

NEW YORK CITY TAXICAB DRIVERS AND THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

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Taxi driving is a primary occupation for immigrants to New York City. Driving a cab in New York City, the home of a substantial majority of American cabbies is nearly a rite of passage for newly arrived male immigrants. For generations Americans have believed that the job helped an immigrant to learn the city, acculturate to American mores, earn sufficient cash to secure a better occupation, and ultimately insure that his sons will not have to wrestle a steering wheel twelve hours or more a day. During the 1950s that dream sometimes became a reality. More recently, cab drivers spend their work lives pushing a hack through the city streets. Still would-be cab drivers come from all over the world to push a hack in New York City. In this article, I will indicate how New Yorkers and cab drivers themselves perceive the trade as composed of aliens, criminals, acculturating new Americans, in identity politics or as part of a multicultural mosaic, and today as proletarians.

Keywords: New York, immigrants, taxi drivers, labour market

Taxicab driving is a primary occupation for immigrants to New York City, a place deemed by leading urban sociologist Nancy Foner as America's quintessential immigrant city. Driving a cab in New York City, the home of a substantial majority of American cabbies is nearly a rite of passage for newly arrived male immigrants. For generations Americans have believed that the job helped an immigrant to learn the city, acculturate to American mores, earn sufficient cash to secure a better occupation, and ultimately insure that his sons will not have to wrestle a steering wheel twelve hours or more a day. During the 1950s that dream sometimes became a reality. More recently, cab drivers

spend their work lives pushing a hack through the city streets. Still would-be cab drivers come from all over the world to push a hack in New York City. Driving a car is a global skill. Though New York cabbies do not have as formal a training as the arduous London “knowledge” test in which prospective cabbies on motor scooters went their way around the city learning every street and possible route, New York’s hack men do take classes in Taxi English and Taxi Geography and are expected soon to become “encyclopedias of the city.” If a cabbie does not know the city streets, he is set, according to Dave Betts, a cabbie philosopher, as a “know-nothing.”¹

Once in the streets, cab drivers pick up their fares include preoccupied businessmen, housewife-shoppers, journalists, and tourists. The latter two groups expect cabbies to give them the inside scoop on hotels, restaurants, scandals while dishing up a series of jokes. Tips depend on the cabbie’s banter and skillful driving. From World War II until the 1990s, fares considered cabbies as avuncular uncles whose didactic wisdom amused and created a class nostalgia among middle class Americans who had left physical labor behind. Cabbies were often the sole working class men that most middle-income fares encountered. Discussions of life mixed with humor, talk about sports and politics allowed the more prosperous passenger to slum in the safety of the back seat.

In the past, native-born New Yorkers and other Americans often drifted into cab driving. Never a first choice occupation and always low in prestige, taxi cab driving attracted actors, students, and the unemployed to earn some quick money working part time or help during a pause in their careers. Patterns of ethnic succession, not always peaceful, began in the 1820s as New York City stretched beyond the limits of the “walking city” and livery hacks became a common means of public transport. Irish cab drivers made room for Jewish and Italian hackmen. Many well-educated Jews in the 1930s became hack men when nothing else was available. After World War II, they learned that the world had passed them by. Known as “Depression Virtuosos,” these Jewish cabbies formed a key group of the classic 1950s generation of cab drivers. Horowitz, whom Holden Caulfield tormented in J.D. Salinger’s novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, is a good representative of such hackmen.²

¹ Quoted in G.R. Hodges, *Taxi: A Social History of the New York City Cabdriver*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2007, pp. 29–30; N. Foner, ‘Immigrants in New York City in the New Millennium,’ in her *One out of Three: Immigrant New York in the Twenty-First Century*, Columbia University Press, New York 2013, pp. 1, 6–8.

² G.R. Hodges, *Taxi...*, p. 109.

