

# Can a Driver Uprising Make Food Apps Deliver?

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Jonán Mancilla is standing on a Manhattan street corner under the awning of a shuttered salon, handing out stickers to his fellow food delivery drivers.

The sticker shows a masked bicyclist in silhouette—fist in the air, food cooler strapped to his back. It bears a Spanglish phrase the largely indigenous workers from Mexico and Guatemala have adopted to describe themselves: “Los Deliveristas Unidos,” or Delivery Workers United.

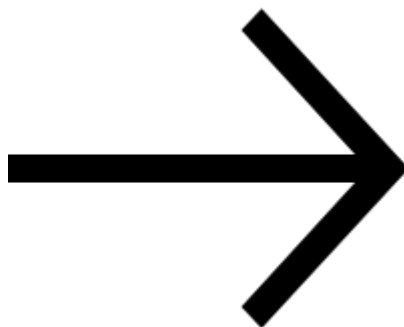
These immigrant gig workers—who toil for apps like Uber Eats, DoorDash, GrubHub, and Relay—drew headlines in April when 2,000 drivers snarled traffic, whooshing on their e-bikes and scooters towards City Hall in the pouring rain.

They are demanding better wages and improved working conditions, including access to bathrooms and protection from theft and assault. They have a powerful ally in the building service union 32BJ SEIU, bolstering their existing partnership with a Brooklyn-based worker center called Worker’s Justice Project (WJP).

Estimates put the number of app-based food delivery drivers between 50,000 and 80,000 in New York City alone. Lionized as essential, immigrant workers have also been treated as disposable.

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A year ago, when lockdowns allowed some workers the flexibility to work from home, others—especially low-wage immigrants in housekeeping, food service, and construction—were laid off and cast out into the streets. They needed a job, fast, with no-frills onboarding. This made them easy marks for temp agencies and unscrupulous contractors.

Among the most predatory were app-based companies, offering an endless supply of gigs and the convenience of signing up on a mobile phone. Legions of immigrant workers flocked to these platforms to schlep food and commodities to New Yorkers sheltering at home.

Now these workers are testing their newfound power in numbers, building up committees throughout the boroughs, and notching their first wins against the tech giants.

## What It's Like

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"I get up at seven in the morning," Mancilla tells me. "I drop my son off at school. At nine I enter the platform, leave at one in the afternoon, come to have lunch, go back to the platform again at two and finish at eight, nine in the evening."

Twelve-hour days and seven-day weeks are common; the pay averages \$300-\$800 a week, The City reports. The bulk of the money comes from tips, but these often get stolen by restaurants to pay the app fee.

The 33-year-old Mancilla has the easy confidence of someone who knows his job well; he's been delivering food for four years. He looks the part of an organizer. Workers on electric bikes beep at him as they drive by; others stop to chat, exchanging elbow-bump greetings. Many are relatives or from the same towns back home in Mexico, a common provenance that makes the outreach easier.

Some share stories of getting mugged or having their bikes stolen; safety is a major concern. "The problem is when you have to go to a building or to a public housing project where you know that your colleagues have already been assaulted," Mancilla says, "and they send you there again."

There's also the problem of bathrooms. Adán, 23, who asked to use only his first name, argues that drivers have earned the right to use the restrooms of the restaurants that depend on them.

"Sometimes they send you to deliver 30 to 50 blocks with only a one-dollar tip," he says. "But the platforms don't tell the restaurants to allow us to use the bathroom."

## Badge of Recognition

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The sticker he is handing out has a design flaw, Mancilla points out: one arm is holding the wrong bike handlebar. Nonetheless, it's doing its job as a visibility-builder. Delivery workers sport it on their bikes or helmets.

One worker told Ligia Guallpa, executive director of the WJP: "When we see this sticker, we know that we belong to each other—but not only that, I think the thieves are seeing these stickers, so they're getting scared."

The stickers are also a tool to build a contact list. Whenever activists hand one out, they ask the person's name, phone number, and what app they deliver for. They're expanding their outreach to include workers who use Amazon Flex to deliver groceries for Whole Foods.

WJP stepped in last summer. The group's base is with construction and domestic workers. Its program includes safety classes and campaigns that have recouped tens of thousands of dollars in stolen wages. But in May it had become an emergency relief center—distributing personal protective equipment and mutual aid support to immigrant workers locked out of state relief.

As the pandemic brought new faces to WJP's doors, Guallpa noticed many were app-based delivery drivers—and the working conditions they described were gruesome.

