

Taxi Workers' Alliance May Join Labor Group

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Body

The New York **Taxi Workers Alliance**, a **group** of 7,000 **taxi** drivers, is not a **labor** union, but in an unusual move, the New York City Central **Labor** Council will vote tomorrow to make the **alliance** its newest member.

Ed Ott, the **labor** council's executive director, said his **group** was eager for the **taxi** drivers to **join** because organized **labor** wants to strengthen its ties with immigrant **workers' groups**.

The **taxi workers' alliance** sees many advantages to **joining** the **labor** council, which is made up of one million **workers** from 400 union locals. The drivers say they hope the council will use its lobbying muscle to help them obtain health coverage and short-term disability insurance.

In addition, many **taxi** drivers are pleased that the move will give them access to low-cost computer classes and English classes at the Consortium for **Worker** Education, a union-sponsored school.

"For us, this is a big deal," Mr. Ott said. "This is an important organization in this city. We want to refocus our immigration work on organizations that really have the potential to become unions and are leading immigrant **workers** to organized **labor**."

A majority of the city's 26,000 **taxi** drivers are from South Asia, and about one-fourth of all drivers belong to the **taxi workers' alliance**. Over the years, the **alliance** has shown its power by organizing a one-day **taxi** strike and by playing a pivotal role in securing the 11 percent fare increase that takes effect next month.

"We've been able to do a lot on our own, and we're proud of it," said Bhairavi Desai, executive director of the **alliance**. "We recognized that by affiliating with the central **labor** council, that will increase our resources and political strength."

Under rulings from the National **Labor** Relations Board, the drivers -- who generally lease their cabs or medallions -- are considered independent contractors, not employees, and therefore do not have a right to unionize and negotiate contracts with the **taxi** garages.

Mr. Ott said the **alliance** had done well despite that challenge. He said, "They're a real organization of working people that has managed to improve standards for their members."

In August, the national A.F.L.-C.I.O., the **labor** council's parent **group**, announced that it would push to strengthen ties with immigrant **workers' groups** to help attract these **workers** to unions and to improve immigrants' wages and working conditions. . As part of this push, the **taxi workers' alliance** will be the first immigrant **workers' group** nationwide to affiliate with a central **labor** council.

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Ms. Desai said she hoped the labor council would help lobby the City Council to ensure that the city's garages provide health insurance to taxi drivers.

"Because this is a hyper-regulated industry, we think there can be a political solution to every problem the drivers face," Ms. Desai said. "There's no reason that the owners in the industry can't contribute to a health fund."

Javaid Tariq, a Pakistani immigrant who has been a taxi driver for 10 years, said he was glad to join the labor council, not just because it will help drivers, but because "we want to help other working-class people."

"Health issues are our biggest problem," Mr. Tariq said. "The drivers don't have any type of health insurance. We drive 12-hour days, and after many years, there are a lot of health issues: bladder infections, stomach problems, muscle problems, back problems."

Ms. Desai said New York's taxi drivers generally work 60 to 70 hours a week and earn \$27,000 to \$33,000 a year.

She said many drivers were eager to take computer classes to learn how to use the Internet.

"These workers haven't had access to the American educational system," she said. "A lot are members in their 40s and 50s who want to learn the computer specifically because they want to keep up with their children back in their home countries."

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