In fact, an overlapping succession of immigrant and native-born American groups have driven or hacked a cab over the past one hundred plus years, if we use 1907 as a marker. That year saw the first appearance of gasoline-powered, taximeter-equipped automobiles in New York City. I argue that New York City cab drivers illustrate the need to use flexible, “in process” definitions of immigrant interaction to America. New York City, as Tom Bender once observed, is a city always in flux; cab drivers, among its most visible residents, reflect such change.³ During this article, I will indicate how New Yorkers and cab drivers themselves perceive the trade as composed of aliens, criminals, acculturating new Americans, in identity politics or as part of a multicultural mosaic, and today as proletarians. I use available demographic figures and employ cultural sources such as books, films, and television shows to support my remarks.

I should add that I had hoped to find more material on Polish-American taxicab drivers. Unfortunately, New York City’s Taxi and Limousine Commission, the regulatory agency for taxi cab drivers does not break down its assessment of European-American cabbies into nationalities. Moreover, the numbers are slim at less than two percent of today’s cabbies and there is little evidence that there was ever a sizable group of Polish-American cabbies in New York or elsewhere. Polish-American cabbies are represented in television shows, most notably HACK, which ran on CBS from 2002–2004. In the series, David Morse, who is not of Polish descent, plays Michael Olshansky, a Polish-American cab driver living in Philadelphia. Olshansky was originally a police officer but lost his job after being involved with narcotics. Equally demeaning was the character of Reverend Jim Ignatowski, a character on the famed series, Taxi. Ignatowski, a vaguely Polish name, was in fact not Reverend Jim’s real identity, but rather his concoction of star child spelled backwards. Such characters are associated with negative stereotypes of Polish workers, rather than real people.⁴

³ T. Bender, *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Idea*, New Press, New York 2006.

⁴ For Hack see http://www.tvacres.com/ethnic_polish_AH.htm. For Reverend Jim see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Ignatowski. For negative images of Poles in television see T.V. Gromada, ‘The Image of Poles in American Film and Television’, pp. 113–120 in R. Miller, ed, *Ethnic Images in American Film and Television*, The Balch Institute, Philadelphia 1978.

HISTORY OF ETHNICITY IN NEW YORK CITY CAB DRIVERS

The cabdrivers' cultural and political identity was always in flux. In 1821, the state of New York licensed livery carriages, in contrast to municipally controlled cartmen, who had delivered a vast spectrum of goods and very occasionally such individuals as criminals and paupers. Carting has been rigorously segregated since 1677. Reflecting private use of African Americans as coachmen, New York State awarded livery licenses to black New Yorkers in one of the very few patronage favors given them in the antebellum city. Yet that same year, New York's assembly passed a bill that placed sharp restrictions on African American voting, by requiring a \$250 bond for prospective voters, a sum that was the majority of a working man's income at the time.⁵

That rare act of assistance was short lived. As Irish immigrants poured into New York City in the next decades, the Democratic Party invented the political wisdom that the best means of insuring a man's loyalty was to give him a job. Newly-minted Irish male immigrants quickly took over carting and female Irish soon dominated domestic labor, another African American work heritage. Two major changes doomed the black liverymen. First, the "anti-monopoly" philosophy of the Loco Foco Wing of the Democratic Party pushed through equal rights reforms that allowed anyone with a hack to drive by paying a few dollars for a license rather than using the historical method of petitioning an alderman. Hacking like carting soon became capitalized. Previously only owner-drivers could cart or hack. Now, huge fleets employing hundreds of drivers dominated the trades. By 1855, as Robert Ernst shows in his close study of the 1855 New York City census, Irish hackmen accounted for 84% of livery drivers with German immigrants coming in second at 12%. After a series of riots and street battles, there were practically no African American liverymen left.⁶

Irish-born New Yorkers dominated livery and hackney coach (so named after the vehicle) driving into the modern era and the introduction of taxicabs in 1907. Irish New Yorkers were joined in the early years of the twentieth century by newly-arrived Eastern European Jews and Italians. A smattering of African Americans worked in Harlem. The novelty of automobiles and New

⁵ G.R. Hodges, *New York City Cartmen, 1667–1850*, New York University Press, New York 2012 (revision of 1986 edition); G.R. Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613–1863*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1999.

