



Protesters use banners to block off Market St. during the Uber and Lyft driver protest in front Uber headquarters on Wednesday, May 8, 2019. (Ellie Doyen/Special to S.F. Examiner)

SF Uber and Lyft drivers take to the streets, block Market Street traffic for better wages

Protest outside Uber headquarters comes as company prepares to go public

[JOE FITZGERALD RODRIGUEZ](#) / May. 8, 2019 3:30 p.m. / [THE CITY](#)

Market Street came to a standstill Wednesday due to Uber and Lyft — but for once, it wasn't due to traffic congestion.

Nearly two hundred Uber and Lyft drivers and their supporters marched outside Uber headquarters at 1455 Market St. starting at noon to call for better pay and working conditions.

"I have to work two or three times more to pay bills when last year it was fine," said Rafael Gorden, a San Francisco resident.

He relies on his income to support his family, including his spouse and two children, ages three and one. Gorden wasn't alone.

The action wasn't just local, but international, with drivers from Sydney, London, New York City and more demanding fair wages, benefits, an independent worker organization similar to a union, and transparency in the app's practices — including deactivations, tips, and fares — to protect workers.

The #UberLyftStrike, as it was known on social media, even drew widespread support from presidential candidates Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Bernie Sanders and Pete Buttigieg. Rising star Democratic Socialist and New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez also supported the action.

Uber and Lyft drivers also asked their peers to shut off their apps and refuse to drive, from noon Wednesday until midnight.

Many drivers who spoke to the San Francisco Examiner said the apps paid far less than in previous years. Women and drivers who were older than sixty, in particular, found barriers to earning on the ride-hail apps because the companies are known to reward brutally long work shifts and offer little transparency on the length of trips drivers accept from riders.

San Francisco's downtown protest lasted just over two hours. The event blocked the street and filled the air with the sound of supportive drivers honking their car horns as well as the more musical horns of the Brass Liberation Orchestra.

For years, the group has played at Bay Area protest events, but on Wednesday they had personal motivation: One of their drummers, Lauren Swiger, is a Lyft driver.

"I've got a triple stake in this issue," Swiger said. She was evicted from her San Francisco home in 2013, and had to move farther out in the Bay Area, where she said her rent "doubled."

Driving for Lyft helps her hang on to her home. But, "my actual earnings are half what they were four years ago," Swiger said, despite her driving the same amount of time.

Ann Glatt, who lives and drives for ride-hail companies in Sacramento, was also protesting outside Uber Wednesday. Glatt said the companies' ever-changing rewards system, which gives bonuses based on time driven and the newness of a driver's vehicle, have led to ever-dwindling pay.

"My pay for the last four years has probably gone down by half," she said.

And that particularly hits women hard, she said. "A lot of us drive full-time but we can't drive eighty hours because women do a lot of the work" at home and elsewhere, she said.

In order to chase those driver financial bonuses, she bought a new car in 2016. Months later those bonuses ended, saddling her with \$300-a-month car payments and sky-high insurance costs. Now 62 years old, Glatt said her adult children help supplement her income.

"These are the hidden costs they don't let you know about," Glatt said.

Mela Choe, a ride-hail driver who lives in San Francisco's Sunset District, also said she feels "trapped" by Uber and Lyft's fare policies.

Ride-hail companies have steadily increased the percentage of fares they keep, she said, leaving her with a dwindling income.

Sometimes, she said, the fares are inconsistently unprofitable.

“I said to myself, ‘something is wrong,’” Choe said.

Eventually, she reported the fare inconsistencies to Uber, who agreed she was owed more money and refunded her. But Choe worries she hasn’t caught every erroneous payment.

When asked why she still drives for Uber despite suspecting them of foul play with her earnings, Choe said she felt trapped.

“I’m an immigrant, I don’t speak good English,” and she’s 65-years-old, she said. “Where am I going to get a job?”

She’s got bad knees and a bad back, and she suspects she was fired from previous jobs due to her age.

“I don’t have no choice” but to drive for Uber, she said. “I have to survive.”

