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Taxi: Cabs and Capitalism in New York City

Biju Mathew

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Taxi: Cabs and Capitalism in New York City

Abstract

[Excerpt] Three significant events have happened since 2005 when this book was first published. (1) Starting in 2004, the city of New York began advancing the Taxi Technology Enhancement Program (TTE), which would require every yellow taxi in NYC to be fitted with a non-navigational Global Positioning System-based tracking system. Driver opposition to this system grew over the next three years, leading up to a series of strikes in September and October 2007. Even as we go to press, this battle continues. (2) In early 2007, the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA) became the first independent labor union to become a full member of the New York State Central Labor Council, a historic development with tremendous significance for the labor movement. (3) Finally, based on burgeoning interest and several taxi-organizing initiatives emerging throughout the United States, NYTWA along with the Taxi Workers Alliance of Pennsylvania organized a founding meeting of the Taxi Workers International (TWI) in March 2007.

All three dramatic events promise long-term effects. In many ways the intertwined nature of these events has given me a more complete understanding of the challenges the contemporary labor movement faces. Accordingly, this Cornell edition carries a new epilogue that not only describes these events and the actions that surrounded them but also attempts to synthesize them theoretically. The result, I hope, is a compelling conclusion to the book that will open up fresh debates within the labor movement.

Keywords

taxi drivers, New York City, labor, unions

Comments

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TAXI!

Cabs and Capitalism in New York City

BIJU MATHEW

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For my mother, Baby Mathews, who continues
to teach me how not to give up
and
in memory of two organizers who left us too early,
Agha Saleem Osman and Malik Majid.

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CONTENTS

Preface to the Cornell Edition	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
Prologue: The Distance Between Two Victories	1
1 Roots of Victory: The Taxi Strikes of 1998	11
2 Horse Hiring: Abolition and Return	39
3 The Age of Greed, or What's Neoliberalism Got to Do with It?	57
4 The Reinvention of the Yellow Cab	83
5 Punish and Discipline: Race in the New Urban Space	107
6 The Borders of Globalization: Negotiating the Metropolis	143
7 Imperial Amnesia	177
Epilogue: Tracking Taxis, Worker Autonomy, and New Labor Strategies	205
Notes	233
Index	250

PREFACE TO THE CORNELL EDITION

Three significant events have happened since 2005 when this book was first published. (1) Starting in 2004, the city of New York began advancing the Taxi Technology Enhancement Program (TTE), which would require every yellow taxi in NYC to be fitted with a non-navigational Global Positioning System-based tracking system. Driver opposition to this system grew over the next three years, leading up to a series of strikes in September and October 2007. Even as we go to press, this battle continues. (2) In early 2007, the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA) became the first independent labor union to become a full member of the New York State Central Labor Council, a historic development with tremendous significance for the labor movement. (3) Finally, based on burgeoning interest and several taxi-organizing initiatives emerging throughout the United States, NYTWA along with the Taxi Workers Alliance of Pennsylvania organized a founding meeting of the Taxi Workers International (TWI) in March 2007.

All three dramatic events promise long-term effects. In many ways the intertwined nature of these events has given me a more complete understanding of the challenges the contemporary labor

For this edition I would like to acknowledge the debt I have gathered over the last three years. My deepest gratitude goes to the new members of the NYTWA Organizing Committee who joined us between 2004 and 2008: Beresford Simmons, Lakshman Abesekhara, Thomas Osam, Victor Salazar, and Mor Thiam. Also, a special thanks to Abdul Qayyum and Tipu Sultan for always being there for battle.

movement faces. Accordingly, this Cornell edition carries a new epilogue that not only describes these events and the actions that surrounded them but also attempts to synthesize them theoretically. The result, I hope, is a compelling conclusion to the book that will open up fresh debates within the labor movement.

DEDICATION: TWO HEROES

Since this book first appeared, we lost two of our most beloved organizers—Kevin Michael Fitzpatrick and Yilma Wolde Mariam. To both of them—a special shout out—Inquilab Zindabad! We have not yet learned how to walk without you.

Yilma Wolde Mariam was mercurial, erudite, hungry to debate, always on the prowl for the next person to awe with the sheer depth and perceptiveness of his incessant questions. A few months before he left us, Yilma rocked the organizing committee of the Alliance with an electrifying analysis of nihilism in the American working class—explicating through a series of vivid images the contemporary problems of the relationship between the white and new immigrant working classes. The pictures he painted were always larger than life.

