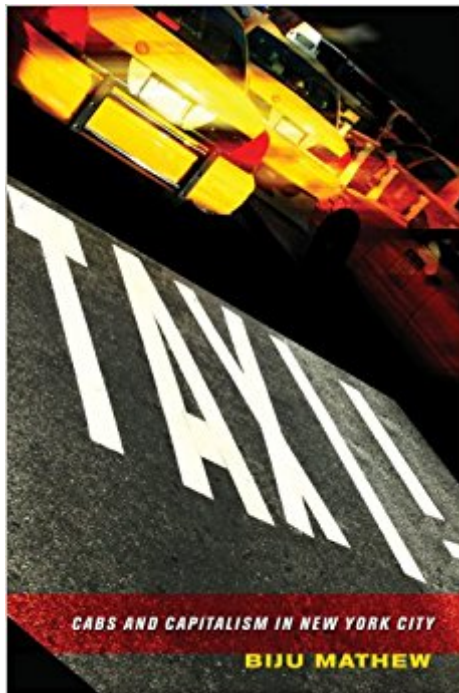




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Taxi!: Cabs And Capitalism In New York City



Synopsis

"Mathew, as a member of the Organizing Committee of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, has a unique perspective on the plight of immigrant taxi drivers. . . . Mathew explores the history of New York's taxicab industry, which has been in a cycle of corruption and reform since the Depression. The book culminates in an essay on globalization, immigration, racism, and the false veneer of multiculturalism in neoliberal society." *Booklist* "Mathew describes the grim economics of driving the ubiquitous yellow cabs— a job where most of the money goes to the cab company owners and where even minor problems, such as a few tickets or a short illness, can spell disaster for drivers." *Financial Times* "Jump aboard this fast-paced ride through the ins and outs of the taxi industry in New York City and sit up front with the 40,000 cabbies who are overworked, underpaid, and routinely harassed, but have come together to improve their lot. . . . Fasten your seatbelt, grip the dashboard, and enjoy the trip." *Morning Star (U.K.)* "Drivers' narratives in *Taxi!* can be riveting, inspiring, and upsetting all at the same time. . . . Their tales penetrate deep into the exploitive nature of the taxi industry. . . . In describing precisely how a group of seemingly powerless immigrant workers flexed their muscles, *Taxi!* critiques the labor movement and the broader movement for social justice." *Left Turn* "Driving a cab has long attracted recent immigrants and others at the margins of the economy. In recent years, however, the working conditions and the nature of cab ownership have changed. As Biju Mathew reveals in this lively account of the benefits and hardships in the lives of today's taxi drivers, just about everything has changed dramatically except the yellow paint. At once a passionate declaration of worker solidarity and an ethnography of work, *Taxi!* is a compelling narrative of the lives of immigrant taxi drivers in New York City. This updated edition covers the formation of the International Taxi Workers Alliance, the unusual collaboration with the Central Labor Council, and 2007 taxi strikes protesting New York City's plan requiring taxicabs to install costly global positioning systems and credit-card machines.

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Customer Reviews

Mathew, as a member of the Organizing Committee of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, has a unique perspective on the plight of immigrant taxi drivers. Cab drivers pay a leasing fee of \$120 per day to fleet owners, and they make a living only if they can bring in more than that, which is often difficult even in a grueling 12-hour shift. They are thought of as second-class citizens, harassed by police and passengers, and are subject to stiff fines for minor offenses. The system is rigged so that the most vulnerable person, the driver, takes on all of the risk. Yet this diverse workforce that speaks over 80 different languages organized a strike in 1998 in the face of opposition from Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Mathew explores the history of New York's taxicab industry, which has been in a cycle of corruption, reform, and corruption since the Depression. The book culminates in an essay on globalization, immigration, racism, and the false veneer of multiculturalism in neoliberal society. David Siegfried

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"In 1998, as Biju Mathew reminds us in *Taxi*, a group of drivers—\$24,000 cabbies—staged an inspiring work stoppage in New York City. Theirs lasted only a day but showed that a group of "independent contractors"—the Taxi Workers Alliance—could make gains through lobbying, publicity, and direct action even when deprived of formal collective bargaining rights. As Mathew movingly describes, the New York taxi driving workforce "Thanks to the forces of globalization—has been "structured almost permanently into a culture of masculine bachelorhood" due to the forced separation of so many drivers from wives and families in their country of origin."—Steve Early, *New Labor Forum*, Spring 2008 "A stunning introduction to the lives of New York's taxi drivers. It is destined to become a classic."—Vijay Prashad

