

Uber drivers to participate in global strike

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Thousands of drivers for Uber, Lyft and other ride-sharing companies are expected to join in a strike today, logging off their apps at peak hours to press demands for livable wages and job security.

Strikes are being planned in major cities throughout the US, as well as in the UK, France, Australia, Nigeria, Kenya, Chile, Brazil, Panama, Costa Rica and Uruguay. The strike action comes the day before Uber stock goes public, with estimates that the sale could increase the company's value by \$10–20 billion beyond its current appraisal of \$80 billion.

The action by Uber and Lyft drivers takes place amidst a growing upsurge in the class struggle, from the recent walkout by hundreds of thousands of teachers in Poland to the strike by 70,000 maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico. It coincides with a statewide walkout by teachers in the US state of Oregon, city college and charter school employees in Chicago, and nurses and hospital support staff in Toledo, Ohio.

In New York City, the Uber and Lyft strike was voted on last week by drivers in the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA). Some 10,000 drivers in the city will not work the busy 7:00 a.m.–9:00 a.m. period on Wednesday and will rally outside Uber and Lyft headquarters in Long Island City at 1:00 p.m.

In San Francisco, drivers are organizing a protest at Uber's headquarters followed by a twelve-hour app shutoff. In London, drivers will be protesting at Uber headquarters during a nine-hour app shutoff. Graphics circulating for the international strike are using the slogan, "Uber IPO: Billions to Bosses, Poverty Pay for Drivers."

In New York City, the taxi industry was transformed when a huge influx of app-based cars hit the streets in 2011, causing heated competition. This competition, cost cutting and arbitrary dismissal policies from ride-sharing companies, and the quickly depreciating value

of taxi medallions, have driven down working conditions for all drivers. This has led to a tragic string of eight NYC taxi and app-based driver suicides last year.

In the wake of these suicides, the city implemented a minimum wage of \$17.22/hour—after driver expenses—for app drivers at the beginning of this year. However, according to a 2018 Economic Policy Institute report, the average Uber driver in the US makes only \$9.21/hour.

These poverty-level wages, which starkly contrast with the millions of dollars that executives and shareholders make, have led to actions by drivers demanding a living wage. In March, hundreds of Uber and Lyft drivers in Los Angeles went on strike in opposition to planned pay cuts and to demand the implementation of a minimum hourly rate matching New York City.

Last week, the US Department of Labor issued a ruling defining gig economy workers, such as Uber and Lyft drivers, as independent contractors. This move allows employers to avoid paying workers the federal minimum wage, overtime or providing benefits or workers' compensation.

In a statement widely circulated on social media, Sonam Lama, a New York City Uber driver since 2015, was quoted in a NYTWA press release as saying, "The gig economy is all about exploiting workers by taking away our rights. It must stop. Uber is the worst actor in the gig economy. Uber claims that we are independent contractors even though they set our rates and control our workday."

An Uber driver in New York, who wished to remain anonymous, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Uber is going public tomorrow, and part of their recently released financial plan is to continually lower driver wages to feed the bottom line for shareholders. They have promised 'other benefits and opportunities' to

make up for this, which drivers know from experience is bull.

“Uber drivers are demanding \$1 per mile and \$0.20 per minute in fares, as well as overtime and benefits and for the company to restructure their independent contractor employment system.”

The WSWS pointed out that the walkout by app-based drivers was part of a global upsurge in working class struggle. “I’m happy to see this quick response from drivers in the wake of all of that. Our wages have been steadily declining in 2019, and once that report was released drivers were rightfully pissed. I used to make between \$80–\$100 in a morning shift, and now I’m lucky to see \$60.

“They have also reduced surge payouts by flooding the market with new drivers. They have a bunch of upfront bonuses when you first begin employment, and then they start reducing your pay and taking those away once you’ve been driving for a while. So they incentivize new drivers and push out old ones.”

The international character of the Uber and Lyft strike demonstrates the essential unity of the global working class and points to the way forward as increasing numbers of workers move into struggle. Whatever their nationality, workers face exploitation at the hands of the same transnational corporations.

The fact that workers at Uber and Lyft are organizing their struggle largely independent of the nationalist trade unions is also of enormous significance. In struggle after struggle, the unions have demonstrated that their role is not to unite, but to divide, workers. The unions are organically tied to the nation-state and to the defense of the capitalist profit system. Workers need new organizations, rank-and-file committees, to coordinate and unify their struggles.

The exploitation of Uber, Lyft and other drivers is part of the intensified exploitation of the entire working class. The so-called gig economy now accounts for 34 percent of the US workforce, and this is expected to grow to 43 percent by 2020. Part-time, low-wage and casualized labor has proliferated through the world. Moreover, traditional sections of the working class are confronting “Amazonization”—that is, the employment of every means possible to increase exploitation.

All the parties of the political establishment are responsible for growing social inequality. In the US, this includes both the Democrats and Republicans. The

Trump administration is waging a war on the working class—ever more directly connected to hostility to socialism. The Democrats have centered their opposition to the Trump administration not on its pro-corporate policies or its fascistic attack on immigrants, but on demands for greater aggression against Russia.

There is growing interest in socialism among millions of workers and young people throughout the world. Conditions like those facing ride-sharing drivers are the reason why.

Genuine socialism means a radical redistribution of wealth and the transformation of the giant banks and corporations into democratically-controlled utilities. It means the reorganization of economic life on a world scale to meet social need, not private profit. Technological advances—including the development of mobile communications and apps—must be used to dramatically improve the conditions of the vast majority of the population, not increase their exploitation.

The realization of socialism requires the building of a mass political movement of the working class, independent of all the capitalist parties. The Socialist Equality Party is spearheading this fight.



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