Kevin Michael Fitzpatrick was dramatically different. His approach to life was somewhere between phlegmatic and sanguine—an approach captured so aptly in the lines Bhairavi Desai wrote after Kevin passed away: “May you be, beloved Kevin, where the poet meets the scientist to talk revolution.” Kevin *knew that he knew*, and it wasn’t that nothing fazed him but that nobody fazed him.

If Yilma’s wit was sharp, Kevin’s was sardonic; if Kevin carried people with him, Yilma hung back and listened. Yilma was our champion phone-banker. He could disarm anyone on the phone, and all of us sitting around would be either dumbstruck by the

brilliance of his responses or keeling over in laughter. That capacity to arm and disarm, irrespective of culture or language, was how we will remember Yilma. In today's fragmented and utilitarian world, Yilma was possibly one of the last true working class internationalists.

A whole generation of NYC taxi drivers knew Kevin as their FEMA hero when, after 9/11, he shouldered much of the work to help drivers get FEMA relief. He knew what it meant to stay in the battle for the long haul. The two books at his bedside when he passed away—one a commentary on Hegel and the other a book on the peoples' history of science—tell us much about him. His hunger for knowledge and his dedication to the liberation of the working class have few parallels. This book would never have been written without him, and in many ways, it is one he should have written himself.

There is a way in which the hurly-burly of politics and the rigors of a campaign don't allow us to stop and mourn fully, don't allow us to reconcile with this loss. Kevin and Yilma led the Taxi Alliance to the doorstep of a tremendous transformation and participated in it until their very last days. *Alvida*, comrades. A thousand flowers will bloom from the memories you have left behind.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book owes its existence entirely to the New York Taxi Workers Alliance and Bhairavi Desai, who has led the organization with rare vision and brilliance for all of its years of existence. It is not often that one has a chance to work with an organizer of such political clarity and intellectual depth and I am incredibly thankful for all that I have learned from her. In lockstep with Bhairavi have been a range of tremendously courageous and creative organizers—members of the Alliance's Organizing Committee, past and present, whom I have no proper way to thank: Rizwan Raja, Kurshid (Amer) Khan, and Tahir Sheik for teaching me to think about the taxi industry; Kevin Fitzpatrick for being what he is—a walking, talking organic New York City history book; Kulwinder Singh, Ghulam Rabbani, Abdul Qayyum, Sharanjit Singh, Akhtar Choudhury, Imran Hossain, Abdul Farooq, and Manjit Singh for the patience with which they took me along in the early days when I knew nothing of the industry; Saeed Ahmed, Mamnun Ul Huq, Ilyas Khan, Moiuddin Ahmed, and Javaid Tariq for the strength and conviction with which they led us during the years of early instability into the days of the strike; Mohammed Kazem, Nauroz Wein, Yilma Wolde Marian, Agha Saleem Osman, Tahir Siddiqui, Kasif Akhtar, and Chidibere Kamalu for keeping the connections between global politics and laboring in New York City alive in my mind all the time; Tasleem Khan, Maged Gabriel, Vivian Borges, Mohammed Ahmad, Surinder Walia, and Malik Majed for leading me deeper into the intrigue that lies behind the

TLC, garages, and brokers; Shomial Ahmad, Osman Chodhury, Chaumtoli Huq, and Bill Lindauer for keeping so many balls in play in the office and outside. But this list of names conveys little of the life that all of us created. A new world into which I would so gladly wake up each morning (or rather afternoon!). Bhairavi and the Organizing Committee have not just built a militant labor organization but a sensitive and nurturing space — one that so easily became my home.

