

Hustled Reviewed: Why You Should Always Tip Your Couriers

When most people think of food couriers, they picture people buzzing down the streets on bicycles, working flexible hours, and making money fast. The podcast *Hustled*, hosted by Toronto Star journalist Sara Mojtehdzadeh, challenges this impression and gives us a glimpse into the reality of Canada's gig economy as couriers at food delivery service giant Foodora, attempt to unionize. In reviewing the podcast, I will first consider Mojtehdzadeh's own experience as a food courier to highlight the rationale for unionizing, consider the hurdles workers faced in doing so, and make reflections on what Foodora's eventual withdrawal out of Canada tells us about the gig economy at large.

Mojtehdzadeh entered the scene at the moment when Foodora couriers were in the process of unionizing. When Mojtehdzadeh signs up to become a courier herself, we follow along as she makes deliveries. The first shock is how little workers make on the job. After almost four hours of working, she makes \$48.61 (including a rare \$20 tip) *before* expenses. Mojtehdzadeh also discovered the work isn't as flexible as it claims – only seasoned couriers get first pick at weekly shifts. Also, while Foodora offers a choice between biking and driving, neither are favourable. Biking can offer the convenience of parking but can be physically strenuous and downright dangerous, and driving, while it can lead to picking up higher paying orders, the profit is offset by the cost of gas and commercial insurance.

Average income evaporates if you get sick, hurt on the job, or if there are dangerous driving conditions that render you unable to work. While employment insurance (EI) would usually cover this loss of income, couriers, like other independent contractors, often do not receive EI. The COVID-19 pandemic only peeled back another layer of precarity as Foodora did not provide personal protective equipment, nor enforce other changes to offer any level of protection to its workers. The only changes it made was to expand its business model to allow pickup of other essentials, including pharmaceuticals – one worker reported delivering “cold and flu medication” to apartments.

A scorecard is often relied on administrative tribunals to determine whether a worker is an independent contractor or employee. One criterion relates to supervision – does the company control and supervise the work? In Foodora's case, couriers are supervised through the app and are reprimanded for “bad” behaviour as slight as having a phone battery die on the job. This is one example of Foodora emulating employee status to maintain uniform across deliveries all while keeping their workers labelled as independent contracts because it is more profitable.

Throughout the podcast, Mojtehdzadeh addresses the common “get another job” rebuttal. The unfortunate reality is that sometimes this is the only job available – especially in a pandemic. Besides, one's reason to work as a food courier is ultimately not relevant to the fact that forming a union would allow workers to level the playing field with the employer and lead to increased security and fixed wages, as it has for food couriers in Norway, for example.

Moreover, the nature of the food delivery industry is unique in that workers must establish they are employees, not independent contractors first *and* there is no location where deliverers can physically meet each other and discuss collective arrangements. This barrier was exacerbated by

COVID-19, which made physical meetups impossible at a critical time – right as the Ontario Labour Board established couriers were employees and able to unionize.

In the end, these obstacles didn't matter; the fight was already over. Despite its growth in the pandemic, Foodora pulled out of Canada in August 2020. The irony of this move is that it is symbolic of the gig economy's hands-off policy. Luckily, not all was lost. As Mojtehdzadeh points out, janitorial services, airport workers, and drivers are just a few of the jobs that follow a similar business model. The Labour Relations Board's decision to side with couriers is still a historic move to be considered in decisions, such as the *Heller v Uber* case.