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SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

FOR THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

JOSE RAMIREZ, individually, and on behalf of Aggrieved Employees pursuant to the California Private Attorneys General Act,

Plaintiffs,

vs.

A.J. KIRKWOOD & ASSOCIATES, INC.; and DOES 1 through 25, inclusive,

Defendants.

Case No. 24CU012580C

Honorable Wendy M. Behan
Department C-66

NOTICE OF MOTION AND MOTION FOR APPROVAL OF PAGA SETTLEMENT AND AWARD OF ATTORNEYS' FEES AND COSTS, SERVICE AWARD, AND SETTLEMENT ADMINISTRATION COSTS

Date: April 24, 2026
Time: 10:15 a.m.
Department: C-66

Complaint Filed: September 23, 2024
Trial Date: Not Set

TO ALL PARTIES AND THEIR ATTORNEYS OF RECORD:

PLEASE TAKE NOTICE THAT on April 24, 2026 at 10:15 a.m. in Department C-66 of the above-captioned Court, located at 330 W Broadway, San Diego, California 92101, Plaintiff Jose Ramirez ("Plaintiff") will and hereby does move the Court for an Order granting approval of the California Labor Code Private Attorneys General Act of 2004, California Labor Code sections 2698, *et seq*. ("PAGA") settlement. Specifically, Plaintiff requests that the Court enter an Order:

1. Granting approval pursuant to California Labor Code section 2699(s)(2) of the Private Attorneys General Act Settlement Agreement and Release ("Settlement," "Agreement," or "Settlement Agreement") attached as **Exhibit 2** to the Declaration of James S. Winn Jr. in Support of Plaintiff's Motion for Approval of PAGA Settlement and Award of Attorneys' Fees and Costs, Service Award, and Settlement Administration Costs ("Winn Decl.");
2. Directing the distribution of the Gross Settlement Amount of Two Hundred Thirty-Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($235,000.00) pursuant to the terms of the Agreement plus an additional Six Thousand Sixteen Dollars and Zero Cents ($6,016.00) (total, $241,016.00) pursuant to the terms of the escalator clause in the Agreement;
3. Approving the Net Settlement Amount, estimated to be One Hundred Twenty-Eight Thousand Two Hundred Twenty-Five Dollars and Fifty-Four Cents ($128,225.54), of which sixty-five percent (65%) will be distributed to the California Labor and Workforce Development Agency ("LWDA") and thirty-five percent (35%) of which will be distributed to the Aggrieved Employees;
4. Approving an award of reasonable attorneys' fees of thirty-five (35%) of the escalated Gross Settlement Amount (i.e., $84,355.60) to Plaintiff's Counsel;
5. Approving the amount of Eighteen Thousand Four Hundred Thirty-Four Dollars and Eighty-Six Cents ($18,434.86) to Plaintiff's Counsel for reimbursement of actual litigation expenses payment pursuant to California Labor Code section 2699(k)(1);
6. Approving the award of Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($5,000.00) to Plaintiff as a Service Award;

7. Appointing ILYM Group, Inc. as the Settlement Administrator; and

8. Approving an award of up to Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($5,000.00) in anticipated costs to ILYM Group, Inc. for its settlement administration services.

In accordance with California Labor Code sections 2699 *et. seq*., on March 16, 2026, a copy of the proposed Settlement Agreement was submitted to the LWDA via online submission through the LWDA's website. (Winn Decl., ¶ 15 and Exh. 3).

This Motion is based upon this Notice, the attached Memorandum of Points and Authorities, the Declarations of James S. Winn Jr., Plaintiff Jose Ramirez, and the Settlement Administrator (Lisa Mullins of ILYM Group, Inc.), the pleadings and other records on file with the Court in this matter, and any other further evidence or argument that the Court may properly receive at or before the hearing.

Respectfully submitted,

Dated:

BLACKSTONE LAW, APC

By: ______________________________
James S. Winn Jr.
Attorneys for Plaintiff Jose Ramirez

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION 1
II. FACTUAL AND PROCEDURAL BACKGROUND 2
III. THE SETTLEMENT TERMS 4
A. Definition of the Aggrieved Employees 4
B. Amount of Settlement 4
C. Allocation and Funding of the Gross Settlement Amount 5
IV. STANDARD FOR APPROVAL OF PAGA SETTLEMENT 6
V. THE AGREEMENT IS FAIR AND SHOULD BE APPROVED 7
A. The Agreement is Presumed to Be Fair 7
B. The Agreement is Fair, Adequate, and Reasonable in Light of the Parties' Respective Legal Positions and Recovery Risks 8
1. Strength of Plaintiff's Case 8
2. Risk, Expense, Complexity, and Likely Duration of Further Litigation 10
3. The Benefits Conferred by the Agreement Balance in Favor of Approval 10
4. The Scope of the Release is Narrowly Tailored 11
5. Experience and Views of Counsel Favor Approval 11
6. The Extent of Discovery and Stage of Proceedings Favor Approval 12
VI. THE REQUESTED FEES PAYMENT IS FAIR AND REASONABLE 12
VII. THE REQUESTED LITIGATION EXPENSES PAYMENT IS FAIR AND REASONABLE 14
VIII. THE SETTLEMENT ADMINISTRATION COSTS ARE FAIR AND REASONABLE14
IX. THE REQUESTED SERVICE AWARD IS FAIR AND REASONABLE 15
X. CONCLUSION 16

