

Impoverishment pushes another New York City taxi driver to suicide

Philip Guelpa
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Since the beginning of the year—five months—five workers, taxi or livery drivers, have committed suicide due to dramatic income declines caused by competition from ride-share companies. The latest apparent suicide is Yu Mein Chow, a 56-year-old Yellow Cab driver, who disappeared on May 11, and was found floating in the East River near the Brooklyn Bridge on Wednesday.

In recent years, traditional taxi and livery services have been subject to severe and effectively unregulated competition from ride-share companies such as Uber and Lyft. The latter are part of the so-called gig economy in which workers are treated as private contractors, subject to super-exploitation, with few or no protections or benefits.

Traditional taxis, which must display a medallion, are regulated by the city. Many medallions are owned by large companies, which deploy fleets of cabs. Others, however, were purchased by individuals or small groups. Until recently costing hundreds of thousands or even more than a million dollars, these medallions have now plummeted in value, wiping out the investments of many individual owners. This is in addition to the precipitous drop in income due to the dramatically increased competition, forcing cabbies to work much longer hours in an attempt to make ends meet, not to speak of repaying the substantial debts incurred in purchasing medallions.

Chow had bought his medallion for \$700,000 in 2011 and was having increasing difficulty in making payments on the loan. He was also burdened by medical bills due to his wife's diagnosis of Stage 4 cancer last fall. Evidently, these crushing financial difficulties led to his death. His brother, Richard Chow, told the *Daily News*, "My brother lost hope as many other medallion owners looking for justice and fairness

have."

For many decades, the number of medallion taxis in the city had ranged around 12,000 to 13,000. Since the arrival of Uber and other ride-sharing companies, however, the total for-hire vehicles operating in the city has risen to over 100,000. Prices for rides have, as a consequence, decreased dramatically.

Between 2013 and 2016, the income of a typical taxi driver dropped nearly \$20,000. Thousands of New York City taxi and livery drivers are suffering bankruptcies, foreclosures, and evictions due to their collapsing incomes. The growing number of suicides among these workers is a symptom of their destroyed lives.

In February, a livery driver in his early 60s, Doug Schifter, shot himself to death in front of City Hall. In a Facebook posting, made shortly before his death, he stated that he now had to work more than 100 hours a week just to survive, blaming both the corporations and politicians.

Drivers for the ride-sharing app companies, such as Uber and Lyft, are no better off. A 2017 survey of app-based drivers found that 57 percent earn less than \$50,000 per year, and 22 percent earn less than \$30,000 per year. This, in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

Several taxi drivers recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the pressures they face.

Luis Carotti, a taxi driver with 30 years of experience, said, "Uber is sucking everything out of this job. They lower their prices in the morning and let them go up later around rush hour. You can't make money driving a cab in the morning anymore.

"The medallions also really took a dip in price. I think they used to be around a million dollars, and now it is at \$200,000. You can't really afford to raise a

family as a taxi driver any more. I want to retire in the next few months. Right now, I'm only working to pay my bills."

Anthony, who has worked part-time for nine years and recently became a full-time driver, explained, "My parents used to own three medallions, but because of Uber changing the industry, we couldn't pay for them. The bank has taken two of them away. Now my mom is driving part-time and my dad is working every day.

"When we bought the medallions, it was a great investment. But Uber is now running without any regulation. I'm not sure who benefited from this, but it is clear that the medallion owners were the ones that lost."

Asked about the response from the political establishment, he added, "Politicians have their hand in this, and the mayor or governor should have done something to regulate this [Uber and similar apps]. I don't usually follow politics, but this is affecting me and my family. We know Uber is the future, and they need some regulations.

"When the Green cabs [which are a type of taxi in New York City that requires different regulations] were introduced, it was nice because they were regulated. We understood that it provided an opportunity for more people. Now, most our work is in Mid-town [Manhattan] or the airports, and Uber is moving in there.

"Even when Uber first came out it was a nice job. You could make \$100,000 a year. Now everyone is making the same money, but we are all working harder and harder."

Reacting to the recent spate of suicides, Syed Haider, a driver with nine years of experience, noted, "If someone is suicidal it is because of a problem. Right now, all the medallion owners are depressed. It is like the medallions are at zero. It is a problem for them, and it must be very scary.

"There is too much competition in the city, and in places like Westchester you don't even need a special license. Cab drivers have to work very hard to make enough money here. Rent is high and everything is expensive in the city. I'm working a minimum of 10 hours a day."

"The politicians get donations from Uber. Money speaks in America," Haider concluded.

Successive Democratic and Republican

administrations have welcomed the arrival of the ride-sharing companies with open arms, leaving them effectively free of regulation, and have done nothing to address the brutal conditions facing any of the workers in this industry.

As a response to the recent deaths, some token measures have been proposed, but have been fiercely opposed by the ride-share companies and will amount to cosmetic changes, at best. This is not an aberration, but rather one aspect of the decades-long drive by the ruling class to casualize all work, stripping workers of the last vestiges of stability and benefits that were won in an earlier period.



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