

Rideshare drivers speak out on working conditions during coronavirus pandemic

By Shuvu Batta
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Rideshare drivers utilizing mobile applications such as Uber, Lyft, Postmates and Instacart for employment, have been hard hit by the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

These drivers are a part of the so-called “gig-economy,” workers who are classified as freelancers and not full-time employees. They have minimal benefits, and do not enjoy a guaranteed wage. Few of them have sick pay or healthcare through their jobs. In the context of a global pandemic, these protections can mean the difference between life and death.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with two rideshare drivers in the United States who wanted to tell their stories to workers around the world. Muneeb is a driver in New York City and Richard is from Atlanta, Georgia. They are both leading members of ProDriver and the Alliance for Independent Workers (AIW), organizations independent of the official trade unions, that aim to organize and aid rideshare workers.

Muneeb told us, “These companies, Uber and Lyft, they’re leaving their workers in the street. It’s not just a problem in New York, it’s a global problem. Everybody is sitting in their homes now. The drivers, they have to work to make ends meet. They are at risk at the front lines.”

Richard added, “I’m driving every day. I’ve been in the transportation business for about 40 years. I started as a taxi driver in Los Angeles, drove a taxi here in Atlanta. I’ve driven semi’s, excavators, delivery. I’ve done a lot in the transportation industry. Now I’m driving for Uber and Lyft and I’ve started to do delivery now because that’s what you have to do at this point. They don’t have any business, most of the business is just delivery. Uber and Lyft, taking passengers around, that’s not happening.

“Uber just announced today that they were going to suspend the Uber Pool. That’s a good thing but it’s a little too late.”

As Richard indicates, the response from Uber, Lyft and

all rideshare app companies to the coronavirus pandemic has been inadequate and slow. Uber Pool, like the similar Lyft Pool, is a service of Uber, which allows riders to share rides with others in order to decrease cost. The service was suspended on March 17, almost a week after the spread of COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. At that point the virus, according to the most conservative estimates, had already infected at least 118,000 in over 114 countries. The figure as of this writing stands at 269,694. The real number of infected is likely several times higher since testing kits are in short supply and many of those infected and able to contaminate others show no symptoms.

Rideshare drivers, who are potentially exposed to dozens of people a day from varied locations, are especially at risk of contamination. But the companies have offered virtually no protection for their drivers, many of whom are now adopting stringent measures to protect themselves from the virus.

Richard spoke about the precautions he has taken: “What I have to do personally after every ride, I keep the windows down about an inch, to keep the air circulating. After each trip I sanitize the door handles and door panels with isopropyl alcohol, I sanitize the seats. I let the passengers know; I let them see it and I also put it on camera. It may seem like a bit of overkill, but you don’t know who’s going to try to sue you. You don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Muneeb added “It’s unfortunate and we are the front line of [the pandemic]. Once this used to be a full-time profession but it’s just a race to the bottom now. I’m picking up rides from the airports, picking up people who are more affected. I think if drivers are out on the road, Uber should chip in for testing. I think each driver needs to get tested, at least once a week, or whatever in medical terms would be better to do.

“I have three kids, but I still have to go to work. If I

don't work how am I going to run the house? Most drivers need to work on a daily basis to cover their expenses, and we are getting zero help from Uber and Lyft...and it's pretty shameful.

"Uber and Lyft, they don't care about the drivers. They suspended Uber Pool today, not because they care about the driver, but because they want to avoid the lawsuits. They don't want to get sued by the passengers. To be honest, they steal money from the drivers. They should be giving drivers \$300-\$400 to each driver for groceries but they're not even doing that."

The sudden drop in pay is already affecting rideshare workers. Richard told us about his own situation. "I made \$16 today. The other day I made \$26. I have a water heater here at my mother's house. My mother lives with me, she's 83. The water heater's gone; I don't have the money to replace it. So, we won't have hot water for probably two weeks till I get the money to replace it. She had a stroke two years ago and has aphasia, and I've been treating her with MHBOT, Mild Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy. We can no longer afford that. It's \$75 dollars a session.

"A week ago, I had to stop that. It'll be two weeks before her money comes in and she'll be able to go back to treatment. Its physically causing her to go downhill.

"I haven't told anyone here this but I'm going to lose my car, probably within the next week or two. I've got no money to pay for it, I'll be two months behind and I'm going to lose my car, I'm going to lose my insurance. And I won't even be able to do my delivery. I'm just the tip, the very tip of the iceberg, and this just shows you what all these other people must be going through and how they're suffering.

"I've met drivers who have told me, 'I can't afford to be sick. I have to drive even when I'm sick'. This is before the coronavirus; I can't stop driving for even a day because I can't afford my bills. It's a form of slave labor."

For every trip, rideshare app companies like Uber and Lyft, take roughly a third of the earnings created by their workers. Though exact figures are unknown, Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi said in a presentation that Uber had "millions of drivers."

Whatever the exact number, rideshare app companies have a huge workforce providing them with large amounts of revenue. Billions of dollars in profit have been made off their labor. Yet while coronavirus rapidly infects the world's population, Uber and Lyft have pledged to "assist" drivers by providing them with a

paltry 14 days of paid sick leave—if drivers can prove that they are infected with COVID-19.

Testing, which requires unpaid time off, is almost impossible for significant numbers of drivers, particularly in the US, where the government and healthcare infrastructure, despite having more than two months to prepare, is short millions of test kits. As of this writing, the US has tested less than 100,000 people.

Uber and Lyft drivers, in other words, are expected to work till they are infected, just as coal miners for generations were expected to work until they contracted black lung disease. The difference, of course, is that sick or contagious rideshare drivers can infect their passengers and their families and hugely raise the number of the population which is infected by the coronavirus.

If they somehow manage to get tested and prove their illness, they are only given an entirely inadequate two weeks of paid leave for a medical condition that has a hospitalization rate of 15-20 percent and may require months of recovery.

Drivers themselves must act to protect their livelihoods, their health and the health of their families and passengers. The Socialist Equality Party has raised a series of demands to mobilize the working class in response to this crisis, which include an emergency program to expand health care infrastructure, provide free and universal testing for all, safe working conditions, and guaranteed compensation for those unable to work.

These demands can be won by a principled and determined struggle. With the unions beholden to the corporations and the state this will require the formation of rank-and-file factory, workplace and neighborhood committees to ensure safe working conditions, including among rideshare drivers.

Central to this will be a political fight against the capitalist system on a global scale, and, in the US its political henchmen in the Democratic and Republican Parties. The Socialist Equality Party is running Joseph Kishore for President and Norissa Santa Cruz for Vice President. We urge all rideshare workers to contact the SEP campaign to help lead this fight.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>