That was the theme of the day Wednesday, as drivers called out Uber and Lyft’s CEOs for earning millions through their initial public offerings. Uber’s IPO this week alone is reportedly in the \$90-100 billion range, an outrageous sum of money the drivers said isn’t going anywhere near their own pockets.

Many of the drivers at the protest were from San Francisco, but others came from far-flung parts of the Bay Area. Drivers from Sacramento and other cities said they frequently sleep in their cars to drive the maximum hours Lyft and Uber allow so they can break even on the trip.

Jeff Perry drives from Sacramento to San Francisco to drive for Uber and Lyft. He said he often finds himself driving 16-hour days to make ends meet. He then sleeps in his car, too exhausted to make the trip back home to his two children, ages 13 and 11.

“I love what I do, I love the idea and the concept” behind Uber and Lyft, he said, but Uber and Lyft “slowly eroded the benefits.”

Sleeping in his car to work, he found “You don’t sleep well. It’s cold. Your feet swell.”

Uber has denied its practices hurt drivers.

In a statement, an Uber spokesperson wrote, “Drivers are at the heart of our service—we can’t succeed without them—and thousands of people come into work at Uber every day focused on how to make their experience better, on and off the road. Whether it’s more consistent earnings, stronger insurance protections or fully-funded four-year degrees for drivers or their families, we’ll continue working to improve the experience for and with drivers.”

As the protest wore on, the marchers walked around the corner to Tenth Street and circled the block.

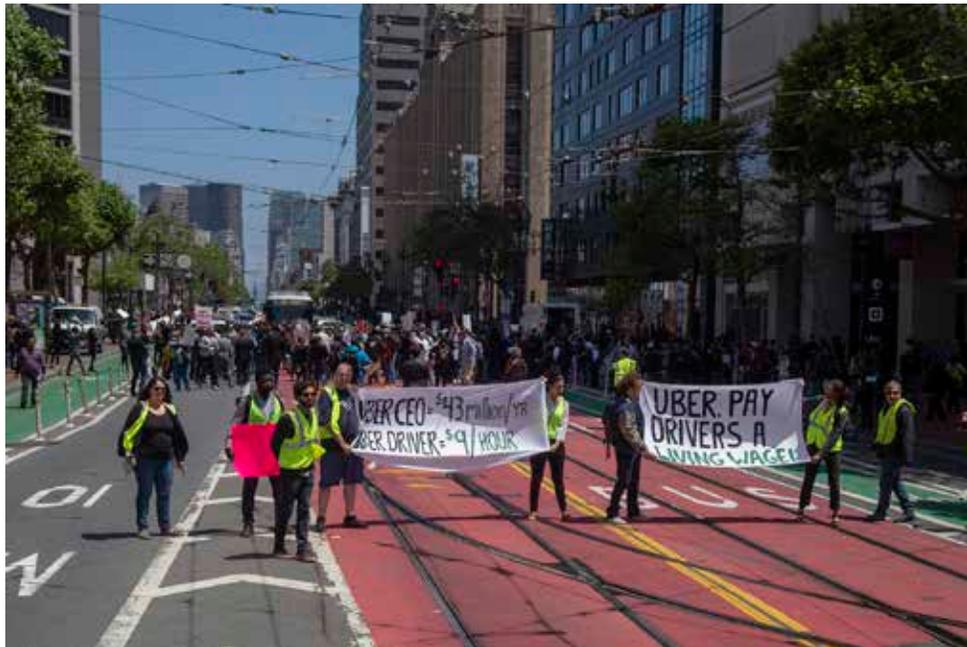
Standing in solidarity with them was attorney Shannon Liss-Riordan, who has made headlines across the United States for a worker-classification case that argued Uber and Lyft drivers are employees, not independent contractors. That case, O'Connor v. Uber, ultimately settled in 2016 with Uber paying as much as \$100 million to drivers.

Liss-Riordan praised Wednesday's worker action as reverberating across the country.

"We can take the fight to the courts," she said, "but sometimes you need to take the fight to the streets."

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This story has been updated to include additional information.



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Rideshare drivers line the sidewalk at the Uber and Lyft driver protest in front Uber headquarters on Market St. on Wednesday, May 8, 2019. (Ellie Doyen/Special to S.F. Examiner)