

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Capstones

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

Fall 12-17-2021

"Our Strength Is Unity:" Delivery Bikers In Their Own Words

Connor W. Zaft

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/547

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Fourteen-hour days from dawn into the evening. Grueling physical labor through the constant travel. Robberies at gunpoint. New York traffic. Bike crashes yielding serious injuries or death. Low pay managed through cold, opaque technology.

For customers using food delivery apps, these may be mild inconveniences, or occasional shocking incidents. For the workers delivering that food, they are everyday occupational hazards. Delivery workers, who are almost entirely men and overwhelmingly immigrants from Latin America and Mexico, serve as yet another example of the shifting characteristics of the United States' working class from stable single workplaces to the precarious, technology-driven gig economy. While many workers enjoy the flexibility and fast, physical nature of this line of work, they also say that the risks have begun to outweigh the rewards.

As with other gig industries, the demanding and dangerous work of so-called "frictionless" food delivery has spurred many in the field to take action in order to deal with the challenges of this growing industry. From organizing marches to confronting politicians to creating online hubs for reporting thefts and lending aid, delivery workers have started demanding the same sort of protections and recognition as more traditional forms of labor.

Yet as with any sector of labor, and especially with one barely a decade old, there are differences and disagreements between workers themselves. Recent media attention has focused on Los Deliveristas Unidos, or The Deliveristas, a subset of organized workers collaborating with professional activists through The Workers' Justice Project. However, some delivery workers express qualms over the choice to work with outsiders through city politics, or simply prefer to keep to themselves.

Developing in parallel to the Deliveristas is a group known as the Delivery Men Movement, or more colloquially, The Deliveryboys. Formed in fall of 2020, initially as a WhatsApp page to report stolen bikes and robberies, the group caught on quickly, amassing hundreds of members over the course of a year. Instead of forming direct ties with more formal

institutions and activists, these delivery workers focus on organizing within their own ranks exclusively, bringing in outside allies only for specific purposes. Their ethos is one of self-reliance and self-determination.

The Deliveryboys' tactics include forming watch groups at night, where members wait near high-crime areas in case of an emergency. They form teams to ride together in order to deter thieves, teach safe riding techniques to deal with traffic, and provide extra batteries and chargers for each others' e-bikes and phones. They've recently begun organizing community activities, such as an interfaith restaurant tour in honor of The Virgin of Guadalupe. The founders of the group say they do all this to provide for themselves and their members, and to show other delivery workers the value of cooperation.

Cesar Solano, 20, is one of the founders of The Delivery Men movement. Solano hails from a small town in Guerrero, Mexico. There, he says, men would rotate duties serving as watchmen to protect residents. This served as his inspiration for The Deliveryboys. Now with hundreds of members and six chapters across the city, Cesar and his comrades have begun organizing community events, such as clean-ups of the Willis Avenue Bridge, by partnering with non-profits and local elected officials. However, Solano says he does not plan to deliver as a lifelong career. While he hopes to go to school and earn a degree, he says he'll stay committed to the Delivery Movement as long as he needs to, but his ultimate hope is that his comrades no longer require his leadership.

"To work in the pandemic for me was not easy at all. It was complicated, because sometimes when I go to the hospitals, we have had to deliver the meals to the hospitals, and instead of delivering the food, I'd see that they are taking a body to the thermo.

You think: 'You do not have health insurance, you do not have the security of walking the streets. They robbed you, do you call the police? No, because they do not arrive, because there are no people working. Your tire is flat, there are no colleagues who will help you because very few worked the pandemic.'

This has been a very complicated experience but I have learned many things, because through the pandemic we have worked, and that is why we decided to start the movement. We have the movement of food distributors of the New York City, because we are the ones who are working. Not other people who were sitting in an office, who were locked up and just now that the pandemic is ending, are coming out to say 'Oh! I have this or I did this,' no. We worked the pandemic."

Vicente Carrasco, 39, has lived in the states since 2000, after he immigrated from Guerrero, Mexico. He's been delivering food for 17 years, working from 5am to 5pm. The father of an ill son, Carrasco said the inflexible hours and strict bosses forced him to find new work through delivery apps to accommodate his son's treatment. After he was assaulted by men who stole his bicycle, he helped found The Delivery Boys, primarily organizing others through WhatsApp.