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

Cases

Amaral v. Cintas Corp. No. 2, 163 Cal.App.4th 1157 (2008) 9

Arias v. Sup. Ct., 46 Cal.4th 969 (2009) 7

Arias, 46 Cal. 4th, at 987 11

Beech Cinema, Inc. v. Twentieth-Century Fox Film Corp. 480 F.Supp. 1195 (S.D.N.Y. 1979) 13

Bell v. Farmers Ins. Exch., 115 Cal.App.4th 715, 726 (2004) 15

Casida v. Sears Holdings Corp., 2012 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 9302 (E.D. Cal. Jan. 25, 2012) 6

Clark v. Am. Residential Servs. LLC, 175 Cal. App. 4th 785 (2009) 7, 15

Elliot v. Spherion Pac. Work, LLC, 572 F.Supp.2d 1169 (C.D. Cal. 2008) 8

In re Ampicillin Antitrust Litig., 526 F.Supp. 494 (D.D.C. 1981) 13

Kullar v. Foot Locker Retail, Inc. (2008) 168 Cal.App.4th 116 8

Laffitte v. Robert Half Int'l, Inc., 1 Cal.5th 480 (2016) 12, 13

Lealao v. Beneficial Cal., Inc., 82 Cal.App.4th 19 (2000) 13

Linney, 151 F.3d at 1239 12

Mallick v. Sup. Ct., 89 Cal.App.3d 434 (1979) 8

Mendez v. Tween Brands, Inc., 2010 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 66454 (E.D. Cal. June 30, 2010) 7

Sandoval v. Roadlink United States Pac., Inc., 2011 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 130378, at 26 (C.D. Cal. Nov. 9, 2011) 12

Thurman v. Bayshore Transit Management, Inc., 203 Cal.App.4th 1112 (2012) 9

Statutes

California Labor Code sections 2698, *et seq*. ..... i, 1

Labor Code ("Lab. Code") § 2699(l) 6

Labor Code §§ 2698 *et seq* 11

MEMORANDUM OF POINTS AND AUTHORITIES

I. INTRODUCTION

Pursuant to the California Labor Code Private Attorneys General Act, California Labor Code sections 2698, *et seq*. ("PAGA"), Plaintiff Jose Ramirez ("Plaintiff") seeks approval of the Private Attorneys General Act Settlement Agreement and Release ("Settlement," "Agreement," or "Settlement Agreement") entered into with Defendant A.J. Kirkwood & Associates, Inc. ("Defendant") (together, with Plaintiff, the "Parties"), which is attached as Exhibit 2 to the Declaration of James S. Winn Jr. in Support of Plaintiff's Motion for Approval of PAGA Settlement and Award of Attorneys' Fees and Costs, Service Award, and Settlement Administration Costs ("Winn Decl."). The Agreement terms are outlined as follows:

- Gross Settlement Amount: Two Hundred Thirty-Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($235,000.00) plus an additional Six Thousand Sixteen Dollars and Zero Cents ($6,016.00) for a total of $241,016.00 per the terms of the escalator clause in the Settlement Agreement (See Footnote 1).
- Attorneys' Fees and Costs: Attorneys' fees of thirty-five (35%) of the escalated Gross Settlement Amount (i.e., $84,355.60) plus reimbursement of litigation costs and expenses in the amount of Eighteen Thousand Four Hundred Thirty-Four Dollars and Eighty-Six Cents ($18,434.86), to be paid from the escalated Gross Settlement Amount.
- Service Award: Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($5,000.00) to Plaintiff, to be paid from the escalated Gross Settlement Amount.
- Settlement Administration Costs: Up to Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($5,000.00), to be paid from the escalated Gross Settlement Amount.
- Estimated Net Settlement Amount: One Hundred Twenty-Eight Thousand Two Hundred Twenty-Five Dollars and Fifty-Four Cents ($128,225.54), of which 65% ($83,346.60), will be paid to the California Labor and Workforce Development Agency ("LWDA"), and the remaining 35% ($44,878.94) will be paid to the Aggrieved Employees.

As set forth herein, the Settlement Agreement is the product of informed discovery, arms-length negotiations, and provides a fair, adequate, and reasonable recovery for the State of California and Aggrieved Employees. Plaintiff therefore respectfully requests that the Court grant approval of the proposed Settlement Agreement, among other requested relief.

II. FACTUAL AND PROCEDURAL BACKGROUND

Defendant provides comprehensive facilities services ranging from mechanical maintenance and operations to energy-efficiency upgrades and interior/exterior maintenance for electrical, construction, and systems technologies. (Winn Decl., ¶ 2). Defendant employed Plaintiff as an hourly-paid, non-exempt employee from approximately June 2017 to approximately September 2023 in the positions of Journeyman and then Foreman Electrician. (Winn Decl., ¶ 2; Declaration of Jose Ramirez in Support of Motion for Approval of PAGA Settlement and Award of Attorneys' Fees and Costs, Service Award, and Settlement Administration Costs ["Ramirez Decl."], ¶ 2).

