Uber and the gig economy

by Simon Belt

In October 2016, a landmark ruling by the Central London Employment Tribunal - brought by two ***Uber London*** drivers and backed by the ***GMB*** union - said that Uber drivers are not self-employed, but are workers who are entitled basic benefits such as holiday and sick pay. On 22 September 2017, the London Mayor Sadiq Khan announced that Transport for London (TfL) were not going to renew the license for Uber London to provide taxi services in London, with effect from 30 September.

So what led to 30,000+ ***Uber London*** taxi drivers were having their licenses revoked with 8 days notice? On announcing that they weren't renewing Uber's lincense, TfL have said that Uber are unfit as a company - so what changed for them to reach this decision after having operated for 10 years in London? Had anything about Uber changed, or was it something beyond Uber's working practises?

Uber London are appealling the October 2016 ruling, arguing that drivers join Uber to be their own boss. For those drivers at least who work solely or mostly for Uber, few people will buy this notion and see Uber as trying to avoid their responsibilities as an employer through technical and tax paying means or being formally self-employed. Even after the judgement and Uber's announcement to appeal, TfL audited the company in the usual way as ok in April 2017. The termination notice TfL gave criticised the firm as unfit and not playing by the rules, citing its record over reporting criminal offences and carrying out driver background checks, so could that be the issue at stake?

You would expect a reaction to the announcement of 30,000 working losing their employment with 10 days notice, and within a couple of weeks an ***Uber London*** petition on change.org received over 845,000 electronic signatures - see https://www.change.org/p/save-your-uber-in-london-saveyouruber.

Uber London also served notice to appeal the decision, thankfully giving the 30,000+ drivers something of a reprieve, potentially up to a year. Dara Khosrowshahi, Uber's new chief executive, is now thankfully going to be meeting Mike Brown, who runs Transport for London to discuss a resolution to this situation.

Uber London taxi drivers are well known to include a higher proportion of migrant workers than the traditional Hackney Black Cabs associated with taxi services in London, and who have often found it difficult to find employment outside of what's become know as the gig economy sector that Uber London is a well known example and representative of. You would think that there would be a great deal of empathy for the Uber London drivers who will no doubt have automobile related debt to pay back and will struggle to pay bills, including rent or mortgages if TfL get their way of making them unemployed. The petition shows there is, although no doubt

some of that support may be to keep the cheaper prices Uber London have been charging compared to incumbent providers.

Many people who are Labour supporters and identify themselves as supporting worker's rights, and some even being keen on defending the rights of migrant workers were muted to say the least to the plight of drivers working for ***Uber London***. Steering the focus away from those who were terminating the employment of 30,000+ taxi drivers, many tried to blame Uber's operations in India or America as an explanation for why itwas right that Uber drivers in London were losing their livelihood.

That ***Uber London*** were cited as not being a nice employer to work for as a justification for them having their license removed seems to express scant regard in truth for the lived experiences or employment rights of taxi drivers working for ***Uber London***. How does making the lives of already quite precariously employedtaxi drivers a whole lost worse through terminating their employment improve their lot? How will they be in a better position to pay their rent, feed their families or even pay back motor related loans and expenses? There does seem to be a higher degree of partisan defense of Labour's Sadiq Khan with these erstwhile defenders of workers' rights, than there is a real attempt to side with the plight of the taxi drivers.

This is not to say that the gig economy is all fine and no attempt to improve the working conditions of people who find themselves working in it. On the contrary, this is a very real problem. Hoping that those on the other end employment relationship, themselves on salaries ***Uber London***
drivers would love, to help us out is surely naive, and wouldn't we be better off trying to perhaps look as collectively acting to improve their employment position? The problems posed by the gig economy won't go away by making workers' employment circumstances more vulnerable.