There is always more than one story to tell about a book. The community of friends and comrades who have engaged me and created a world with me is too vast to name. And yet, there was a moment in 1997 when I thought I would never write this book—when I thought my days of reading and writing had come to an end because of a serious eye ailment. Raza Mir, Vamsi Vakulabharanam, Vijay Prashad, Lisa Armstrong, Sekhar Ramakrishnan, Sue Sussman, Maya Yagnik, Farah Hasan, Rahul De and Sharmila Chakravarty, Raju Rajan, Syeda Fatima, Kuldhir Bhati, Mona Chopra, Vivek Bald and Kym Ragusa, Gautam Premnath and Kasturi Ray, Himadeep Muppidi and Nellie Prabhu, Jagdish Parikh, Srikanth Bollam, Smriti Rao, Balaji and Suba Krishnan, Svetlana Vilanskaia, and Chris Chekuri and Radhika Lal saw me through the worst crisis in my life. Week after week they were there to talk, to read to me, to write and manage my e-mail, and just there to surround me. But there are two friends who took this task of “being there” far beyond any ordinary call of friendship. Hussain (Ali Mir) was there with me at every turn during that crisis and since. Thanks, Bhai. And later there was Pilar Hernandez, who refused to accept that I would not write. Every week she drove forty miles back and forth to sit me down and force me to record this book on tape. It was Pilar’s determination that made me take the idea of writing seriously again.

I have no idea where the process of recovering from an illness

ended, if it ever did, and where political reengagement began. The unflinching demand for a more complex politics that came from Aley Mathew, Ragini Shah, Prerana Reddy, Amita Swadhin, Prachi Patankar, Anjali Kamat, Sonia Arora, Svati Shah, Surabhi Kukke, Tejasvi Nagaraja, Nidhi Mirani, Linta Varghese, Marian Thambinayakam, Junaid Rana, Maya Sen, Satish Kolluri, Sangeeta Rao, Jawad Metni, Anand Roop Roy, Ayaz Ahmad, Prantik Saha, Saadia Toor, and Sonali Sathye has made me politically richer and given me a bunch of lifelong friends. At the same time the struggle against Hindutva outside India, which seemed so hopeless through the 1990s, was given new shape and direction by Mubeen Bolar, Girish Agarwal, Raja Harish Swamy, Kamala Visweswaran, Ra Ravishanker, Kamayani Swami, Chetan Bhatt, Anant Maringanti, Jayant Eranki, and Angana Chatterjee, with tremendous leadership from Shalini Gera. I have learned so much from all of you. In Amherst, Massachusetts, a new community of friends in Srirupa Roy and Lalit Vachani, Usha Zacharias, Nirupama Ravi, and Paula Chakravarty turned what would otherwise be a sterile space of granola-infested living into one charged with political engagement and camaraderie. At the Brecht, Liz Mestres, Sam Anderson, Merle Ratner, Liz Roberts, Nan Rubin, and Lincoln Van Sluytman opened up the world of universalist struggles that had been missing for so long. Liza Featherstone, a Brecht Forum comrade, was also the most engaged reader of this book and her contribution, along with that of Colin Robinson, to its final shape is huge. Also among those who helped read and edit the book and bring it to where it is now are Laura Secor, Samita Sinha, Lizzie Seidlin-Bernstein, Sarah Fan, and Nicole Lebo, and I thank them all for their help.

And as this community grew around me, there were some among them who became the cornerstones of intellectual and social sustenance: Saba Waheed, who became my most consistent

interlocutor and helped shape so many ideas; Rupal Oza and Ashwini Rao, who have been part of thinking through so many projects in diasporic politics; Shabnum Tejani, who never allowed the desire for community to die by reminding me of what honest intellectual work along with deeply held relationships could mean; Deepa Fernandes, who gave me a new world by teaching me how to create conversations from behind a microphone; and Ayca Cubukcu, who brought me back to the live connection between political theory and the daily work of social justice struggles.

Support came from India too—close friends and political comrades who, in the midst of lives in upheaval, still found the time to support me. Pradip Prabhu, Shiraz Balsara, Madhu, Dhodi, Brian Lobo, Priya Sreenivasa, and Meena Dhodade from Kashtakari Sanghtana; Aruna Roy, Shankar Singh, and Nikhil De of MKSS; Madhava Prasad and Janaki Nair, Gita Ramaswamy, Shabnam Hashmi, Anand Patwardhan, Simantini Dhuru, Humaira and Ashar Farhan, Vinod Pavarala and Aparna Rayaprol, Elahe Hip-toola, Azam and Asea Khan, Javed Anand, Teesta Setalvaad, Amirullah Khan and Saleema Rizvi, Jharana Jhaveri, Surinder and Sneha Jodhka, and Anuraag Singh were never too far away. And from different corners of the world, other old friends: Deepa and Pahai Kuo; Shubhra Gururani; my sister Binu and her family, Neaan, Nicole, and Pramod; my mum and Leela aunty; and my other family in Bangalore—Shruti, Madhu, Supriya, Prashant, Praveen, Baba, and Aayi—have all given such wonderful support.