On July 17, 2024, Plaintiff provided written notice by electronic submission to the LWDA and by U.S. Certified Mail to Defendant, pursuant to California Labor Code § 2699.3, of the specific provisions of the California Labor Code alleged to have been violated ("LWDA Notice"). (Winn Decl., ¶ 3 and Exh. 1).

On July 19, 2024, Plaintiff filed a Class Action Complaint in the action entitled *Jose Ramirez v. A.J. Kirkwood & Associates, Inc.*, San Diego County Superior Court Case No. 24CU002090C ("Class Action"), thereby commencing a putative class action against Defendant. (*Id.*, ¶ 4).

On September 23, 2024, Plaintiff filed a Complaint for Enforcement Action Under the Private Attorneys General Act, Cal. Labor Code §§ 2698 *Et Seq*. ("Operative Complaint") in the action entitled *Jose Ramirez v. A.J. Kirkwood & Associates, Inc.*, San Diego County Superior Court Case No 24CU012580C ("Action"). (*Id.*, ¶ 5). The Operative Complaint asserts a single cause of action for civil penalties under PAGA for violations of multiple provisions of the California Labor Code and the applicable Industrial Welfare Commission Wage Orders. (Ibid).

On April 2, 2025, pursuant to the joint stipulation of the Parties, Plaintiff's individual claims in the Class Action were ordered to arbitration and the class claims in the Class Action were dismissed without prejudice. (*Id.*, ¶ 6).

On June 24, 2025, the Parties participated in a formal mediation conducted by Tagore Subramaniam, Esq., a neutral and respected mediator with extensive experience in complex wage and hour matters, which did not result in a settlement at that time. (*Id.*, ¶ 7).

On June 25, 2025, Plaintiff propounded formal written discovery onto Defendant (specifically, Special Interrogatories (Set One) and Requests for Production of Documents (Set One)) and served a proposed Belaire-West notice. (*Id.*, ¶ 8).

On July 21, 2025, the Parties were ultimately able to reach an agreement to resolve the Action in its entirety. (*Id.*, ¶ 9).

On February 27, 2026, the Settlement Agreement was fully executed by the Parties. (*Id.*, ¶ 10 and Exh. 2).

During the course of informal discovery in the Action, Plaintiff's Counsel conducted an intense investigation into the facts of the Action. (*Id.*, ¶ 11). This included obtaining data, information, and documents relating to the underlying alleged violations, including, but not limited to, Plaintiff's employee file, a sampling of Aggrieved Employees' time and payroll data, relevant wage and hour policies, and Aggrieved Employees' data points so that Plaintiff could assess the number of alleged potential violations and value of the recoverable penalties, as well as evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of his claims. (Ibid).

Based on the data, information, and documents received, as well as thorough discussions with Defendant's counsel, Plaintiff's Counsel was able to (i) determine the total number of distinct individuals falling within the definition of "Aggrieved Employees" for the relevant statutory period, (ii) the number of affected pay periods at issue among them, and (iii) construct a damages model that calculated the maximum realistic amount of PAGA penalties that could be levied against Defendant within the relevant statutory period. (*Id.*, ¶ 12). Defendant, however, disputed Plaintiff's claims and disputed both the existence of and extent of liability as alleged by Plaintiff, which allowed Plaintiff's Counsel to further assess the strength of Plaintiff's claims. (Ibid). Plaintiff's Counsel's experience in litigating similar representative wage and hour claims, the degree of investigation that was conducted here, and the amount of data, information, and documents that was obtained, was sufficient to determine the potential value of the PAGA claims, and to evaluate the strength of these claims for purposes of settlement. (Ibid).

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The Parties believe the Settlement Agreement is fair, reasonable, and adequate. (*Id*., ¶ 13). The Parties understand, acknowledge, and agree that the Settlement Agreement constitutes a compromise of Plaintiff's PAGA claims, and that it is the desire and intention of the Parties to affect a final and complete resolution of the Action. (Ibid).

Defendant denies all of the claims in the Action, and does not waive, but rather expressly reserves, all rights to challenge all such claims and allegations upon all legal, procedural, and factual grounds should the Settlement Agreement not become final. (*Id*., ¶ 14). The Settlement Agreement reflects a compromise reached to end litigation in the Action. (Ibid). Following significant investigation and extensive settlement negotiations, Plaintiff now seeks approval of the proposed Settlement Agreement, which will resolve all representative claims alleged in the Action. (Ibid).

III. THE SETTLEMENT TERMS

A. <u>Definition of the Aggrieved Employees</u>

For purposes of settlement only, the Parties have agreed that the "Aggrieved Employees" shall be defined as "all current and former hourly-paid and/or non-exempt employees who worked for Defendant in the State of California at any time during the PAGA Period." (Winn Decl., ¶ 16; Settlement Agreement, ¶ 1(c)). The "PAGA Period" is the period from July 17, 2023 through August 23, 2025. (Winn Decl., ¶ 16; Settlement Agreement, ¶ 1(o)). There are approximately Four Hundred Fourteen (414) Aggrieved Employees who worked approximately Fifteen Thousand Four Hundred Thirty-One (15,431) pay periods for Defendant during the PAGA Period ("Pay Periods").[1] (Winn Decl., ¶ 14; Settlement Agreement, ¶ 1(b)).

