15 behalf of himself and on behalf of others for PAGA penalties *only*, which is the precise and sole
16 nature of this action.

17 3. Accordingly, PLAINTIFF seeks to obtain all applicable relief for
18 DEFENDANT’s violations under PAGA and solely for the relief as permitted by PAGA – that
19 is, penalties and any other relief the Court deems proper pursuant to the PAGA. Nothing in this
20 complaint should be construed as attempting to obtain any relief that would not be available in
21 a PAGA-only action.

22 **THE PARTIES**

23 4. Defendant Utility Tree Service, LLC (“DEFENDANT”) is a limited liability
24 company that at all relevant times mentioned herein conducted and continues to conduct
25 substantial business in the state of California.

26 5. DEFENDANT provides professional, performance-based vegetation management
27 services in California.
28

1 6. PLAINTIFF has been employed by DEFENDANT in California since November
2 of 2021 and has been at all times classified by DEFENDANT as a non-exempt employee, paid
3 on an hourly basis, and entitled to the legally required meal and rest periods and payment of
4 minimum and overtime wages due for all time worked.

5 7. PLAINTIFF, and such persons that may be added from time to time who satisfy
6 the requirements and exhaust the administrative procedures under the Private Attorney General
7 Act, brings this Representative Action on behalf of the State of California with respect to
8 himself and all individuals who are or previously were employed by DEFENDANT in
9 California, including any employees staffed with DEFENDANT by a third party, and classified
10 as non-exempt employees ("AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES") during the time period of
11 September 7, 2021 until a date as determined by the Court (the "PAGA PERIOD").

12 8. PLAINTIFF, on behalf of himself and all AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES
13 presently or formerly employed by DEFENDANT during the PAGA PERIOD, brings this
14 representative action pursuant to Labor Code § 2699, *et seq.* seeking fixed civil penalties for
15 DEFENDANT's violation of California Labor Code §§ 201, 202, 203, 204 *et seq.*, 210, 218,
16 221, 226(a), 226.7, 227.3, 510, 512, 558(a)(1)(2), 1194, 1197, 1197.1, 1198, 2802,
17 California Code of Regulations, Title 8, Section 11040, Subdivision 5(A)-(B), and the
18 applicable Wage Order(s). Based upon the foregoing, PLAINTIFF and all AGGRIEVED
19 EMPLOYEES are aggrieved employees within the meaning of Labor Code § 2699, *et seq.*

20 9. The true names and capacities, whether individual, corporate, subsidiary,
21 partnership, associate or otherwise of defendants DOES 1 through 50, inclusive, are
22 presently unknown to PLAINTIFF who therefore sues these Defendants by such fictitious
23 names pursuant to Cal. Civ. Proc. Code § 474. PLAINTIFF will seek leave to amend this
24 Complaint to allege the true names and capacities of Does 1 through 50, inclusive, when
25 they are ascertained. PLAINTIFF is informed and believes, and based upon that information
26 and belief alleges, that the Defendants named in this Complaint, including DOES 1 through
27
28

1 50, inclusive, are responsible in some manner for one or more of the events and happenings
2 that proximately caused the injuries and damages hereinafter alleged.

3 10. The agents, servants and/or employees of the Defendants and each of them
4 acting on behalf of the Defendants acted within the course and scope of his, her or its
5 authority as the agent, servant and/or employee of the Defendants, and personally
6 participated in the conduct alleged herein on behalf of the Defendants with respect to the
7 conduct alleged herein. Consequently, the acts of each Defendant are legally attributable to
8 the other Defendants and all Defendants are jointly and severally liable to PLAINTIFF and
9 all the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES, for the loss sustained as a proximate result of the
10 conduct of the Defendants' agents, servants and/or employees.