And in the end, every person is easy to thank, except one's partner. There is nothing I can write here that will say everything that I feel for Sangeeta Kamat and what she has meant for me over the last eight years. She has been at the heart of it all—every discovery and every crisis, every struggle and moment of caring. To her, I owe a large part of what I am today.

PROLOGUE: THE DISTANCE BETWEEN TWO VICTORIES

MAY 5, 2004. Lahore Deli, Houston and Crosby Streets, New York City. 11 P.M.

"Aare yaar yeh ho hi nahi sakta," exclaimed Bashir Ahmed, with a look of disbelief. "This is simply impossible!" His short, stocky frame half rested on the door of his yellow cab, but his hands moved furiously.

"Kyon Bhai, mazaa aa raha hai?" "Hey, brothers, so has it been good?" Rizwan asked the small crowd that was gathered on the sidewalk outside the deli drinking chai—a brief break in the night shift, which had begun more than six hours ago.

Bashir looked at Rizwan. *"Ohhw! O bhai. Aap tho union wale hai. . . ."* he said, as he recognized Rizwan as a member of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA).¹ Bashir approached Rizwan and pumped his arm. The small crowd followed—some smiling at Rizwan, others shaking his hand or fraternally thumping him on the back.

The Alliance had just won a major victory: after eight months of negotiations with the mayor's office, the drivers had not only scored the fare increase they wanted, but they'd done so on advantageous terms. The drivers would likely take home 70 percent of the additional revenue, compared to the owners' 30 percent. It was the best split drivers had won since 1967. The previous fare hike had gone to the owners by 86 percent, with only 14 percent reaching the drivers' pockets.

Sadiq, a young man with the demeanor of one much older, was

the last of the group to reach Rizwan. He knew the Alliance well. "Brother," he began, "please thank Bhairavi on our behalf. . . . She is truly amazing."

Rizwan smiled at the way Sadiq said "Bhairavi": perfectly Punjabi, dropping all the heavy sounds, her name rolling off his tongue with a lilt. Bhairavi Desai was the director and lead organizer of the Alliance and one of its founding members. Rizwan nodded. "You're right," he said. "She has such a vision."

"And sheer hard work and dedication. . . . All of you in the Alliance deserve our gratitude," continued Sadiq, who viewed the fare increase as his due but knew well that it had come about only thanks to the Alliance's sustained battle with ownership and its allies.

Bashir was getting agitated. He had lost Rizwan's attention and he had questions. Fidgeting, he pointed in the general direction of his cab. "*O yaar . . . ye dabba daud raha hai . . . galti tho nahi . . .*" He was worried, and his face showed it. The meter, he was saying, is running too fast. Are you sure there is no error? Rizwan's smile grew wider. "*Na . . . nahi,*" he replied, "there is no error. . . . It's just as it should be." He turned to the rest of the crowd and explained his logic.

"See, we used to start at \$2.00 and go up 30 cents every fifth of a mile. So by the time your meter went past the \$3.00 mark you had traveled almost a whole mile. Now you start at \$2.50 and the meter goes up 40 cents every fifth of a mile. And so you have just started your run and it's way past \$3.00. It feels incredible to those of us who have seen the old meter. It's the combined effect of a hike in the base fare and the per-mile rate."

Harjit, an old, lean Sikh driver who had followed Rizwan's logic to the end, nodded. "*Aap log sab union member hai?*" he asked, turning and surveying the crowd, which was growing in size, to see how many of them would acknowledge membership in the Alliance.

“This is their second big win. First they got us the FEMA money, now the fare hike. We should not just be thanking them, we should be joining them in droves.” His gaze rested on Rizwan after lingering for a moment or two each on those who had not said they were Alliance members. “How many members are we?” he asked.

“Just over five thousand,” Rizwan answered. “And thank you, brother, for mentioning the FEMA victory. Everybody forgets about it.”

