On Super Bowl Sunday, a few hundred Uber drivers met in the cold in a public park in Queens, plotting to disrupt the app that thousands of New Yorkers were about to use to get in place to watch the big game. Gathered angrily on rows of wooden benches were Uzbeks, Tajiks, Russians, Kenyans, Serbs and Bangladeshis, many of them waving handmade signs. Their yellow placards attacked the ride-hailing service in the innumerable languages of polyglot New York. “Shame on Uber!” one announced in Spanish. “Uber Broke Our Hearts!” said another in Tibetan. Then in English: “We Made You Billionaires!” and “We Are Not Slaves!”

Ten days earlier, Uber had reduced the drivers’ rates by 15 percent, prompting protests at the company’s Long Island City office as well as in a parking lot at La Guardia Airport where vehicles wait for passengers. The Super Bowl event was meant to build momentum on those actions by turning Uber’s app against itself. When it was over, the drivers planned to spread throughout the city and order rides from their colleagues who were working. As cars showed up, they would pay their peers for coming, then urge them to go home in solidarity.

“We want to show Uber that without us full-time drivers, they won’t have any cars on the road,” Abdoul Diallo shouted from atop a concrete stage. Mr. Diallo, a Guinean immigrant who has emerged as a leader of the strikes, was holding up his own sign: “No Drivers, No Uber — It’s That Simple.”
“This is the formula!” he hollered to the crowd.

It has been nearly five years since Uber arrived in New York City. With its Randian philosophy and proprietary algorithms, the company promised to reshape the driving industry, and in many ways that promise has come true. A million New Yorkers have become accustomed to making cars materialize by pulling out their smartphones — and not just in Manhattan, but also in the other boroughs, which have long been underserved by for-hire providers. In part as a result, taxi owners have seen their profits crumble, taxi lenders are slowly going under and taxi unions are scrambling to protect their members’ jobs.

More recently, however, Uber’s indomitable rise has been clouded by an insurgency from a small but vocal portion of its own drivers who say they feel neglected, even used. From spring 2014 to spring 2015, the company quadrupled its business in the city, and for nearly a year it has been signing up new customers at a rate of 30,000 a week. The drivers argue that such dynamic growth would not have been possible without them: They, after all, supply the cars that keep the network liquid. Drawn to the company by advertisements that promised decent wages, many now contend that they are victims of a corporate bait-and-switch. As Uber has obtained a solid foothold in the market (and a $60 billion valuation), the drivers are complaining that it has slashed its prices in an effort to destroy the competition and to finance its expansion on their backs.
The ride-sharing service has had obstacles in its five years in New York but has overcome most of them.

March 2009: Uber is founded in San Francisco by Travis Kalanick and Garrett Camp.


August 2013: Uber drivers file a class-action lawsuit in San Francisco, claiming to have been misclassified as independent contractors.

June 2014: Thousands of British cabdrivers bring central London to a standstill in protest over Uber.


June 2015: French taxi drivers hold a violent strike over Uber.

July 2015: Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York drops his plan to cap the number of Uber drivers.


“In the beginning, your company was great for both drivers and customers,” Mr. Diallo and his partners wrote this month in a letter to the service. “You treated drivers well and we loved you for that. Little did we know that it would be a short-lived momentary ecstasy that you used to lure us in in great numbers, just so that you can execute your plans and strategies toward world domination.”

Uber, mostly through the voice of Josh Mohrer, the 33-year-old general manager of Uber New York, has said it is pained by the grievances of the drivers, who, while not employees of the service, are known as “driver-partners” in the company’s jargon. Like most tech operations, Uber has a data set for everything, and Mr. Mohrer said his numbers proved that January’s price cut, like a steeper one two years ago, increased the demand for rides and therefore led to larger driver paychecks.
“It’s not intuitive to think that lower fares will mean more money, but that is the reality,” Mr. Mohrer said. He added that he understood why the drivers might be anxious. “It’s a big ask to say, ‘Just trust us.’”

And yet there are underlying reasons for the drivers not to trust him. Uber, like other players in the gig economy, has a tenuous relationship with those who make a living from its software. Its drivers — 34,000 in New York — are independent contractors who buy their own cars, pay for gas and maintenance, and provide their own insurance. Although they get no benefits, they remit to Uber 20 to 25 percent of what they make as a fee to use the service. And unlike its competitors like Lyft, Uber does not permit tipping through its app, but it still reserves the right to “deactivate” its drivers, sometimes for little more than a subpar rider rating.

