

“We need to fight capitalism and change the whole system”

Uber and Lyft drivers conduct international strike

Our reporters
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Thousands of Uber and Lyft drivers struck and protested Wednesday in advance of Uber's Initial Public Offering (IPO) on the New York Stock Exchange Friday. The strike was an international event with rideshare drivers participating in the United States, Australia, Great Britain, France, Nigeria, Kenya, Chile, Brazil, Panama, Costa Rica and Uruguay.

The drivers were protesting poverty wages while executives stand to reap tens, if not hundreds of millions of dollars each off the company's IPO. The stock offering, which is expected to be the biggest in 2019, could increase the company's value by up to \$20 billion, according to some projections.

The drivers' use of social media and other technologies to coordinate simultaneous job actions around the world foreshadows how broader sections of the working class will organize against the global corporate giants. The action was also organized largely outside of the control of the unions.

Uber is deliberately lowering driver earnings in order to maximize the projected stock windfall for investors. The company announced a further 25 percent cut in driver compensation per mile last winter with Uber now taking an average 33 percent in commission for each ride. Drivers average \$10 to \$12 an hour in the US, a wage that puts many below the official poverty line.

Additionally, Uber, its North American competitor Lyft, and other ridesharing platforms internationally, benefit from misclassifying drivers as “independent contractors” rather than employees. Trump's Department of Labor, in an opinion letter issued April 29, declared its intention to classify such “gig economy” workers as independent contractors.

In its Securities and Exchange Commission filing, Uber admitted that classifying drivers as employees would force it to “incur significant additional expenses for compensating Drivers, potentially including expenses associated with the application of wage and hour laws (including minimum wage, overtime, and meal and rest period requirements), employee benefits, social security contributions, taxes, and penalties.”

The company told investors, “As we aim to reduce driver incentives to improve our financial performance, we expect Driver dissatisfaction will generally increase.” In an effort to eliminate dissatisfied drivers, Uber is heavily investing in driverless vehicle technologies.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to striking drivers in New York, London, San Diego, New York and Boston.

In **London**, around 45,000 Uber drivers work in the capital, earning £5 (\$6.52) an hour on average after costs, well below the minimum wage of £8.21 (\$10.70) an hour. Muhumed Ali explained, “We are here today demonstrating against Uber because the cost of driving is increasing day by day, but the fare is stuck and is low. So, we are demanding they increase the fare and reduce the commission Uber takes, which is at 25 percent at the moment. On top of that, Transport for London have

introduced a congestion charge of £24 (\$31.27) per day. The driver has to pay every single day. Uber is not paying, the customers are not paying, drivers are paying.

“We need to make a statement. Tomorrow the company is going public and the bosses are making billions, while the drivers—who are the reason the company works—are living in conditions of poverty.

“We are showing the world that this is not fair, and something has to be done about it. Increasing the fare is not a big deal to Uber, but they want it cheap, cheap, cheap. Some drivers have to work longer and longer hours and it's not safe. If you want to make £100 (\$130) you have to keep going for 12 hours. I'd prefer to have time at home with my kids, but I have no choice.”

Asked if he thought Uber drivers shared a common struggle with others in the gig economy, Muhumed replied, “Absolutely. The corporations are getting more greedy. They are getting all the pennies they can from the workers with these exploitative methods. If you don't work for a week, then you have nothing, you have to turn to your family. You still have to pay rent, a mortgage, for your car. Drivers get into debt. Some people are stuck with old, expensive-to-run cars because of this. You don't have a reserve. In this job, if you haven't worked for a day then you have nothing.”

In an appeal to other drivers to come out and protest, he said, “Join us. Together we are strong, together we can demand what we want and together we can put Uber on its knees. We can force them to do what we want, if we are together. Uber don't want to talk to any union. They don't want to talk even to two drivers together. So, don't be afraid, come forward and fight for your rights.”

Will also spoke to the WSW. “I'm here in solidarity with the Uber taxi drivers,” he said. “I work for UberEats and Deliveroo. I'm familiar with the business model and the practices of Uber and so I'm happy to be out supporting these guys because I know what they're going through.”

Uber, he said, makes “a regressive use of technology to undermine labour legislation. That's essentially what you're seeing, a use of technology to return workers to 19th or 20th century working conditions where they don't have basic rights. This is a growing phenomenon and while companies can still make money from doing it, it will continue to grow. So, workers should come and join, grab a banner and get stuck in.”

Muhammad, an Uber taxi driver said, “How Uber treats its workers is completely unfair. When the new congestion charge came in, Uber refused to pay it, they made the drivers pay. So many drivers feel forced to cancel jobs which take them into the congestion charge zone. But if you cancel too many jobs, then Uber halts your account and they stop you from working. We are not going to stand for it. Today we are very peaceful, very well behaved. But if Uber do not listen then we will be blocking streets. This is their chance to listen, or they will have major

disruption on their hands.”

Uber and Lyft drivers also protested and struck in **New York City**. Hector said, “In New York City, the TLC [Taxi and Limousine Commission] is supposed to protect us. They’ve failed us miserably. The proof is driver suicides and driver poverty.