B. <u>Amount of Settlement</u>

The Parties have agreed to settle the PAGA claims at issue in the Action for a non-reversionary Gross Settlement Amount of Two Hundred Thirty-Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($235,000.00) plus an additional Six Thousand Sixteen Dollars and Zero Cents ($6,016.00) per the terms of the escalator clause in the Settlement Agreement. (Winn Decl., ¶ 17; Settlement Agreement,

[1] At the time of mediation, Defendant represented that there were 13,709 Pay Periods. Accordingly, the escalator clause in Section 4(a)(6) of the Settlement Agreement has been triggered by 351 Pay Periods or 2.56% above the 10% threshold. Defendant has opted to increase the Gross Settlement Amount proportionally by the Pay Periods in excess of the 10% threshold for an additional amount of $6,016 as verified by the proposed administrator IYLM Group, Inc.

¶ 1(i)).

C. <u>Allocation and Funding of the Gross Settlement Amount</u>

The Gross Settlement Amount is a common fund and therefore includes all requested costs, fees, and other allocations. (Winn Decl., ¶ 17). The escalated Gross Settlement Amount includes: (1) counsel's fees in the amount of thirty-five (35%) of the escalated Gross Settlement Amount (i.e., $84,355.60); (2) counsel's actual litigation costs and expenses in the amount of Eighteen Thousand Four Hundred Thirty-Four Dollars and Eighty-Six Cents ($18,434.86); (3) Service Award in the amount of Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($5,000.00) to Plaintiff; and (4) Settlement Administration Costs, not to exceed Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($5,000.00). (Winn Decl., ¶ 17; Settlement Agreement, ¶¶ 1(i), 1(s), 1(r), and 4(a)(1) – 4(a)(6)).

After the above-estimated amounts are deducted from the escalated Gross Settlement Amount, the Net Settlement Amount will amount to approximately One Hundred Twenty-Eight Thousand Two Hundred Twenty-Five Dollars and Fifty-Four Cents ($128,225.54), of which sixty-five percent (65%), or Eighty-Three Thousand Three Hundred Forty-Six Dollars and Sixty Cents ($83,346.60), will be paid to the LWDA ("LWDA Payment"), and thirty-five percent (35%), or Forty-Four Thousand Eight Hundred Seventy-Eight Dollars and Ninety-Four Cents ($44,878.94), will be distributed and paid to Aggrieved Employees ("Employees' Portion") on a *pro rata* basis based upon their number of Pay Periods. (Winn Decl., ¶ 18; Settlement Agreement ¶ 4(a)(5)).

Since it was determined that the total number of Pay Periods worked by the Aggrieved Employees during the PAGA Period actually exceeds 13,709 by more than 10% (i.e., if the Pay Periods exceed 15,080), the Gross Settlement Amount will be increased proportionally by the Pay Periods in excess of the 10% threshold.[2] (Winn Decl., ¶ 19; Settlement Agreement ¶ 4(a)(6)). In this instance, the number of Pay Periods increased by 12.56% through the PAGA Period, and therefore the Gross Settlement Amount shall increase by 2.56% or Six Thousand Sixteen Dollars and Zero Cents ($6,016.00). (Winn Decl., ¶ 19; Settlement Agreement ¶ 4(a)(6)).

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[2] See n.1.

No later than seven (7) calendar days after the Court's order granting approval of the Settlement, Defendant will diligently and in good faith compile from its records and provide the Settlement Administrator a list of all Aggrieved Employees containing the following information for each Aggrieved Employee: (i) first and last name; (ii) last known address; (iii) last known telephone number; (iv) Social Security number; (v) start and end dates of employment; and (vi) number of Pay Periods (collectively, "PAGA List"). (Winn Decl., ¶ 20; Settlement Agreement, ¶ 1(n)).

No later than seven (7) calendar days of receiving the PAGA List and escalated Gross Settlement Amount, the Settlement Administrator will distribute the Individual PAGA Payments along with the Cover Letter to Aggrieved Employees, the LWDA Payment to the LWDA, the Service Award to Plaintiff, the Attorneys' Fees and Costs to Plaintiff's Counsel, and the Settlement Administration Costs to itself. (Winn Decl., ¶ 21; Settlement Agreement, ¶¶ 6(c)(1)-6(c)(8)).

Each Individual PAGA Payment check will be valid and negotiable for one hundred and eighty (180) calendar days from the date the checks are issued, and thereafter, will be canceled. (Winn Decl., ¶ 22; Settlement Agreement, ¶ 6(c)(4)). Funds associated with such canceled checks shall be transmitted to the State Controller's Office Unclaimed Property Division in the name of the Aggrieved Employee(s) at issue and in the amount of their respective Individual PAGA Payment(s). (Winn Decl., ¶ 22; Settlement Agreement, ¶ 6(c)(4)).

IV. STANDARD FOR APPROVAL OF PAGA SETTLEMENT

The settlement of a PAGA claim requires court approval. (California Labor Code ("Lab. Code") § 2699(s)(2)). Although the California Labor Code does not set forth the criteria by which a PAGA settlement is to be evaluated, it is presumed that a reviewing court may take into consideration some of the factors that courts use when reviewing a class action settlement. However, "a PAGA claim asserted on a non-class representative basis...is not considered a class action but a law enforcement action, and therefore does not have to meet the requirements of [a class action]." (*Casida v. Sears Holdings Corp.*, 2012 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 9302 at *8 (E.D. Cal. Jan. 25, 2012)).

