

“They depend on us for their wealth and power”

# Uber and Lyft drivers in Chicago, New York and California speak out against exploitation of gig economy workers

**Our reporters**  
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Uber and Lyft drivers across the globe participated in strikes against the company on Wednesday to protest poverty incomes and their status as independent contractors.

Technology and transportation company Uber, headquartered in the Silicon Valley technology hub of San Francisco, is set to make an Initial Public Offering (IPO) on the New York Stock Exchange Friday that could net up to \$100 billion dollars.

Wednesday's protests began in Melbourne, Australia, and followed across the planet to cities in India, Europe and Africa, and then onto New York City, where drivers staged a protest on the Brooklyn Bridge, and Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and other cities in the Americas.

While the company and the news media sought to downplay the impact of the strike, the movement, which was organized by drivers, largely outside of the influence of any unions or political parties, gave expression to the growing international scope of the class struggle. If Uber drivers can use social media and other communication technologies to coordinate their global struggle, so can Amazon workers or workers in the global auto industry.

Comments made by drivers to reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* highlighted the growing militancy of the working class and opposition to social inequality.

## Chicago

More than 40 drivers participated in a protest at Buckingham fountain located in downtown Chicago and then marched to City Hall. Barry has been driving with Uber and Lyft in Chicago since 2015. He was not able to attend the rally but refused to log into the apps. He said he wants to see a “pay increase and a livable wage.”

“Uber and Lyft have continually decreased driver rates year after year the last four years,” Barry said, “while increasing passenger rates to use their service. It’s becoming more and more difficult to make a good day’s wage after all of our various expenses.”

“In the last year and half or so, Uber started the up-front pricing for customers,” said Jennifer, an Uber driver in Chicago who attended the protest at Buckingham fountain. “That’s where the issues started popping up. We noticed over time they were charging customers more while only paying us for miles and minutes. Instead of that 25 percent they say they take from us from the app, they’ve been taking 50 percent, 60 percent, 70 percent. Customers are getting screwed over. We are getting screwed

over. We’ve got no recourse. We’ve got nothing.”

Jennifer spoke about the costs and risks she incurs as a so-called independent contractor. “So, we got a new car in 2018 and by the end of the year we had 60,000 miles on it. I had to replace all four tires because I had three of them pop on the road. All this happened in the first year.”

“People in charge are vilifying the [working class],” Jennifer said of the ruling class’s contempt for workers. “You hear all the time that we are lazy, that we are poor, that we are on welfare, that they don’t work. None of that is true. We need to, as a society, say that this is not what it really is. Plus, automation is wiping out the bottom jobs.”

“I do work,” she said protesting the perception that the work of an Uber driver is little more than a hobby. “I risk, sometimes, my life because of car accidents. We have to work so hard these days. We can’t even enjoy our time here. What’s the point? It’s not people trying to get nothing for nothing. Why don’t we help each other out so we can all enjoy being here and experience being a human?”

Eli, one of the founders of the group Chicago Rideshare Chicago, has been driving for Uber for two years. “Before I drove for Uber, I was a chef in a restaurant. The thing is, Uber is cutting down all the money we used to make. Share the wealth! Uber is making billions of dollars and cutting our wages. I’m not making half of what I was making before.”

## Atlanta

Stella has been driving for Lyft for the past two years. “When I started two years ago,” she said, “I was making \$1,600 a week driving about 50 hours a week. I was working long hours, but I was making some money. At that time, most of the money was made on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. We used to keep 80 percent of the fare. What we make now is not enough to live on. Even when I drive for over 60 hours a week it is far less than what I used to make. That is why I cut it down about 20 hours and try to make money in other ways.

“Previously, there used to be fare surges during important events like ballgames or concerts. A \$20 fare would go up to \$100. We used to get a big portion of that \$100 fare, but now the company has drastically curtailed these surge fares. Instead they are taking it out of the drivers who are making far less than what they used to.

“I am never sure what I will make, and it is impossible to live with an uncertain income. It has become intolerable.”

Other drivers talked about the physical dangers drivers continuously

face and complained that for women drivers this is a special worry. Some have been assaulted and robbed.

At one demonstration almost all of the passing motorists expressed their support by honking their horns. The demonstrators were holding handmade signs, with one driver showing that for a fare of \$51.38, his cut is a mere \$23.33. The drivers also have to maintain what is called full coverage insurance, which costs a lot of money in a metropolis like Atlanta. The demonstrators were continuously chanting the slogan “worldwide strike” and denounced the millions of dollars the owners were raking in even while they were drastically cutting the pay and bonuses of the drivers.

## San Francisco

Drivers across California also struck, and hundreds gathered outside Uber’s headquarters in San Francisco. Ethan is from Haywood, California. “San Francisco rolled out the red carpets to bring Uber to the city and they (like many tech companies) are responsible for the income disparities and the spike in housing shortages,” he noted. “The very least they can do is give drivers a fair income. They already don’t pay a lot in taxes, their cars flood the streets and cause traffic and accidents. The ethical thing to do is become a solution to the community and not a problem.”

