The Bully's Playbook:
How App Corporations Hold Back Worker Organizing and Harm Democracy

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App-based ridehail and delivery corporations use a well-honed playbook to block fair regulation of their industries, especially when worker demands for labor standards—including minimum pay, benefits, and transparency about the terms and conditions of their work—begin to get traction.

Look out for their BUY , BULLY , BAMBOOZLE strategies and tactics in your city or state.

BUY: Pour funds into amassing political and economic power to leverage against communities and drivers

Tactic # 1: Hire former Democratic operatives and progressive leaders to provide a progressive sheen to exploitative practices and to block pro-worker policy.

- App corporations have expanded their hiring of progressive local leaders (including former staffers for Democratic elected officials and local union leaders) and cultivated Democratic party ties—all to legitimize their business model in Democratic-leaning states and obstruct policies that would raise labor standards for app-based workers.

Tactic # 2: Undermine grassroots worker organizing with corporate-funded "worker organizations."

- Uber has a track record of funding organizations that purport to represent app-based drivers, even as these groups oppose the organizing efforts and policy campaigns of grassroots driver groups. App corporations also fund "Coalitions for Independent Work" in several states that claim to represent app-based workers' interests while fighting against pro-worker policies in these states.

Tactic # 3: Form and fund corporate lobbying groups aiming to turn stable and secure employment into "gig" jobs.

- Operating through innocuous-sounding national lobbying groups, such as the "Flex Association" and "Coalition for Workforce Innovation," the app corporations join forces to advocate to exclude millions of working people from employment-based rights and protections, including the right to minimum wage and the right to organize a union.

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PowerSwitch ACTION

BULLY: Use amassed power to pressure community members, elected officials, and workers into backing off from or blocking policies that hold app corporations accountable.

Tactic # 4: Threaten to pull out of a market, raise prices, or deteriorate customer service if pro-worker policies pass.

- When faced with worker demands for rights and protections or public demands for accountability, the app corporations use in-app messages, political ads, and op-eds from community leaders to fearmonger to customers, often by misrepresenting policy proposals or exaggerating their potential impact.

Tactic # 5: Threaten to take away workers' scheduling flexibility or otherwise worsen job quality if progressive policies pass.

- Using the app to barrage workers with confusing and misleading messaging, app corporations claim that progressive policies—such as minimum pay standards—will take away workers' flexibility or otherwise worsen job quality. They have also retaliated against workers when progressive policies pass; in NYC after a delivery worker pay standard went into effect, the delivery app corporations prohibited customers from tipping workers before ordering as they had previously been able to do.

Tactic # 6: Hoard data to maintain control of the narrative and block community and worker efforts to win standards and accountability.

- App corporations restrict regulators' and the public's access to their data and algorithms, which enables them to maintain an uneven playing field for public debate. They claim they cannot adhere to worker-friendly policies—such as minimum pay standards—without radically disrupting service and operations, and regulators and the public do not have the information necessary to critically assess these claims.

Tactic # 7: Use state preemption as a tool for banning local communities from passing policies protecting app-based workers.

- When app corporations' tactics don't successfully block worker-friendly policies at the local level, they take their threats to the states, pressuring state lawmakers to preempt localities from regulating them. In response to a robust driver pay standard passed in Minneapolis in 2024, for example, Uber took bullying to the state level, advocating for state legislation that would overturn the Minneapolis law and possibly ban all Minnesota communities from regulating ridehail in the future.

Tactic # 8: Use forced arbitration clauses to block accountability.

- The app corporations include forced arbitration clauses in the fine print of their contracts with workers, which means workers have no viable means to challenge systemic corporate practices that degrade their working conditions, such as their classification as independent contractors or the black-box algorithms that determine pay and other work quality issues.
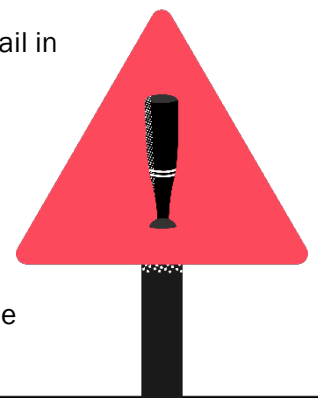
BAMBOOZLE: Mislead and confuse communities, workers, and elected official to shape public narratives and build progressive public images.

Tactic # 9: Mobilize and deploy narrow concepts of racial justice.

- Uber and other app corporations have appropriated progressive discourses of racial justice—such as claiming that app-based work is a solution to racist barriers to jobs and wealth creation—while promoting labor and economic policies that have devastating consequences for communities of color. They have also enlisted third-party validators, including organizations that serve communities of color, to defend their positions on racial justice grounds.

Tactic # 10: Redefine flexible and independent work as "gamified" and controlled app-based work.

- App corporations have co-opted the idea of flexible and independent work to be the ability to sign on and off an app at will, even though that ability is monitored, mediated, supervised, and managed by behavior nudges that allow the corporations to shape workers' behavior. This redefinition also ignores the many ways the corporations control key aspects of the work.

Tactic # 11: Misrepresent the meaning of worker classification.

- Using buzzwords like "flexibility," "independence," and "freedom" to describe app-based work, the app corporations argue that their "innovative" business models don't mesh with "outdated" and "one-size-fits all" employment laws, like minimum wage laws, that can and should apply to all people who work for someone else. They also claim that app-based workers can't have scheduling flexibility and employment-based rights and protections, despite the fact that some digital labor platforms provide both.

Tactic # 12: Promote policies that compromise workers' rights and enshrine a second-class status for app-based workers.

- To defeat workers' demands for robust minimum pay standards, app corporations propose wage standards that sound reasonable at first glance, but do not compensate workers for all time worked or result in a fair wage after expenses. They have also co-opted the laudable notion of portable benefits with proposals that are far stingier than the rights and benefits available to employees.
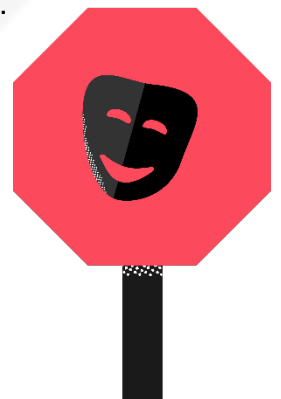
Solutions:

App-based worker organizing groups across the country are fighting back and advancing policies that raise working standards and hold the app corporations accountable. But they need help counteracting the corporate efforts to buy, bully, and bamboozle our communities. We need allies and policymakers to join in calling out these corporate strategies and tactics when they see them, exposing those who try to silence community voices, and demanding that government at all levels stand with constituents rather than corporations.

We need allies to:

☐ Call out the corporate lobby groups and corporate-funded worker organizations and the policies they support that aim to "gigify" work and exclude millions of working people from employment-based rights and protections.

☐ When app corporations make threats in response to pro-worker policies, name the previous instances where app corporations cried wolf (NYC and Seattle), and support efforts to broaden competition in the ridehail and delivery markets so that high-road employers can compete.

☐ Demand that workers and consumers have ownership over the data that app corporations collect from them; require app corporations to provide regulators and the public access to data necessary to implement worker standards; and insist app corporations back up all claims with data accessible to workers and the public.

☐ Embrace a broad vision of racial justice that is inextricably linked with economic justice, where all working people—regardless of who they are, what they do for living, or how they get work—have jobs with decent pay and protections and benefits (including paid time off, scheduling flexibility, unemployment insurance, and workers' compensation) that enable them to weather life's ups and downs and have a life outside of work.

☐ Promote policies that ensure that every job is a good job and everyone who wants a job can have one.