11 THE CONDUCT

12
13 11. Pursuant to the Industrial Welfare Commission Wage Orders, DEFENDANT
14 was required to pay PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES for all their time
15 worked, meaning the time during which an employee is subject to the control of an
16 employer, including all the time the employee is suffered or permitted to work.
17 DEFENDANT requires PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES to work without
18 paying them for all the time they are under DEFENDANT's control. Among other things,
19 DEFENDANT requires PLAINTIFF to work while clocked out during what is supposed to
20 be PLAINTIFF's off-duty meal break. PLAINTIFF was from time to time interrupted by
21 work assignments while clocked out for what should have been PLAINTIFF's off-duty meal
22 break. DEFENDANT, as a matter of established company policy and procedure,
23 administers a uniform practice of rounding the actual time worked and recorded by
24 PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES, always to the benefit of DEFENDANT,
25 so that during the course of their employment, PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED
26 EMPLOYEES are paid less than they would have been paid had they been paid for actual
27 recorded time rather than "rounded" time. Additionally, DEFENDANT engages in the
28 practice of requiring PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES to perform work off

1 the clock in that DEFENDANT, as a condition of employment, required these employees to
2 submit to mandatory temperature checks and symptom questionnaires for COVID-19
3 screening prior to clocking into DEFENDANT's timekeeping system for the workday. As a
4 result, PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES forfeit minimum wage, overtime
5 wage compensation, and off-duty meal breaks by working without their time being correctly
6 recorded and without compensation at the applicable rates. DEFENDANT's policy and
7 practice not to pay PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES for all time worked, is
8 evidenced by DEFENDANT's business records.

9 12. State law provides that employees must be paid overtime and meal and rest
10 break premiums at one-and-one-half times their "regular rate of pay." PLAINTIFF and the
11 AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES are compensated at an hourly rate plus incentive pay that is
12 tied to specific elements of an employee's performance.

13 13. The second component of PLAINTIFF's and the AGGRIEVED
14 EMPLOYEES' compensation is DEFENDANT's non-discretionary incentive program that
15 paid PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES incentive wages based on their
16 performance for DEFENDANT. The non-discretionary incentive program provided all
17 employees paid on an hourly basis with incentive compensation when the employees met the
18 various performance goals set by DEFENDANT. However, when calculating the regular
19 rate of pay in order to pay overtime and meal and rest break premiums to PLAINTIFF and
20 the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES, DEFENDANT failed to include the incentive
21 compensation as part of the employees' "regular rate of pay" for purposes of calculating
22 overtime pay and meal and rest break premium pay. Management and supervisors described
23 the incentive program to potential and new employees as part of the compensation package.
24 As a matter of law, the incentive compensation received by PLAINTIFF and the
25 AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES must be included in the "regular rate of pay." The failure to
26 do so has resulted in a underpayment of overtime compensation and meal and rest break
27 premiums to PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES by DEFENDANT.
28

1 14. As a result of their rigorous work schedules, PLAINTIFF and the
2 AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES were from time to time unable to take thirty (30) minute off
3 duty meal breaks and were not fully relieved of duty for their meal periods. PLAINTIFF
4 and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES were required from time to time to perform work as
5 ordered by DEFENDANT for more than five (5) hours during some shifts without receiving
6 a meal break. Further, DEFENDANT from time to time failed to provide PLAINTIFF and
7 AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES with a second off-duty meal period for some workdays in
8 which these employees were required by DEFENDANT to work ten (10) hours of work.
9 DEFENDANT also engaged in the practice of rounding the meal period times to avoid
10 paying penalties to PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES. PLAINTIFF and the
11 AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES therefore forfeit meal breaks without additional compensation
12 and in accordance with DEFENDANT's corporate policy and practice.

13 15. During the PAGA PERIOD, PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED
14 EMPLOYEES were also required from time to time to work in excess of four (4) hours
15 without being provided ten (10) minute rest periods. Further, these employees were denied
16 their first rest periods of at least ten (10) minutes for some shifts worked of at least two (2)
17 to four (4) hours from time to time, a first and second rest period of at least ten (10) minutes
18 for some shifts worked of between six (6) and eight (8) hours from time to time, and a first,
19 second and third rest period of at least ten (10) minutes for some shifts worked of ten (10)
20 hours or more from time to time. PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES were
21 also not provided with one hour wages in lieu thereof. Additionally, the applicable
22 California Wage Order requires employers to provide employees with off-duty rest periods,
23 which the California Supreme Court defined as time during which an employee is relieved
24 from all work related duties and free from employer control. In so doing, the Court held that
25 the requirement under California law that employers authorize and permit all employees to
26 take rest period means that employers must relieve employees of all duties and relinquish
27 control over how employees spend their time which includes control over the locations
28 where employees may take their rest period. Employers cannot impose controls that prohibit

1 an employee from taking a brief walk - five minutes out, five minutes back. Here,
2 DEFENDANT's policy restricted PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES from
3 unconstrained walks and is unlawful based on DEFENDANT's rule which states
4 PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES cannot leave the work premises during
5 their rest period.

