

Food delivery workers in New York City struggle against super-exploitation

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There are an estimated 80,000 people working as independent food delivery workers in New York City through apps such as Grubhub and Uber Eats. A large percentage of this workforce are Latin American immigrants, known in Spanish as “deliveristas.” Their importance to the everyday lives of millions of city residents, and consequently their numbers, have grown during the pandemic. However, they are among the most exploited sections of the working class.

Deliveristas work at all times of the day and night and in all types of weather, mostly traveling on motorized or foot-powered bicycles through dangerous traffic conditions in among the most congested cities in the world. The danger of the job was tragically demonstrated on July 8, when 24-year-old delivery worker Borkot Ullah was struck on his bicycle by a hit-and-run driver in lower Manhattan. He was taken to Bellevue Hospital, where he died.

Based on data from NYCDOT, over the last eight years around 9.4 cyclists and 12.75 motorcyclists have been killed per year in traffic accidents. In only the first half of this year, eight cyclists and 17 motorcyclists have suffered fatal accidents.

Food delivery workers suffer miserable pay, receive no benefits, lack job security and work irregular hours. As “gig” workers, they are treated as “independent contractors” paid by the trip rather than as hourly employees and must work long hours to earn bare subsistence in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

A report on a recent survey published in the *New York Times* revealed that while the city’s minimum wage is \$15 per hour, many gig workers earn less than half that. The survey found that after paying for the necessary equipment, such as smartphones and electric bikes, their effective income is between \$6.57 and

\$7.87 per hour, half or less the legal minimum. That includes tips, which are unpredictable and often skimmed by the companies. One delivery worker, Gustavo Ajche, told local news, “During the summer, you have to work with multiple apps. Otherwise, you don’t make anything.”

On top of this, food delivery workers are sometimes subjected to violence and theft, including of their vehicles. The companies do not provide the vehicles used by the delivery workers, nor do they pay for maintenance or replacement if they are stolen. Electric bikes cost in the neighborhood of \$2,000.

In March, a food delivery worker, Francisco Villalva Vitinio, 29, was shot and killed in East Harlem when he refused to give up his electric bike. In June, a 53-year-old delivery worker was stabbed in the back while riding his bicycle.

Many food workers lost their jobs when the restaurants where they were employed were forced to close due to the pandemic. Their only option has been to work through a delivery app, such as GrubHub, DoorDash, Relay, and Uber Eats, among others, placing workers at the mercy of these firms, which are engaged in cutthroat competition to drive up profits.

Despite a substantial increase in the volume of revenue during the pandemic, the *Wall Street Journal* reports that the food-delivery companies are not profitable. They are seeking new methods, including increased automation, to boost “efficiency” in order to squeeze even more profit from the workforce. As a result, these companies will fight tooth and nail against any efforts to improve the conditions of the delivery workers, as was the case for ride-share workers last year in California regarding Proposition 22.

The super-exploitation of immigrant workers in New York City has been a staple of the city’s economy since

its founding in the 17th century and has only increased during the pandemic. According to a recent study by the Center for New York City Affairs at the New School, foreign-born workers represent 49 percent of the city's private workforce but suffered 54 percent of the job losses during the pandemic. Half of immigrant workers became unemployed, making them desperate to accept any available work in order to feed their families. Many are forced into cramped living conditions, accelerating the spread of the virus, but have to continue to work, exposing them and their families to an even higher danger of infection.

In response to these wretched conditions, over a thousand workers have joined the recently formed "Los Deliveristas Unidos (LDU)." The LDU is an initiative of a group called the Workers Justice Project (WJP).

LDU has organized large protests outside city hall, presenting a set of minimal demands, including the right to access restaurant bathrooms, a minimum wage, access to benefits in the case of an accident, access to PPE and the ability to appeal if banned from an application.

The WJP has built up ties with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ, which has reportedly been advising LDU for several months. Workers Justice Project executive director Ligia Gualpa, told the *City*, "The support from 32BJ—it's critical, and it is a huge step for the workers."

At a rally in April, 32BJ Union Secretary-Treasurer Marty Pastreich pledged to the delivery workers, "I'm here to tell you that we have your backs."

In reality, the SEIU sees delivery workers as nothing more than a potential source of dues money. Its involvement with LDU is bound up with its own maneuvers with the state Democratic Party to enact legislation that would open the door for its entry into this growing sector of the working class.

According to the terms of one bill proposed in the New York state legislature, union recognition among delivery workers would require as little as 10 percent of the workforce of a company signing membership cards. The bill, however, would maintain their status as "gig" workers paid by the trip rather than with an hourly wage. The only substantive change for delivery workers would be having dues money automatically taken out of their payments through a surcharge on orders and the

elimination of their right to strike through a "labor peace" agreement.

The New York bill is part of a nationwide effort by the Democrats, the oldest capitalist party in America with innumerable connections to Wall Street both through corporate donors and top party figures such as Chuck Schumer, to build up the pro-corporate trade unions as a form of state-sanctioned guardianship over an increasingly restive working class. Similar provisions are contained in the PRO Act supported by the Biden administration and the Democratic Socialists of America.

Outside of delivery workers, the SEIU has played the key role in blocking or limiting strike actions by health care workers during the pandemic and enforcing sellout contracts that have left workers understaffed and underpaid.

The conditions experienced by delivery workers in New York City are part of an international phenomenon. Food delivery workers in China, Germany and other countries face similar conditions and are also looking for ways to fight back.

The way forward for gig workers and workers in all industries is to form rank-and-file committees independent of the trade unions and of the capitalist political parties, that fight for a socialist program in the interests of the working class. For more information or for help forming a committee, contact the *World Socialist Web Site* at wsws.org/workers.



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