



# LOW PAY, NO SUPPORT: Sri Lanka Delivery Drivers Fight for Worker Rights



“We are not employees of Uber; according to the company, we are just consumers of their service. This means the company doesn’t concern itself with our leave or safety. We don’t have any rights.”

– Jayasinghe Lanka,\* 52, seven-year Uber driver



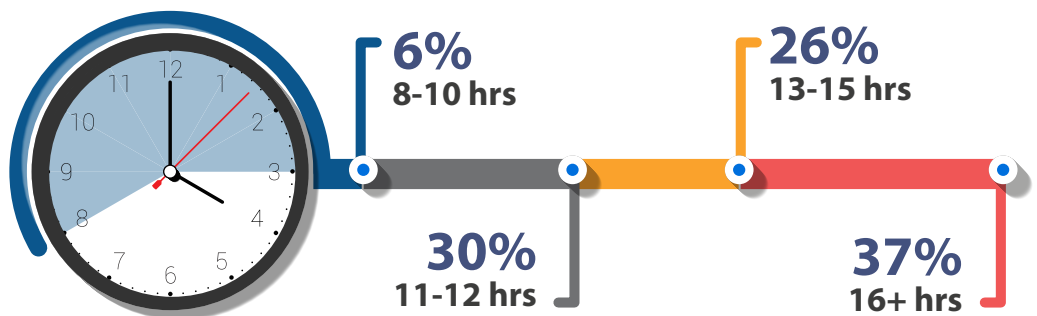
As in many countries, the gig economy in Sri Lanka is expanding, spurred in part by job loss during the COVID pandemic and the country’s severe economic crisis. Sri Lanka’s app-based taxi drivers and delivery workers are classified as freelancers or self-employed workers, an independent worker status outside labor regulation. They are not covered by hard-won labor laws that mandate a minimum wage, social protections, and the right to join or form a union and bargain collectively. The Solidarity Center surveyed and interviewed<sup>1</sup> Sinhalese and Tamil platform workers in Colombo, Sri Lanka, to learn about the conditions they are working to change in the country’s growing informal economy.

App-based drivers and delivery workers shared their everyday struggles of being “managed” by algorithmic platforms that determine how they get paid and reported that they sometimes get cheated out of hard-earned wages. They also indicated earning less than what they previously did for the same jobs, even as inflation is pushing up the cost of fuel and other business expenses. Drivers and deliverers reported that the companies behind these platforms take little responsibility for providing a living wage, job safety or basic benefits like health care and sick leave.

## Low Pay Drives Long Hours

Union contracts establish reasonable work hours and breaks that protect workers’ health and safety and guard against exploitation. A union backing can ensure employers respect internationally established worker rights, enabling app-based taxi drivers and delivery workers to earn decent wages without unreasonably long hours. While platform workers reported attempting to organize themselves into unions, they face obstacles from the absence of a regulatory environment and also resistance from employers.

**93% of those surveyed work 11 or more hours daily, and many work 16 hours or more each day.**



# App-based Taxi Drivers and Delivery Workers Share Their Experiences

**Abdul Illias, a 50-year-old father of three who drives passengers for PickMe and Uber, describes the economic challenges:**

“The money I earn each day is just enough to cover that day’s expenses; most of it goes toward petrol and other vehicle expenses. It’s not sufficient to save for tomorrow, so we must continue working daily to manage for the next day. And we don’t have any rights when we get sick. They mentioned an insurance policy, but I haven’t seen anyone who successfully claimed it, except for workers who had accidents. Regular illnesses aren’t covered. In the past, my income was enough to support my family and cover our basic needs. However, when we compare living and fuel expenses today, it has become difficult to manage.”

**Long hours for low pay leave little time or money for platform drivers to spend on leisure activities**

**32%** | **and** | **55%**  
of transport and delivery drivers spend **nothing** on leisure activities | 5,000 rupees (\$17) **or less** on leisure in a typical month.

## No Support for the Injured or Sick

None of the drivers or deliverers surveyed or interviewed receive vacation or sick pay. They work long hours and rush between deliveries, risking their safety, because if they do not, the app—via the company—punishes them by lowering pay. When drivers or deliverers are injured, they receive no compensation from their employers and often do not even receive a phone call.

**Ayomi, a 38-year-old bicycle delivery driver for Uber Eats, shared her story:**

“I have three dependents in my family, and my mother is sick. I also often fall ill, so much of my money goes toward treatments for both me and my mother.

