

Uber driver independence a bumpy road

25 July 2021, by Julie Jammot



A rideshare driver demonstrates in Los Angeles against Proposition 22, which effectively overturned a state law requiring Uber, Lyft and other app-based, on-demand delivery services to reclassify their drivers and provide employee benefits.

Uber driver Mae Cee scoffs at the notion, touted by the global ride-share service, that she and her peers are self-employed contractors—and that most of them are happy with the arrangement.

In California, labor legislation endorsed by voters last November in a referendum, known as Proposition 22, effectively overturned a state law requiring Uber, Lyft and other app-based, on-demand delivery services to reclassify their [drivers](#) and provide [employee benefits](#).

That legislation, heavily backed by the companies themselves with \$200 million in campaign spending, may have officially resolved the status of so-called "gig workers."

But many of them are still bitter and angry, and say they have all the inconveniences of being independent, and none of the advantages. They also accuse Uber of rolling out benefits while Prop 22 was being debated—and then retracting them.

"No way I'm an independent contractor—not even close, it's such a joke," said Cee, an activist in a

Rideshare Drivers United group.

Drivers for companies such as Uber and Lyft use their own cars and chose their own work schedules in what the companies describe as cherished independence.

But how work days turn out is orchestrated by a sophisticated computer algorithm that artfully nudges drivers to accept as many fares as possible—including less profitable routes.

Some drivers see the situation as basically having a software version of a manager, making them tantamount to employees—without the security such an arrangement would give them.

Prop 22 does guarantee some support such as pay topping the minimum wage and supplemented [health care coverage](#)—but it designates drivers as self-employed, meaning they do not have the right to some regular employee benefits such as collective bargaining.



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Happy trails?

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But Nathan, a driver in San Diego who asked that his last name not be used to protect his privacy, said he felt some of the company's promises went unfulfilled.

"We had more independence, more freedom... we had more ability to control how much money we made," he said. "Uber was finally working towards making drivers happy."

Transparency and price control are two things that Nathan wanted from Uber, and he thought he was getting those things.

But within three months of Prop 22 passing, the company did away with an option to dictate fare prices using a "multiplier" during periods of high demand, he lamented.

Drivers still have the option of picking which rides they want to provide, but say that the amount of information they get to see before deciding which fares to accept has dwindled.

For example, Uber only starts sharing aspiring riders' destinations after a driver has blindly accepted five out of 10 trips.

An Uber spokesperson told AFP that about a third of drivers were refusing more than 80 percent of fares before the tweaks, which were made to improve the reliability of the service.

"With the recovery from the pandemic, we wanted to make sure that passengers have a car when they need it and that all drivers have more trips on average," the spokesperson said.



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New horizons?

Critics argue that calculations regarding how much drivers earn hourly do not take into account time ride-share or delivery drivers spend waiting around.

They also contend that most drivers will not be eligible for the touted contributions to [health insurance coverage](#).

Meanwhile, Uber has been offering incentives to get drivers back on the road as rider demand picks up after being stalled by the coronavirus crisis.

Drivers may still be wary of Covid-19, and could be getting [financial help](#) from government aid to the unemployed. And, as with the rest of the job market, the pandemic may have prompted some to shift gears on careers.

"People did training, or they found other jobs," Cee said. "The pandemic helped us realize we were hooked, trapped in an abusive relationship with Uber."

The Rideshare Drivers United group seeks to mobilize members against the Proposition 22 model, which Uber hopes to spread beyond California.

The San Francisco-based company's ride-share

business was hard hit during the pandemic, but it has seen its food delivery and trucking units pick up speed.

Uber has yet to post a profit.

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