

India: Agitating On Wheels

Thursday 8 June 2023, by [CHAUHAN Anjali](#) (Date first published: 7 June 2023).

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The demonstrations began when Blinkit rolled out its new payout structure for delivery workers, under which the minimum payout per delivery was reduced to Rs 15 (USD 0.18) per delivery. The workers were earlier paid a monthly salary, which was later brought down to a 'per order' payment of Rs 50, then Rs 25 and a few weeks back, it came down to Rs 15. The revised structure also bases incentives on the distance covered to execute the order— a policy commonly known as 'effort'-based pay. As a result, Blinkit delivery workers are now set to earn Rs 600-700 a day (USD 7.27 - USD 8.48) as opposed to Rs 1,200 (USD 14.54) before.

Since April 10, 2023, areas such as the capital, Delhi and NCR region, Noida, Greater Noida, Faridabad, Ghaziabad, and Gurugram, among many others, have become sites of workers' demonstration and agitation whose livelihoods lie in danger due to the wage cut and policy alteration by Blinkit. For almost a week, the app showed services as "temporarily unavailable" as hundreds of delivery workers were on strike against the policy changes.

The protesting delivery workers also joined the enormous demonstration and rally on May Day. The rally comprising various trade unions across the country with workers and allies, marched through the lanes of Old Delhi from Ramleela Maidan to Town Hall, Chandni Chowk, Delhi, where it took the shape of demonstration and meeting, giving collective calls for furthering the labour movement to put an end to the exploitation of workers across the country. Workers were raising the red flag, playing cards of "Bring all workers under the ambit of labour laws", "Register all workers across all categories", and "End contractual work", among others, along with slogans of "Long Live May Day", "Long Live Revolution" were raised.

The resistance also took the digital route by doing a Twitter storm on April 16. Numerous people varying from academics, activists, journalists and students, among others, along with organisations like App Karmchari Ekta Union, All India Central Council of Trade Unions, South Asian Solidarity, Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation and various gig workers unions extended their solidarity in support of delivery workers with the hashtag #StandwithBlinkitWorkers. [1]

The extreme discontent among the workers is fueling the movement. India has witnessed consistent and firm worker protests and strikes in the gig economy. For food delivery workers, Zomato faced [massive delivery worker strikes](#) due to reduced payouts in 2019. In 2020, Swiggy's delivery workers [staged protests](#) in Chennai to demand better pay and transparent incentive policies.

For the ride-hailing industry in India, [Ola and Uber](#) have also seen similar unrest and

demonstrations over better pay, incentives, and working conditions. Beyond delivery and ride-hailing, Urban Company, India's largest home services provider, experienced [waves of protests](#) by workers due to unfair labour practices in 2021.

which is steadily gaining momentum to expose the neoliberal assumptions – such as assured development through entrepreneurship, increased provisions of choice in work, and a competitive market system as the only viable option for economic growth – passed as eternal truths for the masses.

Life and Livelihood At Risk

A National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog report on "[India's Booming Gig and Platform Economy](#)" has estimated that about 47 per cent of the gig work is in medium-skilled jobs, about 22 per cent in high-skilled, and about 31 per cent in low-skilled jobs. Further, it estimates that in 2020-21, 7.7 million workers were engaged in the gig economy. The gig workforce is expected to expand to 23.5 million workers by 2029-30. This brings us to the expansive nature of the present unfolding crisis.

Deepak, a Blinkit delivery worker who works in the Rana Pratab Bagh area of Delhi, told me,

"Earlier, we earned 1,000-1,200rs after working for 8 hours. After this policy change for working the same duration, we will earn around 600rs. All this happened over 1.5 years. They say that our delivery rate will increase according to the distance travelled. But most of the orders we get between the 1-1.5km radius. They are only fooling us. There are a lot of conditions at work now that we do not understand. That is why we are striking. We want to work on a salaried basis so that we can earn a decent living for our families."

He further added about safety issues:

"There is no head or senior here. Even if some accident or unfortunate incident happens, no senior still come here. In the case of accidents, we are compensated only when we have a bill from a government hospital or dispensary. How can you look for only a government hospital when you are lying in the middle of the road with an arm or leg broken?"

These testimonies signify a sharp contrast between the lived realities of platform delivery workers and how they are shown in advertisements as happy-looking delivery "partners" smoothly delivering happiness at your doorsteps.

These platforms create a mirage of flexibility and autonomy: workers can choose when to work, have freedom from their boss, come and leave at their will, and work at their pace. Consumers find service providers "on-demand" and with no binding relation assumed between workers and platforms.

But the actual story is rather different. I asked Rakesh Kumar, another Blinkit delivery worker, about the claims of the company in the name of "freedom" and "autonomy" of workers. He said,

"All this is only on paper. The reality is that once we come here to work, immediately our schedules are made. Even if orders are beyond the schedule, we are forced to not leave without completing them. We are threatened that if we do not abide, then the next morning, we will not be able to work, and our IDs will be blocked. We are often strictly told by TLs (Team Leaders) that we cannot leave before 12 am or even sometimes 2 am.

I'm a sole earner of a family of 6 members, and to make a living for us, I have to work 14-16 hours a day. If they (company) ever get to experience what we go through, doing our work when it is raining, in extreme hot and cold weather, then they will get to know!"

When asked about his earning prior to and after the wage cut, he lamented that he used to earn up to Rs 1,200-1,400 a day, but now it has been reduced to mere Rs 800.

In an email response to [ThePrint's](#) queries, Blinkit said that they provide medical and life insurance to gig workers on their platform; "partners" are free to choose when they work and for how long, and their earnings increase with the number of gigs they take up. And that all active gig workers can reach out to their support team through the app, where their normal response time is under 1 minute.