6 16. During the PAGA PERIOD, DEFENDANT failed to accurately record and
7 pay PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES for the actual amount of time these
8 employees worked. Pursuant to the Industrial Welfare Commission Wage Orders,
9 DEFENDANT was required to pay PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES for
10 all time worked, meaning the time during which an employee was subject to the control of
11 an employer, including all the time the employee was permitted or suffered to permit this
12 work. DEFENDANT required these employees to work off the clock without paying them
13 for all the time they were under DEFENDANT's control. As such, DEFENDANT knew or
14 should have known that PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES were under
15 compensated for all time worked. As a result, PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED
16 EMPLOYEES forfeited time worked by working without their time being accurately
17 recorded and without compensation at the applicable minimum wage and overtime wage
18 rates. To the extent that the time worked off the clock does not qualify for overtime
19 premium payment, DEFENDANT fails to pay minimum wages for the time worked off-the-
20 clock in violation of Cal. Lab. Code §§ 1194, 1197, and 1197.1.

21 17. From time to time, DEFENDANT also fails to provide PLAINTIFF and the
22 AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES with complete and accurate wage statements which failed to
23 show, among other things, the correct gross and net wages earned. Cal. Lab. Code § 226
24 provides that every employer shall furnish each of his or her employees with an accurate
25 itemized wage statement in writing showing, among other things, gross wages earned and all
26 applicable hourly rates in effect during the pay period and the corresponding amount of time
27 worked at each hourly rate. Aside, from the violations listed above in this paragraph,
28 DEFENDANT fails to issue to PLAINTIFF an itemized wage statement that lists all the

1 requirements under California Labor Code 226 *et seq.* As a result, DEFENDANT from time
2 to time provides PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES with wage statements
3 which violated Cal. Lab. Code § 226.

4 18. Cal. Lab. Code § 204(d) provides, the requirements of this section shall be
5 deemed satisfied by the payment of wages for weekly, biweekly, or semimonthly payroll if
6 the wages are paid not more than seven (7) calendar days following the close of the payroll
7 period. Cal. Lab. Code § 210 provides:

8 in [I]n addition to, and entirely independent and apart from, any other penalty provided
9 this article, every person who fails to pay the wages of each employee as provided in
10 Sections. . . .204. . . shall be subject to a civil penalty as follows: (1) For any initial
11 violation, one hundred dollars (\$100) for each failure to pay each employee; (2) For
each subsequent violation, or any willful or intentional violation, two hundred dollars
(\$200) for each failure to pay each employee, plus 25 percent of the amount
unlawfully withheld.

12 19. DEFENDANT from time to time failed to pay PLAINTIFF and the
13 AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES within seven (7) days of the close of the payroll period in
14 accordance with Cal. Lab. Code § 204(d).

15 20. DEFENDANT underpaid sick pay wages to PLAINTIFF and the
16 AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES by failing to pay such wages at the regular rate of pay in
17 violation of Cal. Lab. Code Section 246. Specifically, PLAINTIFF and other non-exempt
18 employees earn non-discretionary remuneration. Rather than pay sick pay at the regular rate
19 of pay, DEFENDANT underpaid sick pay to PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED
20 EMPLOYEES at their base rates of pay.

21 21. Cal. Lab. Code Section 246(1)(2) requires that paid sick time for nonexempt
22 employees be calculated by dividing the employee's total wages, not including overtime
23 premium pay, by the employee's total hours worked in the full pay periods of the prior 90
24 days of employment.