⁶ R. Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825–1863*, Kings Crown Press, New York 1948, p. 71; F.M. Binder, D.M. Reimers, *All the Nations under Heaven: An Ethnic and Racial History of New York City*, Columbia University Press, New York 1995, pp. 58–64; Hodges, *Root & Branch...*; G.R. Hodges, *Taxi...*, pp. 10–11.

York's topsy-turvy economy in the first two decades of the century attracted innumerable native-born Americans to the trade. Equally important was *laissez faire* economic ideology, which persisted from the 1840s into the early twentieth century. Abandonment of old regulations meant that anyone with a driver's license could hack in New York City. Endless fare competition among fleets, often operated by major car companies, meant easy access to the job but poor wages and dangerous working conditions.⁷

Taxi driving underwent a major shakeup in the Great Depression of the 1930s. Downwardly mobile New York professionals and skilled workers competed with longer term cabbies to make a living driving a hack in the 1930s. The worldwide depression and tougher immigration laws meant fewer immigrant arrivals in New York during the decade. As noted above, well-educated and unemployed professionals, often Jewish, found themselves trapped in the job, unable to leave when the economy improved after World War II. Cabbies took to the streets in massive strikes in 1934 in a dispute over nickels deducted from the fare for a tax that was declared unconstitutional in 1933. Fleets, declaring equitable distribution of the several millions of dollars in deductions, tried to keep the money. Cabbies, spurred on by a resurgent communist party, engaged in violent strikes in the winter and spring of 1934, smashing nonstriking cabs, knocking passengers out of the vehicles, and generally terrorizing the city. Mayor Fiorella La Guardia negotiated faithfully with drivers and organizers. In 1937, La Guardia pushed the New York City Council to adopt the Haas Act which limited the number of drivers to 13,500 and mandated ownership of a medallion to cruise the city's streets or wait at hack stands. Originally priced at ten dollars, the medallion was based upon municipal methods descended from the colonial period and marked the end of a free-market approach to cab driving. Approximately two thousand of the original medallion drivers returned the small metal plate to the city government, which allowed the number in use to melt down to about 11,500, a figure that lasted over seven decades. Under the Haas Act, 42% of the medallions had to belong to owner-drivers.⁸

The Haas Act brought a degree of stability to the trade, although cabbies failed again and again to unionize. It created a bond of attachment between the city government and Eastern European Jews, Italians, Irish, a few Poles who made up the demography of cabdrivers. Cab driving became a steady if not prosperous income and allowed its practitioners to claim spots in New York City's lower middle class.

⁷ G.R. Hodges, *Taxi...*, pp. 28–46.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.

Ownership of a medallion or working in the commission system stabilized the trade in the 1950s and sustained the era of the classic cabbie, a central figure in twentieth-century American urban folklore. As New York City flourished in the post World War II era, it improved its position as center of American media. Newspapers, radios, film focus, advertising, and now television made New York City epitomize American urbanity. Tourists, business and professional visitors flocked to Manhattan. Invariably, their first encounters were with taxicab drivers. Locked into the tight confines of an automobile, the lonely cabby and his fare exchanged life stories, philosophies, tips on urban living and jokes. Tips became standard in postwar New York City and cabbies learned to entertain their passengers, who, in turn, anticipated a performance. For working New Yorkers, a cab ride created a class nostalgia in which they experienced familiarity and sympathy for a working class they had left behind. For out-of-towners, the cabby's outrageous humor and philosophies eased otherwise tense ethnic interactions. Such interactions acculturated visitors and cabbies to each other, just as larger social, economic and political forces mixed ethnics and Anglo-Americans together in the 1950s. Class however ruled in the media. Films, television and radio shows, novels and short stories portrayed cabbies as avuncular, somewhat foolish uncles.⁹