Harjit and Rizwan referred to the mass mobilization of taxi drivers in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001. The city had shut down from Broadway to the airports. Tourism had died and swaths of Manhattan were closed to traffic. In the first four months after September 11, most drivers lost between 60 and 80 percent of their daily income. Suddenly, basic necessities—rent, medical care, car payments—slid beyond reach. Bankruptcy was widespread among the drivers. An Urban Justice Center (UJC) survey found that six out of every ten drivers surveyed had amassed debt between \$5,000 and \$10,000 as a direct result of September 11. Yet, following the lead of then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) declined even to entertain disaster assistance claims from taxi drivers.

Refused entry into the Disaster Assistance Center set up on the piers in Manhattan, driver after driver came to the Alliance office to complain. Their exclusion from the city’s assistance programs was baffling. They had lost an enormous amount of business, suffering the impact of the closure of a number of sectors of New York City life.² By December 2001, when statistics became available, almost every taxi garage and broker had collected emergency assistance but drivers still had not.

The disparity reflected something larger about the country’s response to tragedy. The spoils, at least as far as the taxi industry was concerned, had been grabbed by the white middle class and elite.

The wave of random arrests and detentions that was unleashed across America, and especially in urban centers like New York, clearly targeted South Asian and Middle Eastern working-class men. It was also this specific segment of the working class—the immigrant driver—that had been excluded from disaster assistance.

Slowly, the drivers began to mobilize. Their effort picked up steam in early 2002 as the drivers' anger overtook their fear. In March 2002 the Alliance organized a public hearing at Hunter College to which it invited FEMA officials along with a variety of public and private charity officials. The 300-seat auditorium was full an hour before the hearing began. One driver after another described his post-September 11 experience. By the end of the hearing, a crowd of close to 4,000 drivers had gathered, overflowing onto the street. FEMA and Taxi and Limousine Commission (TLC) officials looked stunned. Within weeks, FEMA announced that it was reopening the application process for an all-new Rental and Mortgage Assistance program. The Alliance held a series of FEMA clinics at the airports and at its office on how to apply for assistance. More than 2,000 drivers participated. It was the first successful mobilization against the post-9/11 American state, and it was planned and executed by an almost entirely immigrant workforce union.

Building on the momentum and success of the FEMA mobilization, the Alliance began to develop its livable wage campaign. The economic logic of this campaign for the taxi industry was simple. Drivers do not own the right to put a taxi on the street; that right is almost entirely monopolized by fleet garages and brokerage houses. Drivers lease taxis from these fleets and brokers, and then they drive to pay the rent on their cabs. Only after they make the rent in fares do drivers begin to earn money for themselves. This was hard enough to do pre-9/11, but, in early 2003, close to a year

and a half after the September 11 attacks, most drivers estimated that business was still down by around 10 percent to 20 percent. At an average, drivers earned less than \$500 per week—working in excess of 72 hours each week—while the garage owners and brokers collected, again at an average, in excess of \$1,000 per week on each cab. A driver thus earned barely above minimum wage levels for a twelve-hour workday; the fundamental reason for this was simply that owners took away too large a chunk of the revenue earned by drivers through their lease and car payments.

Since the late 1960s, when the AFL-CIO union representing taxi drivers sold out workers' interests to the bosses, the drivers had been getting a raw deal on wages. Whenever the owners sought to impose a fare hike, they would launch a public relations campaign arguing that "hard-working drivers need a raise," but then they would pocket the proceeds of the fare hike by dramatically raising the lease on cabs.

In mid-2003, the Alliance made its final decision on its livable wage position and submitted a "petition for rule making" to the TLC. The demand was simple: a fare hike along with a reduction in the lease rate. This strategy, the Alliance explained at a press conference in September 2003, was the only way to create a livable wage for drivers; raising the fare alone would do nothing. The Alliance backed up its demands with a detailed report on lease rates as of April 2003 and followed this up with a survey establishing average base driver incomes for the industry. The survey report, called "Unfare," was published by the Urban Justice Center.³ Meanwhile, as winter approached, the mobilization gathered momentum with large-scale outreach at the airports and during shift changes. The Alliance threatened to strike, and drivers girded up for a long one. No start date had been announced, but the rumor mill spun and the press began hinting at an impending Thanksgiving Day strike. Worried, the mayor's office called the Alliance.