A court's review of a PAGA settlement necessarily implicates the following unique features that render the approval process distinct from approval of a class action settlement under Code of Civil Procedure Section 382 and California Rules of Court Rule 3.769. First, in evaluating the adequacy of the settlement amount, the Court's focus is not concerned with the amount aggrieved employees are to receive, but rather, must focus on the total settlement amount in achieving PAGA's objective. Indeed, "[t]he remedy sought in a PAGA suit consists of civil penalties, not individual or class damages," and while a "[PAGA] action is ... designed to protect the public and penalize the employer for past illegal conduct," a reviewing court must be mindful of the fact that settlement of a PAGA claim involves a compromise. (*Mendez v. Tween Brands, Inc.*, 2010 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 66454 at *11 (E.D. Cal. June 30, 2010)).

Second, consistent with the fact that unnamed employees have no property interest in a PAGA claim, "[u]nnamed employees need not be given notice of the PAGA claim, nor do they have the ability to opt-out of the representative PAGA claim." (*Ochoa-Hernandez*, 2010 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 32774 at *13). This renders the approval process of a PAGA settlement distinct from a class action settlement, as there is no need for the Court to employ the "two-step approval process" required under California Rules of Court Rule 3.769.

Finally, unlike class action settlements, the scope of release permitted in a PAGA settlement is limited. While "judgment in [a PAGA] action is binding not only on the named employee plaintiff but also on government agencies and any aggrieved employee not a party to the proceeding...the nonparty employees, because they were not given notice of the action or afforded any opportunity to be heard, would not be bound by the judgment as to remedies other than civil penalties." (*Arias v. Sup. Ct.*, 46 Cal.4th 969, 985-87 (2009)).

V. THE AGREEMENT IS FAIR AND SHOULD BE APPROVED

A. The Agreement is Presumed to Be Fair

California courts recognize that "a presumption of fairness exists where . . . [a] settlement is reached through arm's-length bargaining." (*Wershba v. Apple Computer, Inc.,* 91 Cal.App.4th 224, 245 (2001); *see also Clark v. Am. Residential Servs. LLC*, 175 Cal. App. 4th 785, 799 (2009)). Here, the Agreement is presumptively fair because: (1) it occurred after counsel for the Parties engaged in significant investigation to evaluate the strength and potential value of the PAGA claims, and the risks of litigating these claims through trial; and (2) it was negotiated at great length and effort by counsel with significant experience in similar complex labor and employment matters. (Winn Decl., ¶ 23).

B. The Agreement is Fair, Adequate, and Reasonable in Light of the Parties' Respective Legal Positions and Recovery Risks

In deciding whether to approve a proposed settlement, a trial court has broad powers to determine if it is fair given the circumstances of the case. (*Mallick v. Sup. Ct.*, 89 Cal.App.3d 434, 438 (1979)). In exercising these powers, the overriding concern is to ensure that a proposed settlement is "fair, adequate, and reasonable." (*Dunk*, 48 Cal.App.4th at 1801 (internal quotations omitted)). In evaluating the reasonableness of a settlement, a trial court must consider "the strength of plaintiffs' case, the risk, expense, complexity and likely duration of further litigation, the risk of maintaining class action status through trial, the amount offered in settlement, the extent of discovery completed and the stage of the proceedings, the experience and views of counsel, the presence of a governmental participant, and the reaction of the class members to the proposed settlement."[3] (*Kullar v. Foot Locker Retail, Inc.*, 168 Cal.App.4th 116, 128 (2008)). Even though a *Kullar* analysis is not required for approval of a PAGA settlement, a brief analysis is included to support approval of the Settlement Agreement. (*See* Winn Decl., ¶¶ 31-44).

These factors require balancing and are non-exhaustive. Trial courts should therefore tailor the factors to each case and give due regard to "what is otherwise a private consensual agreement between the parties." (*Dunk, supra,* 48 Cal. App. 4th at 1801).

1. Strength of Plaintiff's Case

In order to prevail at trial, Plaintiff would have to prove violations of the California Labor Code underlying his PAGA claims, demonstrate that Aggrieved Employees suffered, and demonstrate that Defendant's conduct gives rise to penalties. (*See Elliot v. Spherion Pac. Work, LLC*, 572 F.Supp.2d 1169, 1181-82 (C.D. Cal. 2008) ["Plaintiff's claim under [PAGA] is wholly dependent upon his other claims. Because all of Plaintiff's other claims fail as a matter of law, so does his PAGA claim."]).

Here, Plaintiff's core allegations are that Defendant systematically violated the California Labor Code by, *inter alia,* failing to properly pay all overtime wages and minimum wages for all hours

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[3] As this is not a class action, the *Kullar* factors pertaining to the risk of maintaining class action status through trial and the reaction of class members to the proposed settlement are inapplicable.

worked, failing to provide all meal and rest breaks, failing to timely pay all wages upon termination of employment, failing to provide accurate wage statements, failing to keep accurate employment records, and failing to reimburse necessary business-related expenses. (Winn Decl., ¶ 24).