Two years ago, Travis Kalanick, Uber’s chief executive, said in an interview about the company’s plan to field a fleet of driverless vehicles that a reason the service was relatively expensive was that customers were paying for “the other dude in the car.” As the company’s ridership explodes
and the investor class anticipates a potential public offering, the drivers say they often feel like just some other dude: a frictional human substance that gets in the way of an idealized experience of seamless digital travel.

“Uber treats its drivers however it wants,” Mr. Diallo said. “But we’re the ones who do everything except provide the technology.”

A former import-export trader who studied for a business degree, Mr. Diallo, 29, has been driving for the company for three years in a $50,000 Chevrolet Suburban. At first, he said, the job was great: He could afford his lease and still make money because he was taking in as much as $5,000 a week.

But in 2014, Uber cut its rates by 20 percent and not long after that it increased its commissions. Last year, it forced new drivers working for its luxury arm, Uber Black, to pick up passengers through its less expensive option, UberX. On top of this, Mr. Diallo claimed that Uber’s aggressive hiring has flooded the city with too many drivers chasing too few fares.

The price cuts last month were the final straw that set off the rebellion. Most of the drivers learned about the change through a company email, whose lack of warning and remoteness were softened by the fact that Uber promised, for a month, to guarantee an hourly wage at pre-cut levels. Within days of the announcement — and despite the guarantees — Mr. Diallo and two other drivers, Fabio Krasniqi and Farrukh Khamdamov, decided on a strike. Calling themselves the Uber Drivers Network, they created a Facebook page, designed a flier and paid for nearly 20,000 copies at a print shop near La Guardia.

“People can’t make a living,” Mr. Diallo said on the phone after a meeting to coordinate the New York actions with others in London and San Francisco. “They’re picking up $8 fares. They’re driving their cars into the ground. Collectively, there’s a lot of money coming in, but no one individual is making much.
“It’s gotten to the point,” he said, “where it’s literally unbearable.”

Uber likes to say that its drivers, not its riders, are its customers. And while the company might not give its customers health care or a pension, it does provide them access to high-tech support centers, modeled on Apple’s Genius Bars, where they can ask questions about commercial licenses, receive free medical exams or get a can of soda. Uber also helps its drivers negotiate leases with car dealers.

The conflict over the price cuts has been especially vexing for the company, which is adamant that the lower rates have been a boon to both the drivers and its own bottom line. Shortly after the strikers wrote to Uber, Mr. Kalanick posted a memo onto his Facebook page showing that the previous cuts had increased the average driver’s gross hourly wages from $28 to $37. On Tuesday, Mr. Mohrer released numbers indicating that from the three weeks before the last round of cuts to the three weeks after, drivers’ wages went up by 17 percent.

Uber also disputes the claim that there are too many drivers in New York. There are still more taxi riders that the company could woo, and, according to Mr. Mohrer, after the recent cuts were made, trips in the Bronx and Queens, where many drivers live, went up by nearly 25 percent.

But if all this data has the weight of scripture for Uber executives, it has been less persuasive to the drivers, who say the statistics do not fully describe the experience of working for the company. Though lower prices might increase their workload and thus their gross, they say, the increased revenue will be eroded by a corresponding increase in expenses.

At the Super Bowl rally, a driver named Mustafa, who declined to give his last name because he feared reprisals from Uber, said he expected to make about $40 an hour after the cuts. But that was before he paid for higher costs of maintenance, gas and washes; for his car lease, insurance and sales and income taxes; for emissions inspections and the 2.5 percent of earnings he gives each year to the Black Car Fund, a drivers’ trade group, for workers’ compensation; and, of course, for his commissions.

“When you put it together, the numbers don’t add up,” Mustafa said. “I’m taking home less than minimum wage.”
And beyond money, culture matters, too, the drivers say. Some mentioned a photograph that Mr. Mohrer posted on Twitter during his early days at Uber, which showed him smiling with Mr. Kalanick above a message that read, “Jamming with @travisk and plotting city domination.” Others pointed to their own support of Uber this summer when the company went to war with Mayor Bill de Blasio, who wanted to cap its growth, ostensibly to lessen road congestion. During the fight, which it won when Mr. de Blasio dropped his plan for the cap, Uber mobilized millions of dollars and an all-star team of political tacticians, but it also made use of the sympathetic image of hard-working immigrants telling City Hall that Uber put food on the table for their families.

“We stood behind them,” said Ronnie Paulino, a driver who has worked for Uber for a year. “Then they turned around and cut our pay.”

