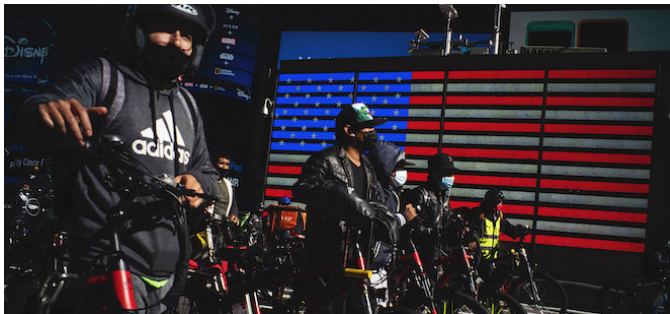


Los Deliveristas Unidos Demand Justice

“One of our dreams that we have as workers is to be treated as essential workers. We just don’t want people to say that we are essential workers, but to be treated as that.”

Michelle Chen ■ January 21, 2021



Delivery workers rally in October 2020 in Times Square to bring attention to increased bike thefts (Eduardo MunozAlvarez/VIEWpress via Getty Images)

This article is part of *Belabored Stories*, a series by Sarah Jaffe and Michelle Chen featuring short accounts of what workers are facing during the coronavirus pandemic. Send your stories to belabored@dissentmagazine.org.

The streets of New York City are eerily quiet these days. Millions shelter at home, and commercial activity has been stifled by the pandemic. But one sound pierces the chilly air constantly: the whirr of the electric bicycles that delivery workers ride to bring fresh meals from restaurant kitchens to apartments across the city.

With so many people ordering their pad thai, burritos, and pizza on platforms like DoorDash, Relay, and Uber Eats, delivery workers are in some ways lucky to be doing a roaring trade at a time when others have lost their jobs. But their gig work has become hell on wheels.

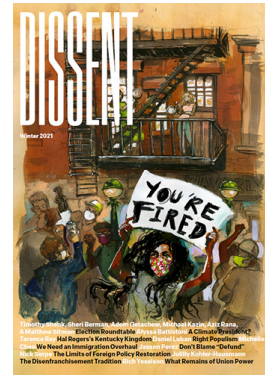
In addition to the hardships that come with daily exposure to a deadly virus when making deliveries to families and businesses, delivery workers face brutal conditions that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. They complain of getting their tips skimmed through the online food delivery platforms that mete out their jobs according to complex algorithms. And since they are not legally considered the direct employees of the restaurants they deliver for, they are especially prone to abuse.

“The app has changed our reality and our relationship with the restaurants,” said Guatemalan-born delivery worker Gustavo Ajche, noting that, unlike in previous years when restaurants directly hired their delivery workers, restaurants “have started naming us as independent contractors, but actually treat us as workers.” As “freelancers,” even while working extremely long hours, they end up earning a piece rate so low that many struggle even to pay the cost of maintaining their e-bikes and the thermal bags that keep food warm over their long winter treks from door to door, according to *The City*. And restaurant owners often deny delivery workers who are not on the payroll even basic courtesies, like restroom access.

“One of the things that we confront in the streets is discrimination from the restaurants,” Ajche says. Workers have “consistently been rejected, or kicked out of the restaurants, or asked not to park our bikes in front of the restaurants. We’re asked not to be near the restaurants, [though] we are the ones who have kept their businesses open, and we’re the ones delivering and making business for them.”

Often the apps “force us to travel long distances,” he adds, and if workers reject the long-distance deliveries offered through their apps, “they threaten to block us from the system.” Several delivery apps have been slapped with lawsuits in recent years by workers claiming they were cheated on their wages, and ended up settling for millions of dollars.

Ajche and other workers are tired of letting the apps and restaurant owners run roughshod over their rights, and many workers, mostly Guatemalan and Mexican



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migrants, have partnered with the [Worker's Justice Project](#), a Brooklyn-based worker center, to establish an organization to represent food delivery workers, Los Deliveristas Unidos (United Delivery Workers). Social media networks, as well as cultural ties—with many family members of indigenous descent working and living together in tight-knit communities—have enabled them to build up their organization to more than 200 members, who work in different parts of the city.

Through WhatsApp groups, the workers have stayed connected during the pandemic, even when some of them are staying home to protect their health. As workers struggled to scrape by through the lockdown, Ajche explains, they “decided to start doing outreach and started connecting [with the] Worker's Justice Project, talking about the issues, about the conditions, and really started thinking more about what has been happening to us.”

Last October, hundreds of delivery workers rallied in a bike ride down to City Hall to demand stronger labor protections for app-based delivery workers, including better safety protections and basic provisions like bathroom access. They plan to meet with city councilmembers to discuss ways to better regulate delivery apps. For those who are undocumented—which makes it extremely daunting to advocate publicly for their labor rights—winning legal status is another goal.

Los Deliveristas Unidos are one of many emerging grassroots gig-worker organizing initiatives, ranging from Uber and Lyft drivers organizing for unemployment relief to Instacart delivery workers going on strike to demand fair wages. Largely excluded from standard labor protections, gig workers have been among the hardest hit by the pandemic-induced recession while also playing a critical role buoying food retail commerce.

Ajche says that the deliveristas hope they can be recognized in the same way as others who have helped carry this beleaguered city through the throes of the COVID-19 crisis:

One of our dreams that we have as workers is to be treated as essential workers. We just don't want people to say that we are essential workers, but to be treated as that. And one of the things we are asking, as a new federal government has stepped in, is to be recognized for our work by giving us immigration relief. Because by us having immigration relief, it will give us a stronger voice to confront these apps. And I feel like it is not fair that this country lets the apps or corporations [force us into] a modern type of slavery, and make us live and work under these conditions. We don't think that's fair.

Michelle Chen is a member of *Dissent's* editorial board and co-host of its *Belabored* podcast.



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