However, when I tried to confirm this with a delivery worker who wishes not to be named, they said the pressure to deliver in 10 minutes, as per the company's policy, often leads to accidents and injuries to workers. However, if workers encounter accidents, ill health or family emergencies, and do not come to work for 2-3 days even after informing the company, still their IDs will be blocked, and sometimes their accounts will be permanently banned.

Unionising Gig Workers

The All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU) has been at the forefront of gig worker organising. Abhishek, General Secretary of the AICCTU Delhi, shared with me how the union has been organising gig workers under App Karamchari Ekta Union.

The App Karamchari Ekta Union has worked extensively in the Delhi NCR area and has been leading Blinkit workers' protests since then.

To begin with, organisers closely observed the pattern of work that gig workers performed across platforms. Having gained a firm hold of the issues, they started tracing the locations where workers could be found on the street.

This is followed by dialogue with the workers, discussing their conditions and the internal functioning of the platforms. A foundation of trust was built through constant support and compassion, and from here came into existence the App Karamchari Ekta Union.

Surya Prakash coordinates the App Karamchari Ekta Union told me about what she has found in her organising,

"Firstly, due to the part-time nature of the gig work, organising workers gets even more difficult. Secondly, as most of them lead an economically challenging life, (we need to) think about how long they can afford to protest. Every day they protest counts as a wage-able day gone. However small that wage might be. Anyway, after the 1990s, unionisation has become difficult due to various reasons like liberalisation and globalisation, and added to that, the present issue is about an unorganised sector which makes it doubly challenging. But the way the resistance is taking shape and unions are firming their feet, a revolutionary change is anticipated in the broader labour movement in India".

Lackluster Responses

The App Karamchari Ekta Union sent a memorandum of demands to the Union Labour Minister on

April 27, demanding all App-based employees be granted the status of permanent worker of their company concerned, 8 hours of work per day to be fixed with a guaranteed wage of at least Rs. 26,000 (USD 315) per month and ensure social security through necessary laws.

There is not yet any response from the government. Because of this, many workers gave in and rejoined the company. A worker who wanted his identity to be kept anonymous lamented, "What can we do? We have families to feed, children to be sent to school. We don't have any option".

On April 19, Blinkit forwarded a statement that it has "implemented a new payout structure" that compensates delivery partners "proportionally to the effort they exerted" in making the delivery, adding that this is a voluntary exercise. Their teams are on-site to address any questions from "partners". This new payout, firstly, came about without prior intimation. Secondly, it immediately came into force and persisted despite a strong reaction by the workers.

A member of App Karmchari Ekta Union said that Blinkit had blocked the app-based IDs of some delivery workers who participated in the protests. Their names were removed from the company's database, and they were asked to give a written guarantee that they would not participate in the strike.

The National Secretary General of the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers told [Times of India](#) that they are considering holding pan-India protests if their demands are not considered by Blinkit Company.

Facing huge backlash, Zomato organised a meeting with striking workers of its grocery delivery platform Blinkit along with the labour department, Gurugram. However, the meeting ended in a deadlock. A labour department official requesting anonymity told Newsclick that the Blinkit management rejected the workers' demand of restoring the previous delivery payment of Rs 25-Rs 50 and presented a proposal that offers a bonus of Rs 500 to a worker who completes 100 deliveries per week and Rs 1,000 for 200 deliveries. The workers rejected this proposal, and this issue has been lying dormant since.

A Global Movement

Delivery workers have been risking their lives to ensure the supply of essentials reaches millions of households during the pandemic. However, their pain, labour and grievances have neither been acknowledged nor compensated. Against this backdrop, the Blinkit strike signifies a crucial turning point as the delivery partners have united to make their voices heard and demand due recognition and better treatment.

Strikes and protests by workers in the gig economy are not unique or limited to India. In the past few years, we witnessed similar incidents across the globe, particularly in the United States. In 2018, Amazon warehouse workers in Europe went on strike during the busiest shopping day, demanding better pay and working conditions. The strike brought attention to the plight of workers and led to a renewed focus on their welfare. Similarly, in 2020, Instacart workers in the United States staged a nationwide strike demanding hazard pay and protective gear amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The pressure eventually led the company to provide additional benefits, such as paid sick leave and bonuses for frontline workers.

The world is witnessing consistent and conscious erosion of labour laws, continuous contractualisation and outsourcing of work under the daunting shadow of neoliberal capitalism. The irony is not lost on calling workers "partners" when the only thing company manages to share with them is the burden of unchecked labour and tiresome work discipline, scrapping of labour laws,

increasing work hours with decreasing wages and institutionalised attack on those who protest or take efforts to unionise. These common trends are taking place throughout the world, pointing towards a dangerous future for workers, but are also increasingly met with resistance.

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P.S.

Asian Labour Review

<https://labourreview.org/agitating-on-wheels/>

Footnotes

[1] See social media posts:

<https://twitter.com/cpimliberation/status/1647588678037024768?t=ixVB4UaKv1FCSsSsrgSRqA&s=08>;

https://twitter.com/AICCTU_tweets/status/1647581288659034117?t=y3PDKyubdbw0km_H6oRsnQ&s=08;

https://twitter.com/Soumyahere99/status/1647587040521867265?t=DjA9Xi-_2fCg4SHKiC4sEA&s=08;

<https://twitter.com/clifroz/status/1647584093222346753?t=jWSjKB5SPaYewU65PCBmvA&s=08>;

https://twitter.com/ake_union/status/1648545071929622529?t=UUNnfZgp4QnlI11XzSm_KQ&s=08