The city regulates the amount of rent that owners can charge drivers with something called a lease cap—a set maximum a fleet or broker can charge a driver to lease a cab. The Alliance would not discuss a fare hike with the city unless a reduction in the lease cap was on the table. By late December, both sides had more or less agreed upon the rate of fare increase—26 percent—but the negotiations were stalled on the point of the lease caps. The owners had proposed a 23 percent fare increase and 23 percent lease cap increase—an offer unacceptable to the Alliance.

By late 2003, it was not just the negotiations that were stalled. There appeared to also be a limit to how the issue would be reported by the media. A large number of stories about the negotiations had appeared both in print and on television. Without exception, all of these reports followed the same story line: an image of a hard-working immigrant driver who deserved a raise, and a range of passenger opinions—some of which endorsed the idea that drivers deserved a raise and others which stated that the increase would hurt the average passenger. One television reporter even told the Alliance off the record that she had to search for more than half an hour to find a passenger who didn't support the increase but had to do so to make the story "balanced."

More important, there was a third element of this story that was just not being reported—that the owners charged a rent and that if the rent were to go up with the fare, then drivers would get nothing. This silence was inexplicable given the fact that the Alliance never held back in specifying this relation between the lease rate and the fare increase as its most critical issue, but the media seemed to prefer blocking it out. Something had to be done.

The Alliance went back to the drawing board and again began an intense driver mobilization effort. In a rain-soaked demonstration outside the TLC's offices on Rector Street in October 2003, driver anger at the commission and the mayor's office welled up.

The Alliance renewed its call for a strike if necessary. The first signs of a change in the media's stance came in a story in *Newsday* that acknowledged the link between lease rates, fare increases, and driver incomes. This was followed by an editorial in the *Daily News* that surprised everyone. The paper, thus far an unlikely ally of immigrant workers, called for a fare increase with "every penny of the increase going to the drivers."⁴ The *New York Times*, in contrast, called for a fare increase that it conceded hard-working drivers deserved, but insisted that owners should be permitted to raise their rents as well, by an unspecified amount.⁵

With the strike call renewed and with the question of lease rates forced into public debate, the negotiations began to move forward again. In the end, on April 23, 2004, the Alliance agreed to a 26 percent fare increase with an 8 percent lease cap hike. The margin between the lease cap hike and the fare hike was sufficient to ensure an average 70–30 split in favor of the driver. Drivers and organizers knew there would still be battles to fight, especially with the fleet garages, who would try to squeeze this split into something closer to 50–50. But the favorable terms of the agreement would send the Alliance into battle with strong odds.

The FEMA settlement and the recent fare hike were dramatic successes for the Alliance, but they were not the union's first endeavors. The Alliance actually cemented its reputation as a quick and aggressive mobilizer with a series of strikes that brought New York City to a halt in May 1998. At that time, the Alliance was a fledgling organization with approximately 500 members. Though the strikes were in large part a success, the results were less clear.⁶ The Alliance had not yet built its capacity to sustain a mobilization. Six years and five thousand members later, the Alliance has won two successive victories—one against a federal agency and the second against the taxi industry's ownership and the mayoral agency

that oversees the industry, the Taxi and Limousine Commission. During those six years, the foundations laid by the 1998 strikes had been consolidated, built on through many campaigns, large and small.

When I began working with the Alliance in 1996, I had no understanding of the industry. Over the last eight years, different pieces of a complicated picture have come together. One is the story I started with in 1996—one that you may also have constructed as you sat in the backseats of yellow cabs, having quick and fragmentary conversations with drivers. Slowly parsing the names you see on the hack licenses displayed in the Plexiglas partitions of cabs, you may have noticed that most drivers in New York are Third World immigrants from Pakistan, Haiti, Bangladesh, Egypt, Senegal, India. From fleeting conversation, you may have gathered that most drivers don't own their taxis but instead lease them from garages and brokers for more than \$100 a day, and that they are required to have two licenses—one a chauffeur license issued by the Department of Motor Vehicles, and one a "hack license," issued by the Taxi and Limousine Commission. (To earn a hack license, which a driver is required by law to display in his cab's partition, the driver must submit to eighty hours of classes and testing in map reading, English, etiquette, and taxi industry rules.)

If you are particularly curious, you might have also asked a driver what he or she thinks of the TLC or the garage owners. You would most likely have been told that the TLC is fundamentally antidriver, that the fleet bosses are millionaires, that the TLC courts are a sham, and that the garage owners are cheats.

