

Food delivery app workers forced to work under horrendous conditions when Ida flooding struck New York City

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7 September 2021

When the deluge produced by the remnants of Hurricane Ida ravaged New York City last Wednesday, causing unprecedented flooding and the deaths of at least 13 people in the city, the poorer sections of the working class were among the hardest hit—including those who tragically drowned in their basement apartments.

Among those most immediately affected were food delivery “gig” workers employed via apps (e.g., GrubHub, DoorDash), who are estimated to number approximately 80,000. With many city residents stuck in their homes or at work, the demand for food delivery spiked, placing increased stress on the delivery workers, who are among the most poorly paid and exploited sections of the city’s working class.

These workers, many of whom are immigrants with marginal incomes at best, in the city with the highest cost of living in the US, were already known for braving all sorts of weather to make a living. When Ida hit, they were forced to endure extremely dangerous and unprecedented conditions, traveling along flooded streets on bicycles and e-bikes, to fulfill orders. A number of the reported deaths from the storm were the result of people being trapped in their cars while trying to navigate inundated roadways.

A widely circulated video shared on Twitter of a delivery worker wading with his bike in water up to his waist surrounded by floating bags of garbage prompted renewed demands that the city institute reforms to the conditions faced by these workers. Such demands have been raised at least since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, over a year and a half ago.

The Democratic Party political establishment in New York, the bought and paid for agents of business, has

paid the plight of these workers only lip service, proposing minimal reforms but taking no action that would infringe on corporate profits. While some companies temporarily suspended deliveries in certain portions of the city during the height of the storm, which included some tornado warnings, others did not.

The most Democratic US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), could muster in support of the workers was a Twitter post requesting, “Please do not be the person who orders delivery during a flash flood that the NWS has deemed a dangerous and life-threatening situation. It puts vulnerable people at risk.”

Delivery app companies are notorious for terminating workers, who are considered independent contractors and not employees, and, therefore, lack even minimal protections or benefits, for little or no reason. This is done in order to terrorize the workforce, many of whom are undocumented, into acquiescing to the most onerous conditions for fear of deportation.

To make the situation even worse, the companies take no responsibility for repairing or replacing the delivery workers’ “rides.” Numerous reports have been posted in the media about motorbikes, which cost around \$3,500 each, becoming inoperable due to immersion in floodwaters. This is on top of the wear and tear and thefts of these vehicles under “normal” conditions, leaving workers with no means of making a living.

Some companies offer meager incentives (reportedly from \$2 to \$3.50 per delivery) to those willing to make deliveries under difficult conditions, thus exploiting the economic stress on the workers which the companies themselves have created, in order to force the workers

into situations which threaten their health and even lives, while making only a marginal improvement in their incomes.

Ligia Guallpa, executive director of the Workers Justice Project, a Democratic Party-associated group promoting Los Deliveristas Unidos, which is attempting to organize delivery app workers, reported that under the conditions experienced during the storm workers barely made enough money to justify the danger and effort they expended.

One worker, Toño Solís, reported that it took him an hour to make one delivery, for which he earned \$5, including tip, which he described as a “cruel joke.” That is a third of the current minimum hourly wage in the city for employers with 11 or more employees. Though, of course, delivery app workers are classified as independent contractors, not as employees, and receive no medical insurance, paid days off, pensions or any other benefits. Even \$15 an hour is ridiculously low compared to the city’s cost of living. Solís stated that for his whole 9.5-hour workday, which ended at 9:30 p.m., he earned a total of \$115, the equivalent of roughly \$12 an hour including tips.

Another worker told The City that in 14 hours he made barely more than \$200 and had to buy spare parts for his electric scooter, which had been rendered inoperable by the heavy rain.

One company, Relay, imposes the draconian rule that unless a worker completes a minimum of 90 percent of their assigned deliveries, they do not get paid. In addition, workers are not permitted to decline orders, whatever the conditions or distance they have to travel. Companies also impose time limits on the completion of deliveries, applying pressure on the workers to travel at unsafe speeds or take dangerous shortcuts. Workers who do not meet the imposed targets are downgraded by the apps, resulting in being assigned to fewer jobs. Some companies reportedly skim the tips intended for the workers.

In a statement reeking of ruling class hypocrisy, a spokesperson for GrubHub stated, “The safety of delivery workers is a top priority. ... While we always appreciate the hard work drivers put in to get the job done, no delivery worker for any company or restaurant should ever take an action that would jeopardize their safety.” Translation: It is the worker’s responsibility.

It is especially poignant that, while these poor,

largely immigrant workers were risking their lives for meager returns, many of the reported deaths were of similar poor, immigrant families who were forced to live in illegal basement apartments due to the high cost of housing, where they were trapped by flood waters pouring down the entrance stairs. All are victims of the capitalist system. The same is true for delivery workers around the world .

Under conditions of the deepening of the capitalist economic crisis exacerbated by the ever-worsening pandemic, the exploitation of food delivery app workers will only intensify, as indeed it will for all workers. There is no solution within capitalism. The very fact that storms such as Ida and worse have been predicted by scientists for decades as the result of human-induced climate change and yet the capitalist class has taken no meaningful actions to address the root causes or marshalled resources to prepare for the inevitable impacts, demonstrates clearly that this system is incapable of averting the impending disaster. Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats or any of their hangers on, such as the DSA, can address this crisis, since they are all tied to the system which is responsible for it in the first place.

As has previously been warned on the WSWS, efforts such as Los Deliveristas Unidos, which are tied to the existing unions, the Democratic Party and, ultimately, the capitalist class, are incapable of addressing the horrendous conditions of the food delivery workers. These organizations accept the limitations of the capitalist system and will only act to blunt opposition and mislead workers into false hope of reform.

Workers in a growing number of fields, such as teaching and automobile production, are breaking free of these anti-working-class organizations to form new organizations of struggle—rank-and-file committees, based on the fight for socialism, representing the fundamental 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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