“There is no labor movement without organizing the new workforce, which just happens to be immigrant in New York. Which is the exact same way the labor unions got started back in the day, right? They got started by immigrants.”

“They were sharing how they were carrying bottles of water to do their basic necessities, how they were treated by the restaurants, how they were pressured by the companies,” she says. As independent contractors, they didn't have the same legal protections as employees. But “the apps were having full control of their lives.”

Soon it became clear there were vast networks of delivery drivers throughout the city. They had self-organized online through Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups based on country of origin and language. WJP offered to help conduct surveys in Arabic, Hindi, Bengali, Mandarin, Spanish, and French Creole.

## Choosing a Target

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The first organizing challenge was identifying the right target.

Workers initially blamed the restaurants for denying them bathrooms, and the police for not keeping them safe. But WJP organized meetings to discuss strategy and do a power analysis. “The police is just one actor,” Guallpa argued. “They should do their jobs, but at the end of the day, they can't give you what you need.”

They ran through a list of possible targets, including the mayor and city council members. The workers decided to focus on the powerful companies to which the restaurants had a contractual obligation: the apps.

The Deliveristas' first public show of force was in October: a rally by 500-600 drivers carrying placards naming all the major food delivery apps. The negative publicity was enough to push DoorDash to meet with the drivers in December and expand bathroom access to 200 restaurants (in its network of nearly 5,000).

Mancilla says the pep talks from the WJP organizers keep him going. “Give it your best, guys!” he says they tell him. “Don’t let yourselves be defeated. Understand that without you, the companies wouldn’t exist.”

## Faster Than Police

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I meet up with some delivery drivers again on May Day in a park in Spanish Harlem, where they have gathered to unbosom their sorrow. Francisco Villalva, a 29-year-old delivery cyclist, was fatally shot in East Harlem in March during an attempted robbery.

The commemoration is organized by El Diario de los Deliveryboys en la Gran Manzana, or *The Big Apple Deliveryboys’ Daily*, another Facebook page set up by workers; they have called for “a day without delivery workers.” People sing Mexican ballads and *corridos*, and pass around plates of tamales and beans.

“Today our whole community is in mourning,” says Juan Solano from the Deliveryboys. He points out Villalva’s four surviving siblings, wearing white T-shirts bearing the face of their dead brother; they’re all app-based drivers, too. The park fences are festooned with bedsheets spelling out “Justice for Francisco and Stop Bike Thefts” and “We Are Tired of Not Being Heard for Not Having Papers.”

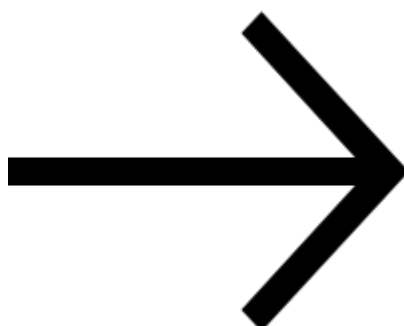
How can such deaths be prevented? The Deliveryboys want a stronger police response to attacks. Los Deliveristas share the same indignation, and attribute the tepid policing to their own undocumented status. But they have devised an alternative strategy.

On rapid-response networks via WhatsApp and Telegram chat groups, drivers report thefts and assaults to one another. Send out an urgent message with your location, “and all of a sudden you are going to see five or 10 people getting there and they help you,” Mancilla says.

Scroll through any of the Deliveryboys or Los Deliveristas Facebook pages, and you’ll find images of stolen bikes and live videos of drivers showing up to help their fellows on the scene of a mugging or accident. Mancilla said drivers started to realize the police wouldn’t come quickly when called—but their fellow workers would.

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## Next, a Union?

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In any growing movement there are conflicting approaches and tension points. Policing is one. Another is whether to form a union or stick to lobbying for legislative changes. Mancilla wants a union; he believes it would have the political muscle to make the police clamp down on bicycle thefts and assaults.

In the near term, the Deliveristas want a living wage, access to bathrooms, indoor rest stops, paid sick days, workers compensation for accidents, and protection against retaliation for inquiring about tip theft.

A package of five bills introduced at the city council in April would address some of these demands. One would fine restaurants for denying drivers bathroom access. Another would establish minimum pay per trip, modeled after the [2018 city ordinance](#) that set a minimum wage for Uber and Lyft drivers. Another would allow drivers to set their own routes.

“There is no labor movement without organizing the new workforce, which just happens to be immigrant in New York,” Gualpa says. “Which is the exact same way the labor unions got started back in the day, right? They got started by immigrants.”

*This article was originally published on [Labor Notes](#).*

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