I am not satisfied with the safety of our work. We are on the roads for 10–12 hours a day, and we have no support if we get into accidents. In December last year, I had an accident where both my hands were broken. I was bedridden for nearly six months. The company did nothing. The company expects us to be admitted to a private hospital for treatment to receive a larger [insurance] payout, but we can’t do that; we don’t have that kind of money.

Because of the accident, my hands aren’t functioning properly. At the very least, the company should call to check on us.”

# Bait and Switch, Wage Theft and Disregard for Worker Safety

Platform companies' apps do much more than match customers with drivers and determine correct delivery orders. They calculate drivers' and deliverers' wages, determine what routes they should take and penalize them based on often unknowable determinations. In Sri Lanka, like elsewhere, companies offer higher rates and take low commissions to attract workers, then increase commissions (sometimes called "take-rates") and change the algorithms over time to erode earnings.

Passenger and delivery drivers have witnessed this change. They also say that apps often report lower distance per job than recorded by their odometer, which means drivers and deliverers are paid less than they should be.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS



**Jayasinghe Lanka**

"There is a difference between the actual distance and what the app indicates. I've observed that Uber reduces 100 meters for every kilometer. So, when we travel 10 kilometers, it automatically reduces it by one kilometer and shows it as nine kilometers. Uber also mentions an estimated arrival time, but it's difficult to reach the destination within the time indicated in the app due to road conditions and traffic.

I joined Uber when it first started in Sri Lanka. They painted a picture of paradise for us. Now, they are exploiting Uber drivers. The company isn't paying us directly. It connects customers with drivers through the app, and we pay them a percentage for each ride."



**Ayomi**

"When we pick up an order, it sometimes shows nearly 6 kilometers, but the company only pays us for 4.5 kilometers. This happens eight or nine times a day."



**P. Karunaratna**

"The rules and regulations are much different now than when I first joined Uber Eats and PickMe, and even the payment is much different. The daily income is only enough for that day. We don't have any opportunity to save money or do anything extra. I work 12–15 hours a day and never take leave unless I get sick. Otherwise, I can't manage with the current economic situation. I think the government should intervene in this sector and establish regulations. Otherwise, companies like Uber and PickMe will always benefit while we get nothing."

# Challenges Compounded for Women Drivers

App-based taxi drivers and delivery workers work long hours for often minimum wages while facing safety risks every day—and these issues are compounded for women platform workers, who also experience sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence on the job.

**Chiththara is 41 years old and supports her mother with her pay as an Uber Eats delivery driver. She shared the unique challenges women in this sector face:**

“It is much more challenging for women. We face health and safety issues, and when we wait for orders, we don’t have a proper facility nearby for sanitary needs. We work during the night, and even though they know a woman will pick up the order, [the app] still sends us to faraway areas. The app selecting main roads instead of smaller ones would improve our safety. They should be more mindful of the roads they choose.

The company’s rules and regulations are changing; payments have decreased significantly. I work 12 hours a day, 28 days a month to earn 120,000 rupees (\$395). We also lack any social security benefits.”

## Forming Unions and Advocating for Change

While the rapid increase in such jobs offers millions of workers additional avenues to earn money, the app-based economy also offers opportunities for employer exploitation through low wages and an absence of job safety, health care and other social protections. Sri Lanka drivers and deliverers are fighting back, as a growing movement of app-based workers joins together to challenge a business model that allows companies to profit while workers behind those profits struggle to access basic worker rights and receive a living wage.



“We are working to build strong collective bargaining power to negotiate better terms and conditions. We encourage app workers to join the trade union and participate actively in its activities, like advocating for safe and healthy working conditions, including measures to prevent workplace injuries and harassment. We promote a work-life balance and flexibility for platform workers and address issues of occupational stress and mental health challenges.”

– **Charith Attanapola, president of the Sri Lanka App-Workers Union (SLAWU)**

\* Workers’ names were changed to protect their privacy.

<sup>1</sup> The Solidarity Center conducted face-to-face surveys of 100 workers in September and October 2023, and interviews with additional workers in August 2024. Participants received compensation for time spent.



## About the Solidarity Center

The Solidarity Center is the largest U.S.-based international worker rights organization helping workers attain safe and healthy workplaces, family-supporting wages, dignity on the job, widespread democracy and greater equity at work and in their community. Find out more: [www.solidaritycenter.org](http://www.solidaritycenter.org)