Defendant maintained several defenses to Plaintiff's theories of liability, which, if successfully argued and proven, had the potential to eliminate or substantially reduce recovery. (Winn Decl., ¶ 25). Throughout this litigation, Defendant maintained, and continues to maintain, that it had, and continues to have, compliant employment policies and practices throughout the time period at issue. (Ibid). Defendant denies that it ever violated any provision of the California Labor Code, including, but not limited to, those sections for which Plaintiff seeks penalties under PAGA. (Ibid). Defendant further denies, and continues to deny, that the lawsuit is appropriate for representative treatment for any purpose other than settlement. (Ibid). Defendant also challenged Plaintiff's standing as an aggrieved employee and denied that any of Defendant's other employees whom Plaintiff seeks to represent are aggrieved. (Ibid).

Defendant also argued that an important feature of PAGA is that the Court retains discretion to lower the penalties if, based on the facts and circumstances of the particular case, to do otherwise would result in an award that is "unjust, arbitrary and oppressive, or confiscatory." (Ibid; Lab. Code § 2699(e)(2); *see also Thurman v. Bayshore Transit Management, Inc.*, 203 Cal.App.4th 1112, 1136 (2012) [holding that a court may reduce the amount of PAGA penalties awarded to an employee based upon discretionary factors]). Even if violations of the California Labor Code occurred, which Defendant denies, Defendant contended that said violations would only be considered "initial violations" and thus heightened "subsequent violation" penalties were not warranted. (Winn Decl., ¶ 26; Lab. Code § 2699(f)(2); *see also Amaral v. Cintas Corp. No. 2*, 163 Cal.App.4th 1157, 1208-09 (2008) ["Until the employer has been notified that it is violating a Labor Code provision [...], the employer cannot be presumed to be aware that its continuing underpayment of employees is a 'violation' subject to penalties."]).

Defendant also contended that, with respect to PAGA claims, the Court was unlikely to assess cumulative penalties for the maximum number of possible, separate California Labor Code violations, because it would be unjust, arbitrary, oppressive, and/or confiscatory, especially where certain conduct may be regulated by multiple provisions of the California Labor Code that are interrelated and work in tandem. (Winn Decl., ¶ 27). Defendant further contended that it took all reasonable steps to be in compliance with all provisions identified in the LWDA Letter pursuant to California Labor Code Section 2699(g) and (h). (*Id*., ¶ 28).

While Plaintiff maintains that his PAGA claims have merit, in reaching the Agreement, Plaintiff and his counsel took into account the strengths and weaknesses of each side's position, and the uncertainty of how the case might have concluded as litigation continued, at trial, and/or upon appeal. (Winn Decl., ¶ 29). Based on these disputes, which had the potential to completely eliminate Plaintiff's recovery, the range of realistic "litigation outcomes" on Plaintiff's PAGA claims was defined by a "maximum possible liability" amount of approximately $1,370,900 and a "risk-adjusted realistic value" amount of approximately $274,180. (*Id*., ¶ 44). In light thereof, the escalated Gross Settlement Amount of $241,016 is a significant settlement. (Ibid).

2. Risk, Expense, Complexity, and Likely Duration of Further Litigation

Approval of the Settlement Agreement is also appropriate in light of the risk, expense, and complexity of further litigation. As discussed above, the Settlement Agreement takes into consideration the specific factual and legal hurdles faced by Plaintiff in establishing Defendant's penalty-liability in this case, which may have resulted in a net-zero recovery. Any recovery on these claims is not certain. And even when liability is found, PAGA claims are discretionary, such that the Court could decline to award their full value. Some of Plaintiff's claims are also derivative, and as such, Plaintiff must prevail on his underlying California Labor Code claims in order to prevail on the derivative claims. These risks – when balanced with the fact that the Agreement achieved a very significant recovery (as demonstrated below), and that further litigation posed a risk of diminishing such recovery by increasing litigation expenses – weigh strongly in favor of settlement approval.

3. The Benefits Conferred by the Agreement Balance in Favor of Approval

The Settlement Agreement provides a *significant* monetary benefit that falls well within the range of an acceptable settlement under the circumstances, which is the standard on which the instant Agreement must be judged.

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The Settlement Agreement is a compromise of highly disputed claims. (*Id.*, ¶ 46). Plaintiff and his counsel recognize the expense and length of continued proceedings necessary to litigate the matter through trial and any possible appeals. (Ibid). Plaintiff and his counsel have also taken into account the uncertainty and risk of the outcome of further litigation, and the difficulties and delays inherent in such litigation. (Ibid). Plaintiff and his counsel are also aware of the burdens of proof necessary to establish liability, both generally and in response to Defendant's defenses thereto, and the difficulties in establishing Defendant's liability for, and the right to recover, penalties on behalf of Plaintiff, the State of California, and other Aggrieved Employees. (Ibid). Plaintiff and his counsel have also taken into account Defendant's agreement to enter into a settlement that confers significant relief upon the Aggrieved Employees and the State of California. (Ibid). Considering all of the facts in this case, Plaintiff and his counsel have determined that the Agreement represents a fair, adequate, and reasonable resolution of the PAGA claims, and that it is in the best interests of the Aggrieved Employees and the State of California. (Ibid).