"I have a son, who's sick, and when, if I worked in a restaurant, the owners would not give me permission. For that reason I decided to do deliver for the applications. Those applications, I can take the day that I want when my son has an appointment."

Jose Rodrigo Nevares, 39, came to the U.S. from Mexico City. Nevares began delivering because of the pandemic, which shuttered the restaurant he worked in. Even though he feared working during the pandemic, Nevares says he suffers from claustrophobia, which made being outside preferable. He has no spouse or children, but Nevares and his brother still provide for his retired father back in Mexico.

"You are working against an invisible enemy [Covid-19]. You knew that something existed, you knew something was wrong, but you couldn't see it."

"We are going through a moment of fear for so many assaults and robberies towards us. And that I know, this, the ... I think the city can do something else if it hasn't."

Misael Ortega is originally from Mexico City, but has lived in the states for 20 years. He has been delivering for about two years. He used to manage a grocery store, but says he can't think of what else he'd rather be doing.

Francisco Cano, 31, moved to the U.S. from Guerrero five years ago, and immediately began working in food delivery. Though originally he worked for a pizzeria, as with so many others, the pandemic pushed him to begin working for the delivery apps after three months of unemployment. He is divorced, and provides for a son, daughter, and step-daughter. Despite the difficulties, including the risk of robbery and assaults, he says he enjoys his work, preferring to get familiar with the streets, neighborhoods, and people he delivers to.

"I have seen people who get attacked. They take away their bicycles, they beat them, but then one cannot get involved because... one does not know what they bring, what weapons they bring... and a person who is illegal, they cannot do anything."

Carlos Pérez, 22, came from Puebla, Mexico when he was around 10 or 11. He worked in restaurants and then moved to delivery about 5 years ago. He says he appreciates the flexibility of his schedule, but feels that deliverers often don't receive the respect he feels they deserve - that customers, restaurants, and even other motorists often disregard the safety and dignity of his colleagues. However, joining the Deliveryboys has given Pérez a sense of pride in his work, particularly the camaraderie he feels amongst the group. Pérez says he even calls some members of the Deliveryboys "family."

"When you come here, there are not many facilities when one is alone. No one comes to teach you, 'What you learn is what you are going to work here,' unfortunately. Many people here do not help us. They do not support us in anything. If there are people who work in construction, they don't say, 'oh, look, come on, I'm going to show you this.' So, here, you arrive alone and you have to learn, because there is a saying: 'Here, anyone who is starving is because he wants to.' Then you have to work, and, well, I learned about deliveries, and well, here I am."

Juan Solano, 34, is another founder of what he calls the Delivery Man Movement. He came from Guerrero, Mexico in 2015, and has worked in delivery for the past four years. A divorced father of three, Solano works long days, and has witnessed and experienced robberies and attacks while working. Because of this, he began organizing other deliverers, helping lead a mass march in October of 2020. Solano is clear to distinguish both himself and his group from the somewhat well-known Los Deliveristas Unidos, or The Deliveristas. He has deep disagreements with working through professional activists, and feels strongly that organizing should not become a financial endeavor, which he says risks alienating the community around delivery men.

"We are one, a movement other than the organization. We know that there is an organization of comrades, Los Deliveristas Unidos, but we are not with them, because we have decided that this movement has to serve the community. Not to serve us, or to pay office expenses, paperwork expenses, no."

Israel Cano, 32, is a Mexican-born deliverer and father of two. He began delivering for restaurants until his work closed and he took to the delivery apps. He says he's been robbed before but escaped unscathed. To this day, he says dealing with thieves is the most difficult part of the work. While he took the job because it was the most readily available employment, he also says he enjoys the job because "I own what I do."

"There are many times that you meet people who take ownership of what isn't theirs, and that is what is sometimes scary."

David Cícajan, 35, has been delivering for 12 years, after coming from Guatemala 14 years ago. While he wishes to work more, these days he says he's unable to get more than 35 hours a week due to a programming obstacle in the app he works through. He says there's beauty in the work he does, when he gets to know a part of the city or a particular colleague, which makes the risks of accidents or robbery more worth taking. He joined the Deliveryboys after hearing about the death of a fellow deliverer. Cícajan says he finds fulfillment in the act of helping one another, of working together despite the solitary job. "We have to help each other, and thank God I have stayed with my colleagues, looking for a solution. Thanks to God, we are now, more than anything, one group. There may be four groups on WhatsApp, but It is a single union."