

Anger among couriers is growing after Deliveroo quits Germany

By Gregor Link
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Last week on Monday, hundreds of couriers working for the online delivery service Deliveroo were informed in a short e-mail that they would be unemployed by that Friday. The UK-based company wrote in the e-mail that it “regretted” that it will no longer be active in Germany and glibly thanked workers for their “services rendered.”

According to the company, 1,100 freelance couriers, who generally transport meals from restaurants to their customers’ apartments by bicycle or scooter, as well as 100 office and temporary staff will be put out of work. The delivery service already withdrew from 10 German cities in August last year.

The e-mail hardly ran to three lines and was immediately hotly debated on social media. A Greek Deliveroo courier told how he had moved to Germany only 10 days earlier, rented an apartment and already paid a deposit. “Now I get this email—fantastic.”

The company is apparently dissatisfied with German labour laws, “for which our parents and grandparents have fought so hard,” notes another user. A third was outraged at the “notice period” of just four days. At Deliveroo, according to a courier from the UK, “people obviously have the wool pulled over their eyes right to the end.”

The multibillion-dollar online corporation ruthlessly exploits more than 60,000 couriers working in 200 cities worldwide. In 13 countries and regions, including the United Kingdom, Ireland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, mostly young people and migrants work on an ostensibly self-employed basis for a company that has more than doubled its revenue in 2016.

Those who come from rural areas in the morning are forced to spend the whole day in the city centres because of the long travel to work. But they are only

paid from the start of their shift or even only if they are given an assignment. At Deliveroo’s London headquarters, the “suppliers,” as the company calls its freelance couriers, earn less than £4 per job. Although they are not employed directly by the company, their “vacation time” is recorded by an app and influences their personal rating—and thus their income.

Contrary to the industry’s cliché of freedom and flexibility, most couriers work full-time and are under heavy financial pressure. They are often on their bike or scooter for hours in the heat, rain, snow and ice, are not paid for long waits in restaurants, and usually have to pay for repairs to their vehicles themselves.

Recently, Deliveroo had cynically boasted of having introduced free accident insurance for all drivers—only after the group had previously made changes in the remuneration system according to which couriers will be paid for the distance travelled instead of the hours worked, massively increasing the risk of accidents.

Meanwhile, Deliveroo faces strong criticism from workers on social media. Couriers around the world publicly refer to the company and management as “one of the dirtiest in the delivery industry” that “robs” its couriers. Terms like “thieves” and “bloodsuckers” are the more harmless epithets employed.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Zack, a “rider” from near London. He said the rates at which the company pays the couriers for distance travelled have dropped sharply in recent years. As a result, the rate of exploitation increases and the average pay—contrary to the statements of management—permanently declines.

Couriers also report that Deliveroo has significantly increased the order radius they require to be covered, forcing them to travel distances of up to five miles per order, while customers have to wait two to three hours.

Measures such as these aim to pit couriers against one another. As Zack reports, the pressure of competition is so high in some districts of London that couriers have been known to slash each other's bicycle tires or chain the wheels of others out of desperation.

With its withdrawal from Germany, Deliveroo is leaving the market essentially to its Dutch competitor Takeaway, which operates in Germany under the name of Lieferando.de with brands like "Pizza.de," "Lieferheld" and "Foodora." Both corporations are part of a rapidly consolidating global industry of online delivery companies whose business model relies—besides avoiding taxes—on the unrestrained exploitation of their global workforce.

A company that has perfected this practice is Amazon. The online retail giant stepped in as the largest single investor in Deliveroo in May as part of a \$575 million round of financing. As in Amazon's fulfilment centres, opposition among Deliveroo and Takeaway workers is increasing.

In late July in Nottingham and early August in Paris, and last year in Berlin and Cologne, couriers participated in protests and work stoppages. An independent Deliveroo works council had been founded in Cologne in February 2018. At that time, the German company headquarters reacted by drastically reducing the number of permanent employees, instead hiring more "freelancers" and thus removing a legal foundation for the works council.

Around the world, couriers are feverishly seeking ways to defend themselves against permanent attacks on their incomes and working conditions. However, according to Zack, under the given conditions, it is hardly possible to fight against the actions of the management. As soon as there is a local strike, delivery rates would be increased immediately in the short term to encourage riders from the wider area to undermine the strike, he reports.

On Facebook, a Pakistani courier wrote that the problem is "that there is no unity among us. If we were to quit work for just a day, they would see."

Regardless of which country they live in, workers at Deliveroo, Takeaway and other companies in the so-called gig-economy are confronted with the same global corporate opponents and face the same political questions. They cannot move forward without organising themselves independently from the unions

and contacting their colleagues in neighbouring countries and throughout the world.

In order to prepare joint, internationally coordinated labour struggles, couriers and office staff need new, independent and international organisations that oppose the attempts of the national unions and management to divide them.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls for the creation of rank-and-file action committees that unite workers regardless of nationality, gender or ethnicity to wage a joint struggle against the global corporations.

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