“Uber has been around since 2010, and from that time on they’ve been abusing us. I’m not just thinking about me, it’s about the whole community. We support people all around the world. In London and California, we’re all the same.”

Cheikh Ndiaye, an Uber driver for the past four years, said, “I’m here for my rights. We are working too many hours. My back is starting to give me problems from sitting so much. I work 100 hours a week, and most days I make \$200 or less. This is less than \$14 an hour, which is lower than any city minimum wage especially in New York City where apartments and everything are so expensive. And if you get a ticket for any little thing, you have to pay from \$200 to \$1000.”

Elizabeth Pereira, an Uber driver for nearly three years, spoke to the WSWs outside the Uber Greenlight Center in Saugus, Massachusetts, north of **Boston**. “It’s not right. For the last three months, they’re cutting our fares in half. We want to get this back. We’re working for pennies. It used to be a \$1.20 that we would get, and now they are paying 66 cents.

“They tried to explain that they need to raise 20 cents per minute when we are in traffic. They’ve charged the riders more, but they want to cut us back.”

Elizabeth said driving was her only job. “I came here five years ago from Brazil and I was working in manufacturing in New Bedford. And, this was a good opportunity for me because I don’t have an education here, and I’m learning English.

“But now we are fighting for our rights. They’re making all this money and they’re trying to make drivers like slaves. They’re making billions and billions because of us. They need us to make their money.”

Approximately 30 drivers picketed the airport in **San Diego**, California, on Wednesday. Many more stopped using the Uber app entirely. “I like doing this,” Harold, who has been driving for Uber and Lyft for two years, said. “I’ve never had a bad rider and I get to meet people from all over the world.

“I used to be a full-time employee for Home Depot but now I’m retired. The extra money from Uber helps supplement Social Security, but to have no benefits hurts. Uber cut our pay by 25 percent and gas prices are going through the ceiling. Most companies pay a gas surcharge; Uber doesn’t.

“Uber just bought a ride share company in Dubai, several bike companies, and is working on self-driving cars with the money we put into the company. They, and Lyft, are trying to make up some of their billion-dollar losses by cutting into our pay.”

Kristie, an Uber driver for two-and-a-half years, used to work for a telecommunications company before she had to quit because of arthritis. “I spend 12 hours a day, every day, driving,” she said. “Sometimes you sit around forever and only make \$3 on a ride. Sometimes I average \$6 to \$7 an hour, sometimes \$23 an hour, but usually I average \$8 an hour. I’m making half of what I did a year ago. Most of us don’t have another income.”

Speaking to the growing inequality over the last three decades, Kristie said, “We all grew up with our families having full-time jobs until you retired. It’s not like that anymore. It used to be a middle-class society, now it’s just rich and poor. You can’t even afford a home anymore. I haven’t had a vacation in who knows how many years.”

She added, “Uber’s probably not paying any taxes either. We can’t go to the IRS and say we’re not paying taxes because we don’t have enough money, but Uber does.”

A few hundred Lyft and Uber drivers protested in **Los Angeles** as part of a group known as Rideshare Drivers United. Most picketed at or nearby Los Angeles International Airport.

John has been a ride share driver for Uber for four years with over 10,000 trips. When he began driving for the company, his rate was about \$1.20 per mile. “A couple of months ago it was already too low at 80 cents a mile when Uber reduced our rate to 60 cents per mile. To give you an idea, the IRS standard mileage rate is 58 cents per mile and our pay is only two cents more. We are employees, they tell us what to do, they play psychological games with these apps, they tell us how much we are going to get paid, and yet they still call us independent contractors. We need the politicians to start looking out for working people,” John said.

When reporters pointed out how the Democrats as well as the Republicans represent corporate America, John agreed and pointed out how Maya Harris, the sister and campaign manager of California senator and presidential candidate Kamala Harris, is married to attorney Tony West who serves as Uber’s general counsel and as its chief legal officer.

Jason is a part-time driver. “Uber cut out our pay per minute by 25 percent, and we have to pay for our own gas, insurance, car repair fees. They pay you a wage where it feels like you’re losing money. We need to fight capitalism and change the whole system.”

When asked about workers fighting internationally, he said, “As owners of capital always do, they’re playing us against each other. People fight for a living wage and even \$25 per hour isn’t enough to live on in LA.”

When asked what was the biggest barrier to uniting workers, Jason said, “Domination of education by the capitalists, lack of education through the media. We are sold a bill of goods, we’re told that we are not good enough and that we should stop complaining and just work harder.”

Reynaldo was also on strike in LA and works for Uber, Uber Eats and Lyft. “We are fighting for respect, dignity and benefits for the drivers. We are exposed to accidents, sometimes strange people in our cars, we have to put miles in our car and pay for gas. I work 9–12 hours a day and work the whole week.

“The rich make billions off of us and they (Uber) are using their profits to make robots to replace us. They should be spending the billions that they have to feed the homeless, take care of our communities. I would call these people the modern slavers.”

When asked about his thoughts on the Los Angeles teachers strike last January, Reynaldo said, “I used to work for LAUSD (the Los Angeles school district). I made very little and the district gave the schools nothing while putting the money into their own pockets. The capitalists exploit people. We need to create an equal society where people have jobs and are able to have a living wage.”



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