From these passing conversations you may have put together the story of New York City yellow cabs: a fast and efficient transport system symbolic of the city, driven by Third World immigrant drivers looking for better lives than the ones available in their

countries of origin. You may have concluded that, like their predecessors, the Italian or Irish drivers, these immigrants can expect to save money over a few years and move on to greener pastures. This is in fact the official story—one that allows us to recognize in the person behind the wheel of our taxi a shared aspiration to success and the simple dictums of hard work and diligence.

This book tells the other story, framed by two key moments in the history of taxi drivers' organizing work. It begins on May 13, 1998, when 24,000 New York yellow cab drivers went on strike, and it ends on May 3, 2004, when the New York Taxi Workers Alliance secured the biggest victory for drivers in over three decades. In recording this story of the evolution of driver power in the industry, my message is a simple one: that political victories are always won by long-term and sustained work, by building organizations and their bases brick by brick. In some part, then, this is the story of that incremental construction.

In describing the Alliance's organizing work, however, other stories emerge from the background, demanding to be told. If we can answer the question of why Mayor Giuliani and the rest of the city were able to ignore the collective call of drivers in 1998, maybe then we can understand why Bashir Ahmed finds it difficult to believe that the fare hike is real. Maybe we can really discover why a particular driver is in the United States rather than in his native Pakistan, and why it is that nearly all of New York's taxi drivers, restaurant workers, and parking lot attendants are Third World immigrants. Maybe we can figure out what exactly Giuliani was doing to New York City during the eight years of his mayorship. And maybe we can understand why Third World immigrant labor patterns are more aptly compared with those of African Americans than with Italian or Irish Americans. Maybe we can decide if multiculturalism, that wonderfully colorful umbrella under whose shade we welcome all the immigrants, is a reality or a fiction.

Maybe we can fathom why so many of us are silent when the INS and FBI tear down the doors of hundreds of impoverished and innocent immigrants in Midwood, Brooklyn. A hundred maybes. Maybe we can decide on the political choices we need to make and the future we want to construct.

ROOTS OF VICTORY:
THE TAXI STRIKES OF 1998

A LITTLE AFTER 1:00 P.M. on May 3, 1998, Saeed Ahmed, an organizer for the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA), pulled into LaGuardia Airport's Delta-US Airways taxi holding lot. Nestled between the Delta and US Airways terminals, the holding lot is hidden from public view by the looming terminal buildings and the elevated ramps that connect the departure levels to the road below. To a passenger stepping off the line and into a cab, which then speeds through the airport complex's many ascending and descending ramps, the holding lot appears only as a passing peal of bright yellow down below. But it is from lots like this one that cabs appear, as if by magic, in front of the terminals just as passengers arrive.¹

As Saeed eased his cab into the Delta holding lot, he noted that it was full: sixteen columns of yellow cabs, some 150 drivers, waiting for passengers. He parked his car and walked to the front of the lot, where he silently handed flyers to the drivers getting coffee at the food truck. The flyers had a simple message printed in big bold letters under the banner of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance: 24-HOUR STRIKE. Below that, in smaller print: May 13, 1998. As Saeed walked up and down the columns of cars dispensing flyers, a cheer rose. The drivers who had gathered around the food truck began calling for a longer strike.

"*Oye Saeed,*" an older driver from Faisalabad, Saeed's hometown in Pakistan, yelled across the lot in a Punjabi full of the tonal

lilt so peculiar to that part of the subcontinent, “*yeh ek din da strike ki hai?*” (“Is it just a one-day strike?”)

Saeed nodded. “Just one day, yes. For now.”

He spoke to drivers standing in clusters of three or four, urging them not only to go on strike but to help get out the word. “Come by the office,” he urged them. “Pick up as many flyers as you need.”

In less than ten minutes the lot was abuzz with animated conversation, as drivers who had never before spoken to one another reflected together on the possibility of a strike.