However amusing cabbies were to the general American public, there were sad truths to their stories. At a time when New York City was a strong union town and working class democratic benefits such as vacations, pensions, and good pay were widespread, cabbies stood out for their lack, even hostility, to labor organizing and their overall absence of benefits. In a movement that has few echoes today, Mayor Robert Wagner, Sr. orchestrated, with wide public support, a cabby union drive. Huge rallies at Madison Square Garden and other popular venues spurred the vote to unionize. Finally successful in 1964 and headed by Harry Van Arsdale, a veteran labor official, the cab drivers' union offered vacations, health benefits and a small pension to full time drivers. The decision to exclude part timers while taxing their earnings for the union proved to be a major miscalculation and a vexing problem. But for a few short years, the cabby union acculturated them into America's middle class democracy.¹⁰

Surely those who relinquished the medallions had reason to regret. After World War II, municipal court decisions agreed with drivers that the value of the permits as a business differed from their modest face value. By 1948 the business value rose to \$2500. By the mid 1970s it accrued to \$25,000. In

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 100–119.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 121–147.

2013, medallion values soared to over one million US dollars. Subsequent city government auctions of new medallions pushed the average figure in 2014 to over US\$1.3 million. Drivers unfortunately did not benefit from such enormous appreciation. Rather, fleet owners, brokers and the city government itself seized huge profits; municipal government alone earned \$US200 million from a recent sale of new medallions.¹¹

Medallions were a key part of an umbrella of regulation that governs cabdrivers. Originally regulated by the Hack Bureau in the police department, cabdrivers came under control in 1971 of the newly created Taxi and Limousine Commission (TLC). Hack Bureau and TLC had similar functions: insuring cab quality, driver performance and obedience to regulated fares and laws and hearing customer complaints about cabbie misbehavior. For decades the agencies sent out inspectors to watch for cabbies riding fares with the flag up or without starting the meter. As a result, cabbies viewed the Hack Bureau and the TLC as an unfriendly manager. Although many occupations in the United States are licensed, cabbies are among those most closely regulated.

From its inception in 1971, the TLC also governed so-called “gypsy” cabs which operated in the outer boroughs and in Harlem where medallion or “yellow” cabs (a universal color after 1968) refused to go. Gypsy cab drivers worked for large fleets such as the Black Pearl Company of Brooklyn with over 1500 cars; drivers leased the cabs. In 1979, during a period of general deregulation in the American economy, the TLC announced a reversal of decades of taxi law and indeed centuries of common carrier law when it allowed fleet and independent medallion owners to lease their cabs and permits by the day or week. The TLC regulated the lease fees.

The effect of the new lease plan was momentous. It immediately shifted the cost of daily operations and profits from the fleets and individual owners to lease drivers. Guaranteed lease fees meant sure income regardless of extent of patronage, weather, condition of the cab or any other variable. At the same time, drivers, who previously worked for a commission of each fare now had to pony up over one hundred dollars per shift (more on Friday evenings) and pay for gas before earning a dime. Now lease drivers customarily do not secure any income until they have driven for seven to eight hours. During bad shifts some do not make any money at all.

Older cabbies benefitted from the shift to the lease system. Aged owner-drivers turned to brokers to manage their medallions and leases. Brokers, new

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 184–185; *New York Times*, October 20, 2011, July 4, 2012. November 12, 2013, April 14, 2014.

in the early 1980s soon became rivals to the big fleets for dominance in the trade. With sure profits in a steady market, medallion values accrued consistently into the first decade of the twenty-first century when they began to skyrocket to contemporary values of over a million dollars, outperforming the stock market and real estate values. As older drivers sold their medallions, thereby creating a pension system, the number of owner-declined sharply to well under twenty percent today. The TLC refers today to a nominal number.

