



Delivery workers march in New York City. Photo by Sol Aramendi provided to Documented by the Workers Justice Project

Delivery Workers Are Struggling to Survive the Pandemic

Online ordering platforms have fundamentally changed delivering food in New York, making the job less stable, more dangerous and increasingly lonely, according to workers

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“Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.” So reads the inscription above the entrance of the iconic James Farley Post Office. Although the creed has long been associated with the postal service 



the early 20th Century, in the 21st Century, for food delivery workers. 37-year-old Gustavo Ajchee, the creed could best describe the nature of his job. In fact, snowstorms like last week's nor'easter are some of his busiest days.

Ajchee can make \$400 to \$500 a week delivering for DoorDash and Relay. When the weather is lousy, he can make closer to \$800. He can only make so much if he works six days a week for more than 10 hours a day. It's exhausting. As a veteran delivery worker, he often finds himself thinking about the good old days when workers were directly employed by a restaurant as opposed to the relative instability of the gig economy.

“Things were somewhat better before because at least we had an employer and had a set schedule,” he said. “The stability that existed between the restaurant and the workers is gone now. No matter how busy it was we still got paid by the hour. With the apps, you're paid only when you make a delivery. If there is no delivery there is no money.”

Ajchee moved to New York from Guatemala in 2004. Prior to making the shift to DoorDash and Relay three years ago, Ajchee worked as a delivery man for Iggys Pizzeria on 1st Ave. The job was never easy but looking back he realized he took the perks of the job, which almost seem like a luxury today, for granted. It was not unusual for his boss to cook his workers meals, give them a place to rest, and reward them for their hard work with annual Christmas bonuses. When days were slow they still got paid.

Now, Ajchee is chronically tired. If he wants to earn a living he has to constantly be moving sometimes traveling five miles to make a delivery. This Christmas will be his third year without the joy he felt looking forward to a bonus.

“We used to have a boss who would give us a place to eat, be nice to us, and treat us with dignity,” he said. “These days we literally have to be in the streets looking for deliveries now. We consistently have to be moving across the city to find work and have no place to rest with dignity.”

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Since first appearing in the early 2000s, food delivery apps have exploded in popularity; radically reshaping consumers’ relationships with food as well as workers’ relationships with their employers. According to market research firm NPD, in 2010, nearly 1.39 billion phone delivery orders were placed directly to restaurants in the US. Five years later, that number had dipped to about 1.02 billion. During the same period, app orders more than doubled from 403 million to nearly 904 million. It’s estimated that the market in 2018 was worth \$25.7 billion and is projected to rise to be worth \$33.2 billion by 2022.

Of all cities, New York City is the largest food app delivery market with New Yorkers spending \$773.7 per capita. The pandemic has only increased the value of food delivery apps, with companies such as DoorDash, Postmates, and Uber Eats nearly doubling their business. Earlier this month, DoorDash went public, with its stock rising by 86 percent, surpassing its initial public offering price of \$102.

“There is a whole new economy that has been booming during the pandemic, and that is food delivery apps,” said Ligia Gualpa, Executive Director of the Worker’s Justice Project, a Brooklyn-based worker center organizing delivery workers. “It’s important to understand that these workers who have been feeding New York during the pandemic are mostly immigrant workers and that these apps not only disrupted the employee-employer relationship but also been profiting from the labor of immigrant

workers who left without economic relief to survive the pandemic.”

Increased business for apps, also increases the likelihood of food delivery workers being put at risk. In addition to the increased danger of contracting the coronavirus, other risks such as auto collisions, theft, and other accidents are common.

Jack Lee makes an 11-mile journey on his e-bike every day from his home in Flushing, Queens to Manhattan to work for the high-end food delivery app Caviar. At 60, the 12 hour days he works have pushed his body to its limits.

“I always feel aches and pains, especially in the cold but what else can I do, If I don’t work I can’t support myself.”

According to Ligia Guallpa, the brunt of those dangers is disproportionately placed on immigrant labor, which represents the majority of the workforce.

“These apps have been targeting and recruiting immigrants to join this new workforce under the most dangerous conditions,” she said. “They exploit these workers by putting their life at risk. Many of these apps have denied them PPE, have refused to pay living wages, and limit the number of deliveries they make.”

Additionally, many have excused apps like DoorDash of stealing tips from workers. In November, the Washington D.C. Attorney General reached a \$2.5 million settlement with DoorDash, which included \$1.5 million in compensation to drivers for tip theft. Ajchee himself has claimed that he frequently notices that his tips are stolen when he looks at the restaurant receipts and compares them to the amount the app shows him.

“Wage theft has happened to me and to some of the other workers. I have confronted the apps when I noticed my tips were stolen. When I complain right away they give the money back and say it was a system problem.”

Delivery worker advocates have been working closely with elected officials like Councilwoman Carlina Rivera to craft legislation around combating tip theft as well as providing bathroom access for workers and wages and premium payment options for workers who are experiencing increased work and risk during the pandemic. Councilwoman Rivera has vowed to stand up for the workers as her legislative priority.

“I look forward to working with delivery workers and advocates like the Workers Justice Project as we together explore potential legislative solutions to address the plight of these workers who work long hours for far too little pay and on the job protections.”

Seamless, Uber, and Relay did not reply to Documented’s request for comment. A DoorDash representative did share a statement.

“In October 2020, Dashers earned an average of over \$33 per hour they were on a job in Manhattan, including 100% of their tips. We are leading the way in supporting delivery workers in New York by providing free and discounted safety gear, helping secure access to restrooms Dashers can use, providing access to e-bikes, and working with City Councilmembers and community advocates to improve safety in New York. We are eager to engage with stakeholders and our Dasher community on ways we can continue to best serve their needs.”

For Ligia Gualpa apps like DoorDash’s claims that they are working in the best interests of the workers are disingenuous, to say the least. To her, the problem is the very nature of the relationship between the workers

and the apps. Until the apps recognize the workers as workers and not independent contractors, the exploitation will continue.

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“These apps are not only controlling the lives and the health of these workers but also determining who works and who has the ability to work,” she said. “They claim that these workers are independent contractors but treat them as workers by determining how many hours they work, how many deliveries they make, and by not giving control of how much they earn.”

As for Gustavo Ajchee, he has been organizing with other delivery workers to demand that the apps stop stealing tips as well as working to educate the public to tip workers directly. With two children attending college back home in Guatemala, he not only works hard to give them a better life than the one he had but also so they could be proud of him. Despite being a man who looks forward, it’s around Christmas that he begins to think about the way the job was before the invasion of the apps. No longer could he enjoy the company of his coworkers and relish in the spirit of the season.

“Now it feels like we are literally left alone now to survive.”

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