“I think every decade there is a new fight, a new economy in labor,” he said. “The ‘gig economy’ is the new fight. Treat your drivers fairly! Lyft and Uber will also tell the media that 75 percent of drivers only do this part time. That may or may not be true but that still doesn’t mean you should pay drivers low rates.

“We provide the service, we grew the brand, we’re in the front lines,” Ethan continued. “We’re just a number now and it’s messing with their bottom lines even though we take on all the operating costs of running the business. They write off billions in losses and can’t afford drivers a fair price for the service and operating costs. But they can certainly pay their executives \$43 million last year!”

Ethan also spoke out against the classification of drivers as ‘independent contractors.’ He said, “they are only using the title so that operating costs are passed off to the individual, but they dictate pay and punish you for not taking jobs. The algorithms they use to assign work and what drivers make on a given day or night lack transparency. The upfront pricing and surge pricing are not transparent—sometimes they take bigger cuts on a fare than others.”

“It is also unethical,” he added, “when they update driver agreements without giving you time to actually review all the documents. You just have to agree to everything, or you will not be able to use the app.”

Grant is a driver from Stockton, California. “I would say that Uber’s and Lyft’s treatment of their workers motivated me to participate. The declining pay we receive, the lack of transparency in driver requirements and pay calculations, the laughable excuse for what they are calling benefits...I could give specifics all day long.

“Let me say that I’m sick of driving San Francisco tech bros out to dinners that cost more than I make all day, wearing shoes that cost more than I make in a week, from apartments that cost more per month than my entire income...while I am living out of my car, so the CEO can make \$45 million a year,” Grant said.

“I am highly encouraged by today’s strike and its widespread reach. It shows that we are moving in a direction of more worker power rather than being treated as servants.”

“Neither Uber nor Lyft provide health insurance. That is a major point of contention for Uber’s drivers who have to get by without it. If we as a

society were to disconnect healthcare from employment, a lot of people who are trapped in a bad job because they’ll lose their insurance will be freed up to pursue better jobs.”

Grant also spoke of the costs borne by drivers. “Between actively providing rides, keeping my car looking professional, and driving to where I think the best business is to be found, I put in a solid 70 hours a week,” he said. “I don’t even drive for Lyft anymore because of their insurance policy. It used to be that both Uber and Lyft had mandatory insurance policies that we were forced to use rather than our own insurance policies. And these policies were garbage.

“I’m talking about having a \$1,000 deductible on the policy!” Grant added of the car insurance costs. “That’s my entire week’s take-home pay! And now, Lyft has decided that was too expensive to provide, so now their deductible is \$2,500! That’s two weeks’ *gross pay* in the region with the highest rideshare driver pay in the world. I can’t risk that, so now I’m stuck driving for Uber with no alternative,” he said.

“It used to be that if either Lyft or Uber did something I didn’t like I’d just work for the competition for a month. Now I can no longer do that. So, I’m left with no leverage against whatever changes they decide to make,” Grant said.

“After providing over 4,500 rides to Uber, their thank-you bonus in anticipation of their stock IPO amounted to a whopping \$100. I can buy a whole TWO SHARES of stock with that! And even though I have provided Lyft over 5,500 rides, their thank-you bonus was *zero* .”

He added that social media has played an important role in organizing the strike. “Social media is a great way to organize the worker movement,” Grant said. “Unless those in charge of platforms censor our efforts. That is why we need to classify the internet as a public utility in order to restore a free and open internet.”

Grant concluded: “I encourage workers everywhere to band together and flex your collective power. Capitalism, by definition, values capital more than it values the workers who create it. It is up to actual people to remind the wealthy and powerful that they are not islands, getting rich solely from the sweat of their own brow and the ideas they come up with. If they were the only ones working on their projects, there would be no such thing as a billionaire. It’s the rest of us that they depend on for their wealth and power.”

## New York City

Scores of drivers protested outside Uber’s headquarters in New York City. Mo spoke out passionately against the exploitation of drivers by these technology companies. “When these companies want to make any change, or they want to make any law, that gets done. When it comes to the driver, we are disposable.”

The Trump administration is working on behalf of technology and transportation companies like Uber and Lyft to classify employees as “independent contractors” instead of as employees, which enables the companies to make billions in profits by circumventing federal laws regarding minimum wages, overtime pay, workers compensation and other protections.

“They call us independent contractors,” Mo said, “but they treat us worse than a part-time employee. This is a misclassification. They got us stuck with the Uber algorithm. They tell us ‘you are your own boss.’ BS! The algorithm is your boss!”

The destruction of good paying jobs for drivers has resulted in a spate of driver suicides, Mo said. “This is the most regulated city, yet nine drivers have killed themselves!” he said indignantly. “If you cannot take care of your drivers, you have no right to go out and release your IPO at \$120

billion. This transportation industry is expected to be \$220 billion by 2027 on the graves and dead bodies of drivers—who are either getting killed on the job or committing suicide. Where is the security and safety for drivers or for passengers?”



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