

Another New York City taxi driver commits suicide

Clare Hurley
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Last Friday another New York City taxi driver took his own life, bringing the number of suicides of livery drivers to six in the last six months.

Abdul Saleh, age 59, a Yemeni immigrant who had been a driver for 30 years, hung himself in his rented room in Brooklyn after coming up short for the third month in a row on the \$300 monthly fee he owed for leasing his cab. Despite driving for twelve hours per day, Saleh's earnings, like those of drivers of medallion-licensed cabs across the city, have plummeted due to ever-increasing competition from the ride-hailing apps Uber and Lyft.

On Monday morning, Bhairavi Desai, executive director of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA) addressed a sparsely attended press conference held in front of New York's City Hall to appeal to the City Council to pass legislation that would include Uber and Lyft drivers in regulation capping the number of vehicles allowed to operate.

"Drivers are being forced to suicide because the poverty is so crushing and there is such a sense of hopelessness due to political inaction. This is not acceptable!" Desai said. "We've come out I don't know how many times," she continued, referring to previous protests. In one, coffins were placed on City Hall's steps for each of the dead, including Danilo Castillo (December 2017), Douglas Schifter (February 2018), Nicanor Ochisor (March 2018), and Yu Mein Chow (May 2018).

The NYTWA has made no genuine appeal to unify the drivers it nominally represents with Uber and Lyft drivers, whose work as drivers is often a second or third job. On the contrary, the perspective of the union is to appeal to politicians for rules targeting Uber and Lyft drivers—in other words, to divide the working class. Its occasional calls for unity between traditional liveried

"black, yellow and green" drivers with Uber and Lyft drivers are in fact an appeal by the NYTWA to politicians to help it expand its small dues base of 18,000 members. "[A]ll this could be fixed, all we are asking for is basic regulation!" Desai implored at his press conference.

To this point such appeals have been ignored by New York City's Democratic Party politicians. In 2015, Mayor Bill de Blasio backed down on a proposed cap on Uber drivers in the face of a fierce lobbying campaign by the company which is now valued at \$18.2 billion. Most recently in April 2018, the mayor opposed a bill that would impose a \$2,000 fee on Uber drivers and prohibit them from driving for more than one ride-hailing app.

The ride-hailing apps have emerged in cities where public transportation has become increasingly inadequate. Despite as much as \$100 billion spent on capital improvements over the past three decades, the New York City public transit system has not been able to keep up with the explosive growth in ridership seen since the 1980s. This has resulted in breakdowns and delays, which according to a *New York Times* report in May 2017, "have more than doubled in frequency, rising to over 70,000 each month from about 28,000 a month in 2012. Overcrowding accounts for more than a third of the subway delays."

As a result, the demand for taxi service has surged, becoming a lucrative market in which app companies like Uber and its competitor Lyft have developed.

Since 2011, the overall number of vehicles for hire on the city streets has almost tripled from 50,000 to 130,000, an increase largely made up of private cars being driven for Uber and Lyft. Of the 130,000 vehicles, only 13,000 are the traditional "yellow cabs" regulated through the sale of medallions by the Taxi

and Limousine Commission (TLC). These cabs, which are “hailed” in the street predominantly in the borough of Manhattan and charge metered fares, are augmented by livery or “black car” services which pick up passengers by pre-arrangement using set fees instead of meters, and which cannot be hailed on the street even if vacant.

As workers increasingly commute from or between outer boroughs that are barely served, if at all, by public transit, a “green” cab service, proposed in 2011 by then-mayor Michael Bloomberg, was finally implemented in 2013 in an effort to address the dearth of cabs outside of Manhattan. Green cabs can only drop off but not pick up passengers in Manhattan. Added to this are so called “gypsy” car services that operate on the margins of these regulations.

The ride-hailing app, which has become popular over the past decade, combines the immediacy of hailing a cab with the convenience of a car-service—all booked and paid for on the passenger’s cellphone. However, like other technological developments under capitalism, it has not led to better wages and shorter days for New York’s transportation workforce.

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Just the opposite has taken place. The new technology has generated immense profits for elite financial investors in Uber and Lyft, while imposing ever greater exploitation on drivers. In the meantime, tech entrepreneurs like Uber’s Travis Kalanick are working to develop self-driving cars, circumventing the need for a driver altogether. Only in the hands of the working class itself can such technological developments serve to enhance the lives of workers instead of driving them deeper into debt and suicidal despair.

Not only do the app-based ride services compete against the traditional taxi and livery companies and add to the overall congestion of the streets, in the competition amongst themselves they fiercely drive down operating costs by cutting the share received by their drivers, all of whom work on a contingent, “contract” basis.

Originally claiming that Uber drivers were able to earn \$90K a year, after deducting the cost of maintaining one’s own vehicle together with expenses for gas, tolls, and insurance, Uber and Lyft drivers are

hard-pressed to make much more than the modest \$35-40K that is the median annual income for a NYC yellow cab driver. In fact, nearly 40 percent of drivers report that Uber does not make up a significant portion of their earnings, serving more as a stop-gap while looking for permanent employment.

Seen in this light, the suicides of taxi drivers like Abdul Saleh have an even more tragic aspect. At one time driving a cab, though always grueling and dangerous work, could serve as a means by which workers, in many cases new immigrants, could earn a reasonable income. Ironically, as medallions—which at their peak sold for \$1million—came down in price under pressure of competition from the ride-hailing apps, they could be purchased by an individual or a few drivers who pooled their money as an investment.

Such was the case of Saleh, who had gone in on a medallion with a partner for \$700,000. He had hoped that after 30 years of driving he would be able to sell the medallion and have money for retirement. When the bottom fell out of the medallion market in 2017, plummeting to \$241,000 from a high the previous year of \$725,000, he was plunged into insurmountable debt.



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