Leasing had powerful demographic effects on taxi driving. The number of native-born Americans began to drop precipitously in the early 1980s. Russian Jews drove cabs in large numbers, often pooling funds to purchase a still-affordable medallion. Indians, Pakistanis, and Bengalis became the most predominate nationality for cabbies in that order. Africans, mostly from Nigeria and Ghana and West Indians, particularly Dominicans made up the largest-ever cohort of cabbies of African descent. Few could afford to purchase medallions, which required a twenty percent down payment. Accordingly, between 1990 and today, taxi cab driving has become increasingly international and proletarian, made up of single males or husbands with families back home whom they rarely see. Such cab drivers had less and less contact with the customer in the back seat. Rather than exchange jokes and life stories, cabbies made inexpensive long distance calls to families and friends thousands of miles away while their passengers punched messages or read market reports on their cell phones. Always a lonely job, taxicab drivers have become even more isolated. To make matters worse, the attacks on 9/11 stirred nativism and racism against sub-continent Indians, Pakistanis and Bengalis.

Income deprivation, lack of mobility and loneliness, international origins and hindrances to citizenship abetted by racism make for a vicious stew that denies the acculturation enjoyed by previous generations of cabbies. Saskia Sassen's world cities analysis argues that global cities such as New York are increasingly composed of the mega-rich who are served by a floating proletariat, into which cab drivers have fallen.¹²

This descent accelerated after the turn of the twentieth century. New York's business-minded mayor, Michael Bloomberg (term 2001–2014) pushed through the most significant increase in the number of medallions, strived to create a standard "taxi for the future," with one model serving all, and instituted a new permit-cab called the "green taxi," that allowed livery and gypsy cab drivers to purchase permits and pick up fares north of 110th Street in Manhattan and in the other boroughs. Livery drivers snapped up the permits, even selling them on

¹² S. Sassen, *The Global City*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1991.

Craig's List for profit. However, as 93% of all taxi rides occur either in Manhattan (90%) or at the airports (3%), even increasing the number of medallions did not dilute their value; rather they continued to climb dramatically.¹³

Mayor Michael Bloomberg was indifferent if not hostile to attempts to organize cab drivers. Although his administration approved a fare increase in 2004 (now ten years old), more prominent achievements including installing much-disliked GPS systems equipped with credit card readers and droning video advertisements. Bhairavi Desai, the long term head of the New York City, strived to work with the TLC to secure benefits for members of the New York City Taxi Workers Alliance. Generally the Bloomberg administration and the TLC ignored Desai. In 2012, the TLC agreed upon a plan to deduct six cents from every credit card charge to fund health care benefits for drivers, who have lacked them since the late 1960s. The fund piled up \$US1.4 million by 2014 when a Manhattan Supreme Court Judge struck it down.¹⁴

Recently the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission, the regulatory body for cabdrivers and liverymen, uncovered a startling statistic. Only six percent of contemporary cabbies are from the United States and related territories (for example Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands). While cabbies come from thirty-one American states and the District of Columbia, those figures are dwarfed by the origins of foreign-born cabbies from 175 countries around the world. The highest concentration of yellow taxi drivers comes from Bangladesh, with over 10,250 drivers. Drivers from Bangladesh now represent 23.1% of all yellow taxi drivers. Pakistan comes in second with 5,850 yellow taxi drivers (about 13.2% of all yellow taxi drivers). This represents a shift from 2005, when the highest concentration came from Pakistan (14.4%), and Bangladesh was second at 13.6%. Cabbies driving the so-called Green Taxis which can operate only in the outer boroughs hail primarily from the Dominican Republic (about 20%) while the second highest concentration of FHV drivers comes from the U.S., representing 9.6% of all FHV drivers (about 4,500 drivers).¹⁵

The Taxi Fact Book provides other telling statistics about today's cabdrivers. About 88% of TLC-licensed drivers live within the five boroughs that make up New York City. Most yellow taxi drivers live in Queens (about 43%). After Queens, the most popular boroughs are Brooklyn (23%), the Bronx (13%), Manhattan (7%), and Staten Island (2%). In comparison, FHV drivers are more spread out throughout the five boroughs, with 29% of drivers in Queens, 24%

¹³ TLC, Taxi Fact Book.

¹⁴ *New York Daily News*, April 4, 14, 2014.