After speaking this month to an economics class at New York University, Mr. Mohrer acknowledged that when he first came to Uber, there were fewer drivers and stronger bonds between them and his management team. But as the fleet has grown, he said, he has tried to remain responsive to the drivers, who, on average, work 30 hours a week — or triple the rate of their peers in smaller cities.
“They’re more vested and engaged in Uber, so we take a more careful approach here,” Mr. Mohrer said. He added: “It’s a deeper relationship.”

But deeper doesn’t necessarily mean easier. A few weeks ago, Mr. Mohrer met with the leaders of the strikes at his office on West 27th Street in Chelsea’s gallery district. He said they had a frank discussion about the rate cuts, which could be rescinded if the cuts do not achieve their goals. While he was not explicit about what those goals might be, he insisted that the conversation had been useful. “I want to do this regularly,” he said. “Giving drivers the opportunity to speak to me and my staff can result in more rapid change.”

The strikers found the meeting less successful. “It was a joke,” Mr. Diallo said. “They treated us like jokers.” From his perspective, Mr. Mohrer offered no concessions on the cuts and was firm on only one position: that there would never be a tipping option on Uber’s app.

And that was the message Mr. Krasniqi delivered to the crowd in Queens on Super Bowl Sunday. Cupping his hands to his mouth, he reported on the meeting, then told the drivers to call their friends and relatives who also worked for Uber and urge them to stop driving.

“That’s how we built them up — with our friends and families,” Mr. Krasniqi roared. “And if we built them up, we can destroy them!”

It is hard to tell at this point just how serious the threat to Uber from sustained unrest would be. The challenges of organizing a work force composed of men and women of disparate ethnicities and languages loosely connected by a cloud-based app are significant. “If the drivers can come together in a block causing problems, they might get something,” said Evan Rawley, a professor of strategy at the Columbia Business School who studies the taxi industry. “But this is not West Virginia coal miners who all grew up together in the same small town.”

Uber has been somewhat clumsy in dealing with the problems with its fleet. In a stroke of unfortunate timing, Wired magazine published a 3,000-word treatise on Uber’s new corporate logo one day after the drivers went on strike outside its New York office. It was an inadvertent study in tech-world navel-gazing: as hundreds of immigrants were splashed across the Internet attacking Uber, Wired described how Mr. Kalanick had been working for two years on the logo, immersing himself in organic color schemes and kerning.

There is a potential wild card: Class-action lawsuits have been filed against Uber, including in the federal courts in Brooklyn and San Francisco, which seek to make the drivers full employees. If the suits are successful, they could cripple Uber’s business model, though some legal experts have said they are skeptical that the drivers could prevail when they use their own vehicles, and decide themselves when and whether to pick up passengers.
That leaves the traditional route of union organizing, which, in the case of the strikers in New York, has become chaotic. About a year ago, the Uber Drivers Network approached Local 1181 of the Amalgamated Transit Union, one of whose organizers has been helping them plan rallies and collect union cards. The New York Taxi Workers Alliance, an advocacy group for yellow cabdrivers, claims to have signed up nearly 5,000 Uber drivers in the city. And on Feb. 2, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 1430, filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board asking to represent another 600 Uber drivers who work at La Guardia.

Mr. Diallo and his team have been working on a secret weapon: a driver-owned app to compete with those from Lyft and Uber, those from other ride-hailing companies like Gett and Via, and the taxi industry’s own two e-hailing systems, Way2Ride and Arro. The drivers designed the app themselves and have hired a company called Swift Technologies to build it. It could be ready as early as next month.

“The solution is not to stay with Uber,” Mr. Diallo said. “The solution is to have our own platform — to build a real partnership and really be partners.”

For now, however, they are still planning strikes, even if the one on Super Bowl Sunday was of questionable effectiveness. The drivers celebrated the action on their Facebook page, posting a screen shot of Uber’s app that night — accompanied by the hashtag #SHUTDOWNSUPERBOWL — that showed a wait time at Kennedy Airport of 72 minutes.
But the very next morning, Uber sent an email to its drivers announcing that the day before, it had broken its record for the most trips on a Sunday.

“Thanks to you, our driver-partners,” the email read, “hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers moved safely around the city this weekend.”

**Correction: Feb. 21, 2016**

A cover article this weekend about Uber drivers’ dissatisfaction with the company misstates, in some editions, the percent of earnings that Uber drivers pay to the Black Car Fund, a drivers’ trade group, for workers’ compensation. **It is 2.5 percent, not 3 percent.** And an accompanying timeline in some editions misstated the month and the year that Uber began UberPool, its carpooling service. **It began in December 2014, not in July 2015.**

A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 21, 2016, on Page MB1 of the New York edition with the headline: Uber Drivers Up Against the App