

TAXI WORKERS' ALLIANCE OF PENNSYLVANIA

BY BETH GRIFFIN

The murders of five Philadelphia cab drivers in 2005 inspired a diverse coalition of men and women from six continents to improve security and working conditions for taxi drivers in the City of Brotherly Love.

"No one seemed to care that drivers were being killed and injured on the job, or that we hadn't had a meter increase in 14 years," says Ron Blount, president of the Taxi Workers' Alliance (TWA) of Pennsylvania and one of its founding drivers. "Cabs were in bad shape, and inspectors were fining drivers huge amounts for minor infractions." TWA currently receives funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) to help its low-income, multi-ethnic membership work for dignity and economic justice.

The cabbies channeled their frustration into non-violent action. They contacted drivers in other cities for advice, went to the state capitol in Harrisburg to press their case, organized prayer vigils for their fallen colleagues, and stopped working for an hour on a busy day to demonstrate their value.

"We raised public consciousness that drivers are human, and we learned that working together works," Ron says. TWA won a meter increase after its first campaign and, six months later, a boost in the long-stagnant fare between the airport and downtown.

Ron says TWA worked with the police to crack down on attacks against cabbies and identify the perpetrators. The group also sat down with state and local officials to restructure taxi regulators, lower fines, and eliminate frivolous tickets. The result is less



Mohammad Shukur, member of TWA. Photo courtesy of Taxi Workers' Alliance of Pennsylvania.

stress for the drivers and a more transparent regulatory system that includes worker input, he says.

But it is still hard to describe the intricacies of the system to workers who hail from more than 40 countries. Most drive twelve-hour shifts in cars they lease from a fleet-owner who also owns the valuable city-issued medallion, which allows a taxi to pick up passengers on the street. After paying for gas, dispatch service, and fines, they may net \$500 a week. The long hours and low pay do not leave much time or energy for activism.

In the beginning, TWA identified members of each ethnic group among the drivers and invited them to meet to discuss conditions. "People were comfortable with others who spoke their own language," says Ron. These leaders shared information with their compatriots and helped TWA achieve

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

At the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), “helping people help themselves” is ingrained as a motto and a directive. It’s what we do, and we do it well. But looking at the Taxi Workers’ Alliance (TWA) of Pennsylvania, profiled in this newsletter, I am reminded that our work also enables people of good will to empower each other, even those with whom they have little in common.

Taxi drivers in Philadelphia, as in most urban areas, are the working poor. Theirs is a tedious, menial job, performed under tough conditions, for people who may be rushed, rude, or violent. They are at the bottom of the power structure and are marginalized by financial and regulatory stresses that range from the annoying to the truly oppressing.

Catholic social teaching is directed at righting the injustices faced by groups like the TWA. The cabbies in Philadelphia hail from six continents. They speak dozens of different languages. Many were educated professionals in their home country. All are trying to make ends meet and get home safely at the end of the day.

Frightened by the murders of several drivers and burdened by fares that were frozen a decade earlier, these cabbies decided to get together to address the violence and inequities. They turned for advice to the New York Taxi Workers’ Alliance (NYTWA). As it happens, the NYTWA was the first cabbie organization CCHD ever funded. We helped them get established and gave them grants to improve and expand in their early years. Ron Blount, the head of the Philadelphia TWA group, said the NYTWA was generous with guidance and support. “They were instrumental in helping us until we could collect dues and apply for grants. We wouldn’t have survived without them,” he said.

This is a great example of CCHD’s ability to help groups help their own members as well as other people facing similar injustices. And the TWA of Pennsylvania is now helping a cabbie group organize in Austin, Texas. You could say they are “paying it forward.”

TWA organized its members in a thoughtful, straightforward, and non-violent way to address systemic problems many considered intractable. As a group, the cabbies overcame their ethnic, cultural, and religious differences to work for common goals.

With every site visit and interaction with a funded group, our eyes are opened again, both to the mistreatment of the marginalized and to the powerful effect of CCHD assistance in their lives. We are grateful for your support. Every day, you help us help others to help themselves.

Thank you!



Ralph McCloud
Director
Catholic Campaign for Human Development



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break the cycle of poverty

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Mohammad Shukur talking with other taxi drivers. Photo courtesy of Taxi Workers' Alliance of Pennsylvania.

consensus on issues and priorities. “We developed a common message and got it out to all the drivers,” he says.

Working together, they were able to address “drive-by ticketing,” a questionable practice whereby drivers accused of parking violations did not receive actual tickets, but learned of their supposed misdeed when they received overdue notices in the mail, long after the time to appeal a ticket had passed. Ron says a six-month campaign by TWA helped create the political will to eliminate the quota-driven practice. In addition, the municipal parking authority established a dedicated hotline for cabbie issues.