25 22. DEFENDANT violated Cal. Lab. Code Section 246 by failing to pay sick pay
26 at the regular rate of pay. PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES routinely
27 earned non-discretionary incentive wages which increased their regular rate of pay.
28 However, when sick pay was paid, it was paid at the base rate of pay for PLAINTIFF and

1 the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES, as opposed to the correct, higher regular rate of pay, as
2 required under Cal. Lab. Code Section 246.

3 23. As a pattern and practice, DEFENDANT regularly failed to pay PLAINTIFF
4 and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES their correct wages and accordingly owe waiting time
5 penalties pursuant to Cal. Lab. Code Section 203. Further, PLAINTIFF is informed and
6 believes and based thereon alleges that such failure to pay sick pay at regular rate was
7 willful, such that the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES whose employment has separated are
8 entitled to waiting time penalties pursuant to Cal. Lab. Code Sections 201-203.

9 24. Pursuant to Cal. Lab. Code Section 221, "It shall be unlawful for any employer
10 to collect or receive from an employee any part of wages theretofore paid by said employer
11 to said employee." DEFENDANT failed to pay all compensation due to PLAINTIFF and
12 the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES, made unlawful deductions from compensation payable to
13 PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES, failed to disclose all aspects of the
14 deductions from compensation payable to PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED
15 EMPLOYEES, and thereby failed to pay these employees all wages due at each applicable
16 pay period and upon termination.

17 25. DEFENDANT intentionally and knowingly failed to reimburse and indemnify
18 PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES for required business expenses incurred
19 by the PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES in direct consequence of
20 discharging their duties on behalf of DEFENDANT. Under California Labor Code Section
21 2802, employers are required to indemnify employees for all expenses incurred in the course
22 and scope of their employment. Cal. Lab. Code § 2802 expressly states that "an employer
23 shall indemnify his or her employee for all necessary expenditures or losses incurred by the
24 employee in direct consequence of the discharge of his or her duties, or of his or her
25 obedience to the directions of the employer, even though unlawful, unless the employee, at
26 the time of obeying the directions, believed them to be unlawful."

27 26. In the course of their employment PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED
28 EMPLOYEES as a business expense, were required by DEFENDANT to use their own

1 personal cellular phones and personal home offices as a result of and in furtherance of their
2 job duties as employees for DEFENDANT but are not reimbursed or indemnified by
3 DEFENDANT for the cost associated with the use of their personal cellular phones and
4 home offices for DEFENDANT's benefit. Specifically, PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED
5 EMPLOYEES were required by DEFENDANT to use their personal cellular phones and
6 home offices. As a result, in the course of their employment with DEFENDANT,
7 PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES incurred unreimbursed business expenses
8 which included, but were not limited to, costs related to the use of their personal cellular
9 phones and home offices all on behalf of and for the benefit of DEFENDANT.

10 27. All of the conduct and violations alleged herein occurred during the PAGA
11 PERIOD. To the extent that any of the conduct and violations alleged herein did not affect
12 PLAINTIFF during the PAGA PERIOD, PLAINTIFF seeks penalties for those violations
13 that affected the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES pursuant to *Carrington v. Starbucks Corp.*
14 2018 AJDAR 12157 (Certified for Publication 12/19/18).

15 **JURISDICTION AND VENUE**

16 28. This Court has jurisdiction over this Action pursuant to California Code of
17 Civil Procedure, Section 410.10.

18 29. Venue is proper in this Court pursuant to California Code of Civil Procedure,
19 Sections 395 and 395.5, because PLAINTIFF worked in this County for DEFENDANT and
20 DEFENDANT (i) currently maintains and at all relevant times maintained offices and
21 facilities in this County and/or conducts substantial business in this County, and (ii)
22 committed the wrongful conduct herein alleged in this County against PLAINTIFF and other
23 AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES.

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1 **FIRST CAUSE OF ACTION**

2 **For Violation of the Private Attorneys General Act**

3 **[Cal. Lab. Code §§ 2698, *et seq.*]**

4 **(By PLAINTIFF and Against All Defendants)**

5 30. PLAINTIFF realleges and incorporates by this reference, as though fully set
6 forth herein, the prior paragraphs of this Complaint.