cover in poor state

In the end, this book wasn't what I hoped it would be, but was still worth the read. As a cabbie in Boston, I picked this up hoping to get a feel for the cab business in NY. And as a history buff, I was particularly interested in the promise of a good back-story. Unfortunately, there's very little history here. Despite the book's extensive footnotes section, most of the "history" comes from the memories of a few old-time drivers, and is generally concerned with settling grudges and exposing exploitation. In addition, this book reads like a doctoral thesis in hardcover. "White middle class suburbanites" get almost as much page time as the immigrant drivers. And there's barely a word about the interesting job these drivers have, instead the focus is on their place as it relates to globalization, exploitation of Third World labor, and "neoliberal economic practices." Not exactly what I thought I was getting into. That being said, even though I'm in Boston and not New York, I can safely say that the subjects of Mr. Mathew's book are not exaggerating, and the tale he tells is true at its core - driving a cab is a tough job, and the driver has to dodge the brokers, the cops, the city and the frequently abusive passengers just to make a basic wage. If you're looking for some scholarly views on the function of immigrant labor in cities, strategies for labor organizing in a diverse workforce, or another reason to distrust Giuliani, this is a great read. If you're looking for a good history of cabs in NYC, or just an interesting peek into the lives of the people who risk life and limb to roam the streets, this isn't it. I'm still waiting for that book. A final nit-pick: as you'd expect from an organizer for the Taxi Workers Alliance, there's not a single word about the possible role of the drivers in the heat brought down on them. In my view, it's simply irresponsible to ignore the significant number of rude, ignorant, criminal and even dangerous people who drive cabs. If I were given the choice between reforming the lease agreement (an odious situation, to be sure) and cleaning the Boston fleets of the worst drivers, I'd probably boot the drivers. There are issues in the industry that go beyond race, class and economics, and even those issues go much deeper than Mr. Mathews takes them.

"Taxi!" tells the story of the organization in the last ten years of a successful labor union - though never recognized officially as such - by NYC cab drivers. There had been an official AFL-CIO union but its leadership had (in the 70s) sold out the drivers coming into the industry in return for pennies for oldtimers, and a dues check-off. The union gave in to the corrupt local Democratic politicians who helped taxi "brokers" legalize a "leasing" system in which drivers make a daily cash "lease" payment before they can start work. Under the daily "lease" system drivers as they set out each day have to make over \$100 before they earn anything for themselves. In bad weather and traffic they can work 12 hour days for nothing. But supposedly they are "independent contractors" and so labor

laws don't apply. By the 90s almost all the drivers were working under this kind of peonage. Subject to ever increasing levels of harassment by Giuliani's police, the many drivers with Islamic names were then hit full on with the pogrom atmosphere that followed 9/11. Biju Mathew tells how the drivers collectively organized strikes (the AFL-CIO taxi union being moribund actually helped - all the drivers had to do was not enter into a "lease" that day!), organized legal services to contest rip-offs from brokers and racist harassment from the Giuliani administration, and organized to get their voices heard in New York City local politics. These immigrant drivers come from Egypt, Haiti, India, and Pakistan, and in the process of struggle overcame the divisions that have been used to set one against another. For anyone sick at heart over the impotence of US labor unions, it's a great, and heartening, read.

I've been driving a cab now 2 months in NYC. This author interviews lots of immigrants, whom clearly believe they are entitled to a lot of things. They complain about nonsense. Every industry has to deal with costs to make their money. If you open a business, you PAY rent to a landlord and immediately start the day in the hole, just like the cab business where the owners of the medallion bought a PIECE OF PROPERTY (the medallion) and can now RENT it like anything else. But cab drivers today make on average anywhere from 175-300/day and they are not remotely poor. This book is out of date and does not tell a real story. Are cars in some garages old pieces of garbage and work horribly? Yes, that is my experience. I drive a lot of bad cars. Are there dispatchers who play favorites and give better cars to those who pay them on the side? YES! So what? Are there nasty corrupt cops out there who are taught by fellow policemen that when they desperately need to meet their quota (because there IS a quota) that they should just find a yellow cab and exploit the driver because what can he do? YES. But at the end of the day, a lot of my fellow drivers can barely speak the language, come from another country and despite having very little education, are given a chance to make what in most parts of the world and definitely from the "world" they came from, a handsome living.

New York City taxi drivers work long shifts, seven days a week: most are lease drivers on a daily or weekly contract and until the relatively recent Taxi Workers Alliance was formed, most bore the brunt of bad business. *Taxi!* comes from Biju Mathew, a long-time organizer of the Alliance, and uses interactions from the drivers themselves to reveal the history of the taxi business. Chapters focus on labor struggles and urban politics in New York as much as on immigrant history and influences on the taxi industry as a whole.

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