“The taxi regulators in the city and the state recognize that drivers have a group to advocate for them, so now we have a place at the table and drivers have a bit more respect and dignity,” Ron says. He paraphrases Mahatma Gandhi to describe TWA’s progress: “First they laugh at you, then they ignore you, then they fight you, and then you win!”


TWA’s successes have earned the respect of cabbies throughout the city. Ron says their membership now numbers 635 drivers, which is more than one-quarter of the full-time cabbies in Philadelphia. “TWA is credible, because it’s drivers themselves coming together. We don’t rely on consultants and computer programs,” Ron says. In the absence of formal health and disability benefits, the drivers established their own relief fund. And with the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, TWA hopes to negotiate insurance coverage for its members.

Taxi medallions and dispatch company fees are two major barriers to cabbies’ economic

advancement. Registration medallions issued by the city are limited in number and cost more than \$500,000. TWA is urging that a percentage of the proceeds from the sale of new medallions be dedicated to a driver disability fund. “The cost of medallions is rising so fast, up from \$60,000 in 2005, that people on Wall Street are starting to invest in the taxi medallion market,” Ron explains.

Drivers pay a weekly fee to radio dispatchers who forward ride requests from customers. TWA hopes to reduce the individual fees and redirect the funds to the drivers by establishing its own dispatch company. With contributions from cabbies and a grant from CCHD, TWA is on the verge of making this dream a reality. “Our drivers will be distributed throughout Philadelphia and the outer neighborhoods, and everyone will get more fares. We can be assured of being treated with respect and dignity,” Ron says.

He credits CCHD with helping TWA maintain high standards and consistent growth. “The funding enables us to have someone behind the desk to serve the members, but our contact with CCHD every quarter is like a thermometer to measure our progress and identify what’s going well and what needs to be changed. Without the visits and reporting process, we probably wouldn’t take the time to stop and think about it closely,” Ron says.

TWA started after a chilling spate of violence. Now, it is working with cab owners to install cameras and panic buttons in each car and share GPS tracking info with police. “Conditions have improved, but violence comes and goes. We are family to one another. We need to look out for the safety and health of each driver,” Ron concludes. 



Rally against drive-by ticketing policies. Photo courtesy of Taxi Workers' Alliance of Pennsylvania.

PROFILE: MOHAMMED SHUKUR

BY BETH GRIFFIN

Two years after arriving in the United States from Bangladesh with a master's degree in business administration, Mohammed Shukur became a cabbie in Philadelphia. He was persuaded by the easy talk of the Iranian and Afghani taxi drivers who filled up at the gas station where he worked.

But beyond the welcome, flexible hours, Mohammed found a puzzling system rife with injustice and uneven enforcement of rules. He owned his cab, and each day's fares seemed significant, yet when he factored in expenses, he could barely support his wife and their three children. He paid for gas, medallion rental, radio dispatch, and frequent tickets issued with crippling fees. Fines for a bald tire, for example, ranged from \$350 to \$750. If Mohammed tried to plead his case, he would lose a half day of work.


Mohammed joined TWA because it is a group of drivers working for themselves and their colleagues. There were other start-up cabbie organizations, but "only TWA prevailed because of its honesty, sincerity, and hard work. TWA organized quickly and created networks," he says.

In 2006, Mohammed helped organize representatives of different ethnic groups to support a daylong strike for higher fares and better conditions. More recently, he worked with TWA to fight a mandate that all drivers buy a GPS from a

single source identified by the municipality. Drivers wanted to choose their own systems at a cost they could afford, he said, rather than support a deal that would not benefit them.

"It's a crucial time for taxi drivers," Mohammed explains. Medallions, which are required in order for a cab to answer a street hail, are so expensive that most drivers will never be able to own one. The cost for renewing licenses and leasing cars is skyrocketing. And the local regulatory body approved new transportation organizations, which are now cutting into the business of the existing cabbies.

"When TWA fights against injustice and gets a victory, I get satisfied myself. If all the drivers are living well, I'm good," Mohammed says. When TWA opens its own cooperative radio dispatch service, Mohammed says driver costs will fall by more than half, and money will go into a fund for needy cabbies and their families. "Instead of paying \$150 a month and 5 percent of the meter to a dispatch company, we'll pay our cooperative \$60 a month and 2.5 percent of the meter," he says.

Mohammed's work benefits his family and his fellow drivers, although he says it leaves him little time for family life. "The reality is different from what I expected, but I recognize myself as a worker with a lot of experience in the fight against injustice," he says. 

What Is CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed over \$280 million to more than 7,800 low-income-led,

community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.



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