

Uber cuts protested by New York City drivers

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In response to a 15 percent fare cut announced by the company over the weekend, hundreds of Uber and other taxi drivers protested Monday at the Uber headquarters near Queens Plaza in New York City. They expressed anger that their already meager incomes would be reduced even further by the company's action, forcing them to work even longer hours.

Uber is an international "ride share" service, whose drivers are treated as independent contractors rather than as employees. As of last summer, the company was valued at \$17 billion. The rate cut was reportedly undertaken to increase the company's market share, in competition with Lyft, another ride-share service, as well as regular taxis and car services.

The super-exploitation of Uber and other taxi workers is just one aspect of the ever-widening economic inequality in the city that is the financial capital of the world. With astronomically high living expenses, millions of low-wage workers are barely eking by in a city where workers, according to a recent report, need to earn an hourly wage of least \$38.80, roughly four times the current minimum wage, in order to afford the city's 2015 median asking rent of \$2,690.

A significant proportion of the rally was composed of drivers from countries such as Nepal, China, Russia, and the Caucasus region, reflecting the super-exploitation of immigrant workers. Signs expressed anger at wage cuts by billionaire owners. Trucks, cars, and taxis rolling by the rally blew their horns in support and were met with cheers from the drivers.

Many Uber drivers are part-timers, and net an average \$300 per week for 25 hours worked, from which they still have to pay for gasoline, insurance, vehicle expenses, and self-employment taxes. Recent reports show drivers making \$2.89 an hour, less than half the official minimum wage.

The development of Internet-based service using cell

phone apps has greatly intensified competition, forcing drivers to work longer hours to try make sufficient income and pay off their investments for cars. The technology-based changes in the taxi industry have led to protests against Uber in at least nine countries in Latin America, Europe, Canada and the Far East.

Uber and other drivers at the rally spoke to reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Victor, an immigrant from Russia with two years experience, stated, "Even before they dropped the price we were working with very low margins. We already have to pay for inspections and insurance. We are always risking getting a ticket, and if we do we have to pay it.

"One of the guys did the math, and if you work about 57 hours, under the new rate, after expenses you are making about \$9.50 an hour. Why not work in a warehouse, if they are only going to pay that much?"

"When I joined Uber two years ago, I knew the rates and then the company changed the rules. I have already bought the car, the dealer doesn't change the cost because of this, and my insurance is the same. I know in other states things are different and a lot of the drivers just work part-time, but we already paid out thousands of dollars for these cars.

"They say we are 'partners' but they didn't ask us anything before making these changes. I think a lot of people will leave Uber, and then there will be less drivers. We might be really busy, but eventually the market will adjust and this will hit us hard."

Pemba Sherpa, an immigrant from Nepal, who has worked for Uber for five months, decried the rate cuts, "They are trying to kill us. We have to pay rent, plus the cost of a car, which is between \$60,000 and \$65,000, and they are asking us to work for just over \$4 an hour.

"When I started working for Uber, I asked them, 'should I get the black car?' and they told me to get it.

Then they told me I had to pick up UberX clients for less money, or do pulls, which means I have to pick up multiple clients at the same time. If you are doing pulls, I could be picking up six people and they are all paying \$2 each that is less than a subway ride. It is like I am a bus driver, but I did not sign up to be a bus driver.

“We are entrapped because we already bought the cars, and they just keep changing the rules. They send us our times and conditions every night, and we have to accept them or we won’t be able to work.”

Another Uber driver, added, “They want us to work for \$4.89 an hour, and you can’t take care of your family for that. We will be working longer hours for the same amount of money, and that is an insult.

“We already have to pay for the cars, for insurance. We have to pay for dry cleaning for our shirts, and we are getting less money than if we worked at McDonalds.”

Parminder Singh, an Uber driver and former taxi driver, explained “Uber just keeps adding cars, and making things worse for us. New York taxi companies can’t add more cars, because that increases congestion on the roads and makes things worse.

“We just want to raise our kids, but you can’t do that on this much money. I work from noon until 1 or 2AM. My son is nine years old, and I never see him. He wants to see me, but I can’t because I am at work.”

Asked about the political issues raised by his working conditions, Singh added, “The city should be responsible for taking care of the people that live here. When I was in Yellow Cab we had protested in front of the Governor’s office, to make things better for all the drivers, but the politicians still have not done anything.

“My feeling is that the city should be providing jobs to people with qualifications. We should not have people becoming drivers, when they are trained for something else.”

“Uber is 1,500 drivers, and they will make us homeless” Bahkyti Yori asserted. “What happens when we cannot cover our insurance, financial costs? We will lose our cars, everything.”

Pasand Sherpa told the WSWS, “Uber lowered the rate 15 percent but Uber takes a high percentage, 30 to 35 percent, but there is no percentage increase for us. It was \$8 at the start for riders but now it is \$7. Every trip they charge us 35 percent. They discount from the customer’s side but not from the driver’s side. Wages

are going down but we are working harder. It was better but now we would have to drive 500 miles. We don’t have a union. The Taxi Workers Alliance organized this.”

Medallion (yellow cab) taxi drivers joined the rally in support of the Uber drivers. Iqbal Singh, a yellow cab driver for 25 years, was there in support of the Uber drivers. “We came out to fight with them. Uber made \$62 billion. If they are cutting back the fare, so they make less, then yellow cabs also make less money. They can then cut the fare again and make it even worse. We want Uber to have a set price.”

An Uber driver for two years, Shamsu Uddin said, “The jobs came online before for \$3 per mile, then \$2.15, and now again forty cents less. We can’t even make \$100 to \$150 an hour. How can we make the mortgage payments or pay for the new car or take care of our family. I drive twelve hours a day. Everything goes up in price, every bill, but not us. We built the billionaire boss. There are many competing companies--Yellow, Green, LYFT, Uber, Gate, Bayer, and now Juno is coming in April. [Mayor] De Blasio said it is not good for the driver but he set this up.”

Tenzin Wangyal assessed the situation, “I think there is a decent amount that can be made by drivers but the company takes 30 percent and the driver is left not making much. They structure the system to get people to fight against each other. It needs to be structured to bring people together. This should not only be including taxi but all people should support this fight. It is about fairness and justice. People just keep talking. No one is doing anything. That is why we are here, for our voice to be heard. They make the same speech, but it is the same old reality. It is time to act now and do the right thing. It is for democracy and justice.”



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