HOLDING CONVERSATIONS

The holding lot is normally a quiet place, and sometimes the silence is a despairing one—especially on days like this one, when a few delayed flights combined with the routine mid-afternoon lull leads to a surfeit of cabs. Drivers find themselves waiting an hour, sometimes even two, for passengers. A couple of lost hours can cost a driver dearly, but such risks are a fact of daily life. Many drivers use the downtime to stretch their legs or grab a snack at the food truck, which serves overpriced, dried-out samosas and rolls sticky with stale oil from sitting on a hot plate for hours. The drivers sometimes joke that if anybody ever invented a way of screwing up a tea bag, the holding lot food truck would probably patent it. But, stuck in the lot, many drivers grudgingly shell out a dollar for bad coffee. Some prefer to stay in their cabs for a quick nap in the backseat if the day is not oppressively hot or biting cold. If it's not too windy, others will step out of their cars and spread newspapers across their hoods to read. The holding lot is like a badly maintained public park without the shade of the trees, a place where drivers who would rather be working have little choice but to relax and catch up with each other. And if the moment of

asking after each other lasts too long and the lines don't move, it can become a deeply depressing place.

An hour into Saeed's work in the holding lot, two more Alliance organizers, Javaid Tariq and Bhairavi Desai, arrived. Bhairavi's arrival created a stir. Many drivers knew her as the one person they could talk with, someone who could answer their questions. In the two years she had been working as the Alliance's only full-time organizer, Bhairavi had built a powerful reputation among drivers as a fearless, effective, and committed organizer.

Discussions grew more animated as the crowd swelled around Bhairavi. Within minutes she was relieved of more than half of the five hundred flyers she had brought into the lot. Drivers came up and took them in stacks. "For my garage this evening," a driver would say, taking charge of fifty flyers. By late afternoon Alliance organizers began arriving in groups. The lines were moving now, but every driver entering the lot was leaving with a flyer.

"*Idea tho sahi hai,*" a frail sardar driver told Saeed, "*lekin, yeh sab karengi* strike?" His eyes moved across the lot as he asked whether Saeed believed that all the drivers would strike. Saeed nodded.

Amid the excitement, there were also many drivers whose only reaction to the flyer was silence. They watched and listened as their fellow drivers worked the idea through: Why should we strike? What will the strike bring us? For how many days should we take action? Is one day enough? The silence was a sign that not everybody was engaged enough to offer an opinion. "It's our responsibility . . . to each other," Saeed answered. Later, reporting back at the Alliance office, he said "*Kaam shuru hua hai . . . kuch mat poochau ki kya hoga,*" explaining that at the end of day one, everything was still up in the air.

Back in Manhattan, Javaid Tariq and I met up just before his shift ended. Our task was to monitor the CB radio. Javaid had just come into Manhattan after his brief visit to the LaGuardia holding

lot. His face was flushed with excitement. "*Aare Biju Bhai, kafi shor mach gaya hai,*" he said, as he told me about the lively discussion that had unfolded at LaGuardia, especially after Bhairavi had arrived.

Javaid had been driving yellow taxis for six years when he first came to an Alliance meeting. An occasional photographer, an undying romantic, and a terribly gentle soul, he wore a sixties-style ponytail. I had joined the Alliance as a volunteer organizer a few weeks after Bhairavi had started full time. Javaid, Kulwinder, Tahir, Yunus, Manjit, Moiuddin, and Kursheed had all come in the immediate months that followed.

I'm sure that for many of the founding activists, my interest in organizing immigrant yellow-cab drivers was a bit of an enigma: a professor of business whose specialty was computers didn't fit the standard image of a labor organizer. Many of the early conversations focused on building trust more than anything else. Bhairavi's commitment, her capacity to create spaces where such conversations were possible, and her clear vision for the organization had been critical in forging these early relationships.

Javaid hesitated a moment before continuing his summary. "It's a good start, really good, but you will hear, there is some confusion too," he said, then turned up the volume on his CB radio. For a brief moment it was only static. Then the CB crackled and we landed in the middle of an ongoing conversation. A raspy voice burst out in Punjabi: "*Oye beerya . . . chotta da haalat karab hai. . .*" A pause and then he continued, "*Bas strike di baat chalriai. . .*" I looked to Javaid for a translation. He smiled, knowing what had confused me. *Chotta* just means small, so the driver's statement that things were not good at *chotta* made little sense to me. "*Chotta* is LaGuardia," he explained, "and *Badda* (big) is JFK." It was apparent that in the crowded lots at LaGuardia the strike was the biggest discussion piece.