¹⁵ New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission, *The 2014 New York City Taxi Fact Book*, The Commission, New York 2014, pp. 11–12.

in Brooklyn, 22% in the Bronx, 10% in Manhattan, and just 3% in Staten Island. Among those drivers who do not live in New York City, most live in New Jersey (around 6,300 or 6% of all drivers) or in New York State on Long Island (about 4%) or in Upstate NY (2%). Less than one percent of all drivers live elsewhere.¹⁶

Males predominate among contemporary taxi drivers. Although female drivers appeared during World War II, the taxi industry continues to be nearly all male. Around 49,500 (98.9%) of today's yellow taxi drivers are male, whereas just 536 are female. The percentage of female FHV drivers is slightly higher, with a total of around 2,300 female drivers (just under 4% of all FHV drivers).¹⁷

Cab driving is no longer a young man's job. TLC-licensed drivers range in age from 19 years (the youngest age allowed by TLC Rules), to the oldest, who turned 94 in August 2013. The average age for a New York City yellow taxi driver is 46 years old, up from 44 years old in 2005. For FHV drivers, the average age is 47 years. Looking at the age distributions for yellow taxi and FHV drivers, a larger share of yellow taxi drivers are younger in age than FHV drivers, with about 21% of yellow drivers under 35 years old and just 19% of FHV drivers. The largest age cohort for both groups of drivers is those between 50 and 54 years of age. Around 14% of yellow taxi drivers and 15% of FHV drivers fall into this age group.

Who will be the cabdrivers of the future? For the next decade or more, South Asian dominance of the job will remain. The numbers of Desi driving cab so far surpasses the next group that major change is unlikely. Should sufficient numbers of South Asians move out of the job, hopefully for something better, or their sons do so, the next groups are likely to be Chinese, Mexicans, and West Indians, all sizable contributors to New York's present and future demography, and all from car cultures. Unless there are major regulatory changes, the job will remain proletarian.¹⁸

Indeed, there are threats to drivers that could reduce their status even further to lumpen proletarians, or part of the global labor force moving from place to place without civil rights, job protection, or futures. Cab drivers have never been known for their collective conscientiousness. The latest threat, disguised as a blessing, to cabdrivers is Uber, a smart phone dispatching service. Promising higher wages and earnings to drivers, Uber plans to dismantle all regulations

¹⁶ TLC, *Taxi Fact Book*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ N. Foner, *One out of Three...*, p. 22.

over urban transportation. Uber's primary business uses luxury sedans, operated by independent drivers, who earn eighty percent of each fare while contributing the rest to Uber. The company also operates UberX, which outsources taxi rides to private individuals using their own vehicles. All of this is done outside of city regulations. Never timid in its rush to expand, Uber, skirted city laws in New York and other major cities when it told drivers in its UberX ride-sharing program last month that they could start picking up passengers at airports. The fledgling union for Chicago's taxi drivers complained, citing an ordinance barring anyone but taxicabs and limousine services from serving the airports. Chicago officials were soon shooing away the UberX drivers, although Uber defended its actions by saying O'Hare desperately needed additional transportation options.

But the Chicago taxi drivers' victory was short-lived. The Chicago City Council voted 34 to 10 on May 28 to give ride-sharing companies much of what they wanted. The new law set no limits on the number of companies, vehicles or ride-sharing drivers and would let those drivers operate at the city's two main airports, O'Hare and Midway. Drivers in New York City thus far have been able to resist Uber, though its massive US \$50B capitalization insures that it can influence urban lawmakers and sustain a steady stream of lawsuits. UberX may be initially attractive to drivers, who are weary of working for fleets and taxi brokerages, and hope for better conditions in a new system. However, UberX's drivers use their own vehicles to transport passengers, make inroads in city after city, and thereby diminish the value of a medallion or the years of experience put in by traditional taxi drivers. Medallion drivers face a loss of clout and livelihood. Years of rising gas prices and, in many places, stagnant fares have already contributed to lower incomes for many drivers.