7 31. PAGA is a mechanism by which the State of California itself can enforce state
8 labor laws through the employee suing under the PAGA who do so as the proxy or agent of
9 the state's labor law enforcement agencies. An action to recover civil penalties under
10 PAGA is fundamentally a law enforcement action designed to protect the public and not to
11 benefit private parties. The purpose of the PAGA is not to recover damages or restitution,
12 but to create a means of "deputizing" citizens as private attorneys general to enforce the
13 Labor Code. In enacting PAGA, the California Legislature specified that "it was ... in the
14 public interest to allow aggrieved employees, acting as private attorneys general to recover
15 civil penalties for Labor Code violations ..." Stats. 2003, ch. 906, § 1. Accordingly, PAGA
16 claims cannot be subject to arbitration.

17 32. PLAINTIFF, and such persons that may be added from time to time who
18 satisfy the requirements and exhaust the administrative procedures under the Private
19 Attorney General Act, brings this Representative Action on behalf of the State of California
20 with respect to himself and all individuals who are or previously were employed by
21 DEFENDANT in California, including any employees staffed with DEFENDANT by a third
22 party, and classified as non-exempt employees ("AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES") during the
23 time period of September 7, 2021 until a date as determined by the Court (the "PAGA
24 PERIOD").

25 33. On September 7, 2022, PLAINTIFF gave written notice by electronic mail to
26 the Labor and Workforce Development Agency (the "Agency") and by certified mail to the
27 employer of the specific provisions of this code alleged to have been violated as required by
28 Labor Code § 2699.3. The statutory waiting period for PLAINTIFF to add these allegations

1 to the Complaint has expired. As a result, pursuant to Section 2699.3, PLAINTIFF may now
2 commence a representative civil action under PAGA pursuant to Section 2699 as the proxy
3 of the State of California with respect to all AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES as herein defined.

4 34. The policies, acts and practices heretofore described were and are an unlawful
5 business act or practice because DEFENDANT (a) failed to provide PLAINTIFF and the
6 AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES accurate itemized wage statements, (b) failed to properly
7 record and provide legally required meal and rest periods, (c) failed to pay minimum wages,
8 (d) failed to pay overtime wages and sick pay wages, and (e) failed to reimburse employees
9 for required expenses, all in violation of the applicable Labor Code sections listed in Labor
10 Code §§ 201, 202, 203, 204 *et seq.*, 210, 218, 221, 226(a), 226.7, 227.3, 510, 512,
11 558(a)(1)(2), 1194, 1197, 1197.1, 1198, 2802, California Code of Regulations, Title 8,
12 Section 11040, Subdivision 5(A)-(B), and the applicable Wage Order(s), and thereby gives
13 rise to civil penalties as a result of such conduct.¹ PLAINTIFF hereby seeks recovery of
14 only civil penalties as prescribed by the Labor Code Private Attorney General Act of 2004 as
15 the representative of the State of California for the illegal conduct perpetrated on
16 PLAINTIFF and the AGGRIEVED EMPLOYEES.

17
18 **PRAYER FOR RELIEF**

19 WHEREFORE, PLAINTIFF prays for judgment against each Defendant, jointly and
20 severally, as follows:

21 1. On behalf of the State of California and with respect to all AGGRIEVED
22 EMPLOYEES:

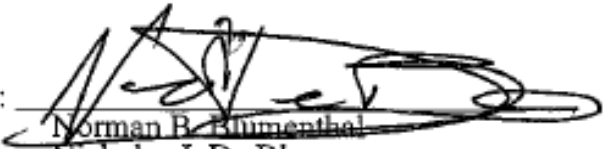
23 A) Recovery of civil penalties as prescribed by the Labor Code Private
24 Attorneys General Act of 2004; and,

25 B) An award of attorneys' fees and cost of suit, as allowable under the
26 law, including, but not limited to, pursuant to Labor Code §2699.

27
28 ¹Plaintiff specifically excludes and/or does not allege any claims under California Labor
Code §558(a)(3).

1 Dated: December 28, 2022

2 BLUMENTHAL NORDREHAUG BHOWMIK DE BLOUW
3 LLP

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5 By: 

6 Norman B. Blumenthal
7 Nicholas J. De Blouw
8 Attorneys for Plaintiff
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