4. <u>The Scope of the Release is Narrowly Tailored</u>

As discussed above, the California Supreme Court has concluded that in the context of PAGA "the nonparty employees, because they were not given notice of the action or afforded any opportunity to be heard, would not be bound by the judgment as to remedies other than civil penalties." (*See Arias*, 46 Cal. 4th, at 987). Thus, the scope of the limited release provided in exchange for the foregoing consideration is limited to the civil penalties asserted in the Operative Complaint and the LWDA Notice, under California Labor Code §§ 2698 *et seq.* (*See* Settlement Agreement, at ¶ 1(m)).

As such, this factor balances strongly in favor of approval of the Agreement.

5. <u>Experience and Views of Counsel Favor Approval</u>

Plaintiff's Counsel is experienced in complex representative and class action wage-and-hour litigation. (Winn Decl., ¶ 53). In the view of Plaintiff's Counsel, the benefits conferred by the Agreement are eminently fair and reasonable, and in the best interests of the State of California and the Aggrieved Employees in light of the risk, delay, and uncertainty of continued litigation and the substantial monetary benefits provided for by the Agreement. (*Id.*, ¶ 48).

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6. The Extent of Discovery and Stage of Proceedings Favor Approval

In evaluating this element, the Court should be mindful that "'formal discovery is not a necessary ticket to the bargaining table'" [*Linney v. Cellular Alaska P'ship*, 151 F.3d 1234, 1239], as the relevant consideration is "whether 'the parties have sufficient information to make an informed decision about settlement.'" (*See Sandoval v. Roadlink United States Pac., Inc.*, 2011 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 130378, at 26 (C.D. Cal. Nov. 9, 2011)).

Here, the extent of informal discovery conducted was sufficient to enable Plaintiff's Counsel to evaluate the strength and value of the PAGA claims for purposes of settlement. (Winn Decl., ¶ 49). As discussed above, Plaintiff's Counsel's investigation was sufficient to, among other things, tabulate with precision the total number of alleged California Labor Code violations at issue during the relevant statutory period and identify the total number of individuals falling within the definition of "Aggrieved Employees" for the relevant statutory period. (*Id*., ¶ 12).

Based on Plaintiff's Counsel's experience litigating wage and hour claims, such investigation was sufficient to determine the potential value of the PAGA claims, and to evaluate the strength of these claims for purposes of settlement. (Winn Decl., ¶ 12).

VI. THE REQUESTED FEES PAYMENT IS FAIR AND REASONABLE

As the prevailing party in settlement, Plaintiff is entitled to recover attorneys' fees for bringing his PAGA claims. (Lab. Code § 2699(k) ["Any employee who prevails in any action shall be entitled to an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs."]). Plaintiff's Counsel is also entitled to attorneys' fees pursuant to Code of Civil Procedure section 1021.5(a), as the instant action has resulted in the enforcement of important rights benefitting the public and secures monetary recovery for the State of California as well as the Aggrieved Employees.

While trial courts have discretion to apply either a lodestar method or percentage-of-the-fund method, the California Supreme Court has taken the position that trial courts also "retain the discretion to forgo a lodestar cross-check and use other means to evaluate the reasonableness of a requested percentage fee." (*Laffitte v. Robert Half Int'l, Inc.*, 1 Cal.5th 480, 506 (2016); *see also Wershba*, 91 Cal.App. 4th at 253). Courts award fees to serve as an economic incentive for lawyers to undertake litigation, and thereby enhance and facilitate access to the judicial system for adjudication of meritorious claims, and to deter wrongdoing. This is especially true in situations where multiple similar alleged wrongs would not be economically feasible to pursue individually, such as here. Trial courts have "wide latitude" in assessing the value of attorneys' fees and their decisions will "not be disturbed on appeal absent a manifest abuse of discretion." (*Lealao v. Beneficial Cal., Inc.*, 82 Cal.App.4th 19, 41 (2000); *see also Laffitte,* 1 Cal.5th at 506 [holding that "trial court did not abuse its discretion in using [the percentage of fund method], in part to approve the fee request"]).

The percentage fee method is preferred in representative actions because "it better approximates the workings of the marketplace than the lodestar approach." (*Lealao, supra,* 82 Cal.App.4th at 49). In cases where the settlement agreement provides that the defendant will pay the plaintiffs' attorneys a percentage of the fund created by the settlement, use of that percentage method is appropriate. (*Lealao,* 82 Cal.App.4th at 32). Fee awards that are too small will "chill the private enforcement essential to the vindication of many legal rights and obstruct the representative actions that often relieve the courts of the need to separately adjudicate numerous claims." (*Id.* at 53). Therefore, fees in representative actions should approximate the probable terms of a contingent fee contract negotiated by a sophisticated attorney and client in comparable litigation. (*Id.* at 48).

Plaintiff's Counsel's application for attorneys' fees in light of the facts and circumstances surrounding the case is within the range of reasonableness. Historically, courts have awarded fees as high as fifty percent (50%) of the settlement in complex actions, depending on the circumstances of the case. (*See In re Ampicillin Antitrust Litig.*, 526 F.Supp. 494 (D.D.C. 1981) [awarding attorneys' fees in the amount of 45% of the $7.3 million total settlement amount]; *Beech Cinema, Inc. v. Twentieth-Century Fox Film Corp.* 480 F.Supp. 1195 (S.D.N.Y. 1979) [awarding approximately 53% of the settlement as attorneys' fees]).