To combat Uber, taxi drivers in New York, Chicago and other cities are for the first time seeking to form a national taxi drivers' union – not just to gain leverage against UberX but also to pressure city officials and taxi companies to heed their concerns. The powerful taxi drivers' union in New York City, with 17,000 members, is spearheading this effort, bringing its organizing expertise to Chicago, where it is pushing to unionize thousands of drivers and to link up with drivers' unions in Philadelphia, Miami, Houston, northern Maryland and Austin, Tex. Drivers have similar grievances: low pay, high leasing fees, police who issue too many tickets and taxi companies that cheat them. Despite those common problems, forming a national union will be difficult, in part, because taxi drivers are an independent, disputatious group with roots in dozens of countries. Efforts to unionize drivers in the past have failed, though those difficulties were always within a regulatory environment. Uber presents a false freedom that further pits each driver against the other. For that reason, driver

diversity can hurt any sense of solidarity. “It’s definitely a United Nations,” said Karen Chamberlain, who has driven a taxi in Chicago for two decades. “This is a hard business to get people to come together and agree. There are so many different nationalities and different languages. Nobody trusts each other.” Ms. Chamberlain says she drives seven nights a week, more than 70 hours, but nets only \$20,000 a year after factoring in gasoline and a \$752-a-week taxi lease. She said she earned less than half of what she made a decade ago, when gasoline cost 45 percent less and her leasing fee was lower.¹⁹

The A.F.L.-C.I.O. supports the idea of a national taxi drivers’ union as part of its broader strategy to reverse decades of decline in union membership and power. Labor groups are realizing that they can no longer afford to ignore sectors like the taxi industry that employ many immigrant workers, whom unions view as a vital source of potential membership growth. And taxi drivers, whether Ethiopian, Haitian or Pakistani, are often leaders in immigrant communities around the country. One snag these unionization plans face is that taxi drivers are usually independent contractors who are barred by antitrust law from colluding to set prices (although they can lobby city officials to grant fare increases). Drivers say that some organizing efforts have been paying off. For instance the 1,200-member drivers’ union in Philadelphia helped secure three fare increases, lower fines for violations like having bald tires and a reduction in the fee for accepting credit card payments to 5 percent of the fare, from 10 percent. Ronald Blount, president of the Philadelphia union, sees benefits in going national. “We can learn from each other. We can see what forms of pressure worked in other cities,” he said. If they were successful in forming a national union, the taxi unions would be able to tap the mighty A.F.L.-C.I.O. and its 56 unions to get behind their cause. One recent Sunday afternoon, three leaders of the New York City Taxi Workers Alliance met with 10 Chicago taxi drivers on Chicago’s North Side to strategize about expanding the union here and trying to halt UberX’s expansion. To enlist drivers, they planned to set up tables at airport taxi lines, hotel entrances and popular food trucks. And they planned to lobby the City Council to put a brake on UberX. The fledgling Chicago union, the United Taxidivers Community Council, has 300 members but hopes its organizing drive this year will increase the number to 2,000, out of the city’s nearly 10,000 drivers.

¹⁹ S. Greenhouse, ‘Taxi Driver Solidarity – Pinched by Ride-Sharing Services, Cabbies Seek a National Union,’ *New York Times*, June 6, 2014.

Bhairavi Desai, the executive director of the New York union – who first made a name for herself by orchestrating a strike of thousands of drivers in 1998 – asserted that taxi drivers were an exploited lot ripe for unionization,

“Poverty among the drivers is just palpable.” Ms. Desai said. “Most drivers work 60 to 70 hours a week and earn below the minimum wage. Drivers have been suffering in such deep poverty, and that’s been compounded by the threat of the ride-sharing companies.” Uber has already strong-armed its drivers, telling them not to work for any competitors. Uber, empowered by an \$18 billion capitalization is seeking to overturn taxi regulations. The company has hired David Plouffe, the former campaign manager for President Barack Obama, to lead its efforts to overturn regulations. Plouffe likened his efforts to a political race, which means that contemporary popular opinion will be more important than decades of regulation. That is an ominous sign for drivers as it will remove any protections and make possible hyper-competition, reckless driving and poorly trained drivers.²⁰

²⁰ *CNN.com*, August 5, 2014; *New York Times*, August 19, 2014.