

New York City mayor attacks taxi drivers

Fred Mazelis
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New York City's Taxi and Limousine Commission voted on May 28 to approve a series of new rules which amount to a ruthless attack on the city's taxi drivers. Fifteen of seventeen proposed changes demanded by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani were adopted by the commission, and the two which were tabled are expected to be approved shortly.

Maximum fines for many traffic violations will now be raised to \$1,000, from \$350. Minor violations such as smoking or being rude to passengers will result in fines of \$150, instead of the previous \$25. A "point system" that calls for suspending a driver's license for as little as two minor violations is also being instituted. Drivers will have their licenses suspended for 30 days if they accumulate 5 points within 18 months, and revoked if they get 8 points within that time period.

A yield sign violation would result in 4 points, an unsafe lane change 3 points, speeding 11 miles above the limit would add 4 points, and reckless driving 5 points. Two speeding violations within 18 months would thus result in the revocation of a driver's license.

The action by the mayoral-appointed commission follows a month of confrontations between the city's cab drivers and City Hall, including a one-day strike which kept 90 percent or more of the city's taxis off the streets, as well as other protests.

The media have framed the dispute as one between the city and the "taxi industry," and highlighted the refusal of the owners of large fleets to pay compensation to accident victims even after long court fights. The "industry," however, consists not only of the owners of the cabs, but also the more than 40,000 drivers.

There are 12,187 yellow cabs in New York, their number limited by the supply of medallions, which are now priced at about \$250,000. Some drivers save for years or pool their resources to buy a medallion. Most are owned by the large fleets.

The taxi industry was transformed about 20 years ago when a leasing system was substituted for the earlier commission system of payments to drivers. Whereas drivers would previously earn 44 or 45 percent of each fare, they must now pay between \$90 and \$135 up front for each day they lease a taxi on the streets of the city. This has added to the pressure on the drivers, since they do not earn a penny until they have taken in the fares to pay off the daily leasing fee.

Each day begins with the fee hanging around the driver's neck. As a result, drivers routinely work 12-hour shifts, six days a week in punishing traffic to take in, if they are lucky, about \$500. They deal with rude and abusive passengers, often the well-heeled upper-middle-class layers who make no attempt to hide their contempt. In addition, they have been subject, even before the newly passed rules, to continuous harassment by TLC inspectors and the police.

The increasingly difficult working conditions and low pay have driven many out of the industry, while other workers, largely immigrants without proficiency in English or other skills, have taken their place. The city's drivers now hail from 85 different countries. Some 40 percent come from the major countries of the Indian subcontinent, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. This has made it easier for big business politicians like Giuliani to turn them into the latest whipping boys for the daily stress and "quality of life" problems besetting the city. The mayor has pointed to a 41 percent increase in accidents involving taxis over the past seven years, but not a word has been said about what these workers face in order to make a living.

The one-day strike last May 13 was an indication that the drivers, though almost completely unorganized, have been pushed to the breaking point. "There has been a consistent bashing of the taxi driver by the media and the politicians, until the public feels the taxi driver is a bad person who can be punished and

punished,” said one driver active in organizing the protest. “These rules are not so much pro-safety as anti-driver,” said another worker. “It is easy to be anti-driver because people do not consider us human.”

The reaction of Giuliani to the united cry of protest from the cab drivers has been his characteristic arrogance and contempt. A day before the strike he confidently predicted that few if any cabbies would respond. Afterwards, he changed the subject, commenting that “we’ve gotten a surprisingly large number of calls saying this was one of the more pleasant days in a long time. If they would like to stay home forever, they can stay home forever.”

The mayor has engaged in nonstop taunting and baiting of the cab drivers. When drivers scheduled a caravan and protest at City Hall for May 21, the city mobilized hundreds of police to prevent all taxis without passengers from entering Manhattan from the outer boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens. The mayor’s action, ostensibly aimed at preventing the cabbies from “shutting down the city,” actually led to major tie-ups as the cops stopped traffic at bridges and tunnels.

Giuliani’s move was essentially an illegal lockout of the drivers, preventing many from working that day in order to avoid another demonstration of their anger and unity, a demonstration which might prove contagious among other sections of workers. The American Civil Liberties Union argued in federal district court that the mayor had violated the workers’ First Amendment rights, and a judge agreed. The court ruling was followed by behind-the-scenes negotiations, after which a caravan of about 150 cabs was allowed without incident.

More ominously, Giuliani and his spokesmen began referring to the drivers as “taxi terrorists,” an undisguised attempt to associate the protest of the largely Indian and Pakistani workers with such incidents as the World Trade Center bombing.

Even when the drivers offered to call off their protest in exchange for a meeting with the mayor, Giuliani contemptuously refused. This led even former Mayor Ed Koch, anything but a friend of the working man, to comment that if the mayor had been asked for a meeting by David Rockefeller, he would certainly have agreed.

The attack on the taxi drivers is part of a broader assault on every section of the working class. The

poorest sections are being targeted with particular venom, in such developments as the city’s massive workfare program, the layoffs of city hospital workers and the latest attempt to kick thousands of students out of the City University. Giuliani has also taken aim at thousands of food vendors who eke out a living selling hot dogs and other fast food on the streets of Manhattan, demanding that they be banned from large sections of busy downtown areas.

The unprecedented level of social polarization in New York is less and less compatible with certain basic democratic rights which, with all their restrictions and limitations, generations of workers have come to take for granted. Street demonstrations, which were a regular occurrence 20 or 30 years ago, are now hemmed in by police restrictions or banned outright.

The taxi drivers were told that the place for protest was not in the street, but at the Taxi and Limousine Commission hearing on May 28. When they showed up there, however, they found that a time limit had been set on discussion. The vast majority of drivers were denied the right to speak. After the testimony, the commissioners retired to secret session, a violation of the state’s own “open meetings” law for public bodies, to ram through the new regulations.

More than 30 percent of New York City’s population is now foreign-born, and Giuliani and other politicians have made much of the supposedly warm welcome for immigrants. The treatment of the taxi drivers shows that this welcome is reserved only for the few who are wealthy and those among the majority who are prepared to endure poverty and abuse without protest.



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