Here, Plaintiff's Counsel's request of thirty-five (35%) of the escalated Gross Settlement Amount (i.e., $84,355.60) is fair and reasonable based on the percentage of the recovery method. Plaintiff's Counsel has vigorously litigated this case since it was commenced, with the very real possibility of an unsuccessful outcome and no fee recovery of any kind. (Winn Decl., ¶ 50). Counsel for Plaintiff undertook significant investigation and invested a significant amount of time analyzing relevant documents and data to evaluate the nature and extent of the alleged underlying California

Labor Code violations and calculation of the potential monetary recovery as they relate to Plaintiff's PAGA claims under PAGA. (*Id*., ¶ 54). Plaintiff's Counsel possesses combined extensive experience litigating wage and hour and other complex litigation matters, and the attorneys who worked on this matter have been approved as class counsel in the settlement of other class and PAGA actions, numerous times. (*Id*., ¶ 53).

In the present case, Plaintiff's Counsel has borne all of the risks and costs of litigation and will not receive any compensation until recovery is obtained. (*Id*., ¶ 51). Plaintiff's Counsel is experienced in complex wage-and-hour litigation and used that experience to obtain a favorable result for Plaintiff, the Aggrieved Employees, and the State of California. (Ibid). Considering the amount of fees requested, work performed, risks incurred, and experience of Plaintiff's Counsel in handling similar matters, Plaintiff maintains that the requested attorneys' fees of thirty-five (35%) of the escalated Gross Settlement Amount (i.e., $82,250.00) are reasonable and should be awarded. (Ibid).

VII. THE REQUESTED LITIGATION EXPENSES PAYMENT IS FAIR AND REASONABLE

The Agreement provides for reimbursement of the Plaintiff's Counsel's litigation costs and expenses up to the amount of Twenty-Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($25,000.00). (Winn Decl., ¶ 56; Settlement Agreement, ¶ 4(a)(1)). However, Plaintiff's Counsel only seeks reimbursement of a total of Eighteen Thousand Four Hundred Thirty-Four Dollars and Eighty-Six Cents ($18,434.86) in litigation costs and expenses. (Winn Decl., ¶ 56 and Exh. 5). Accordingly, Plaintiff's Counsel respectfully requests that the Court reimburse it for actual litigation costs and expenses in the amount of Eighteen Thousand Four Hundred Thirty-Four Dollars and Eighty-Six Cents ($18,434.86).

VIII. THE SETTLEMENT ADMINISTRATION COSTS ARE FAIR AND REASONABLE

As set forth in the Settlement Agreement, the Parties have agreed to retain, subject to approval by the Court, ILYM Group, Inc., to handle the administration of the Agreement. (Winn Decl., ¶ 57; Settlement Agreement, ¶ 4(a)(3)). The fees and expenses of the Settlement Administrator are estimated not to exceed Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($5,000.00). (Winn Decl., ¶ 57; Settlement Agreement, ¶ 4(a)(3)). These costs include, but are not limited to, expenses for preparing, printing, and mailing the Cover Letter and Individual PAGA Payment checks to the Aggrieved Employees, re-mailing the returned Individual PAGA Payment checks to any new addresses obtained, and handling inquiries from Aggrieved Employees regarding the Agreement, among other things. (Winn Decl., ¶ 57). Accordingly, the Court should grant approval of the Settlement Administration Costs in the amount of *up to* Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($5,000.00) to ILYM Group, Inc., a necessary third-party for handling the settlement process. (Ibid).

IX. THE REQUESTED SERVICE AWARD IS FAIR AND REASONABLE

The purpose of an enhancement award is to incentivize aggrieved employees to step into the shoes of the state labor agency and undertake the responsibilities associated with initiating a lawsuit and serving in a representative capacity. (*See, e.g., Bell v. Farmers Ins. Exch*., 115 Cal.App.4th 715, 726 (2004) (upholding "service payments" to named plaintiffs for their efforts in bringing the action); *Clark v. Am. Residential Servs., LLC*, 175 Cal.App.4th 785, 804 (2009) ("an incentive award is appropriate 'if it is necessary to induce an individual to participate in the suit'"). Plaintiff initiated this litigation on behalf of the State of California and his former co-workers who will now be entitled to receive payment from the Agreement. By initiating and pursuing the Action, Plaintiff stepped into the shoes of the State of California and undertook the responsibilities of serving in a representative capacity. (Winn Decl., ¶ 59; *See* generally Ramirez Decl.). Plaintiff was available whenever Plaintiff's Counsel needed him and actively tried to obtain information that would benefit the prosecution of the Action. (Winn Decl., ¶ 59; Ramirez Decl., ¶¶ 4-5).

Accordingly, Plaintiff respectfully submits that it is appropriate and just for Plaintiff to receive an Service Award in the amount of Five Thousand Dollars and Zero Cents ($5,000.00) in addition to the Individual PAGA Payment he will receive as an Aggrieved Employee, for his services on behalf of the State of California and the other Aggrieved Employees. (*Id*., ¶ 60).

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X. CONCLUSION

For all of the foregoing reasons, Plaintiff respectfully requests that this Court grant Plaintiff's Motion for Approval of PAGA Settlement, Attorneys' Fees and Costs, Service Award, and Settlement Administration Costs and grant the relief requested herein.

Respectfully submitted,

Dated: March 23, 2026.

BLACKSTONE LAW, APC

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