

# Tokyo Uber Blues

A FILM BY TAKU AOYAGI



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE







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# Film Summary



Shot with a mix of smartphones and GoPros, filmmaker Taku Aoyagi takes us on his daily bike rides as an Uber Eats worker. But pedaling on Tokyo's deserted streets, delivering boba tea to cloistered condos, he starts to wonder...what was it that Ken Loach said about the Uberization of society? And what does gig-work offer an unemployed young person with student debt?



# Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Tokyo Uber Blues* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

### **Tips and Tools for Facilitators**

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

## **Share Community Agreements**

### **Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?**

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. [Here is a model](#) of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

### **Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion**

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- **Pass around** sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- **Allow time** for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- **Go around in a circle** and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- **Go around two to three times** to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- **Read the list aloud.**
- **Invite** questions or revisions.
- **Ask** if all are satisfied with the list.

## COMMON CONCEPTS AND LANGUAGE

### **Algorithmic management**

The practice of managing workers through technology to such a degree that they have little or no contact with human managers in the everyday process of directing and coordinating their work. For instance, food delivery work via UberEats is algorithmically managed through an app that offers couriers orders and gives them the information they need to deliver food from restaurants to customers.

### **Alienation**

A concept derived from humanist philosophy that describes when human beings are treated as objects without the ability to make decisions and, as a result,

come to see their own actions and the actions of people around them, as external phenomena that they cannot impact or control.

### **Capitalism**

An economic (and value) system in which a minority of people own and control the materials and organizations required to run the economy, while the majority are required to work for them to make a living. Not all capitalist societies look the same - they can have different laws, different cultures, and different forms of government (republic, dictatorship, constitutional monarchy, etc.)

### **Capitalist realism**

A term coined by cultur-

al theorist Mark Fisher which describes how people living in capitalist societies struggle to envision the possibility of society being organized differently. Within this structure, it becomes easy to believe, in the words of 20th-century British Prime Minister Margret Thatcher, that “there is no alternative” and very hard to imagine different modes of relation within the economy and beyond.



## Exploitation

An unequal relationship between people in which one benefits at the expense of the work of the other. Often used in social theory to describe an unequal relationship between the working class (wage earners) and the bourgeoisie (those who control wages and manage workers) in the economy. The most famous example is Karl Marx's theory of surplus value, which focuses on how, in capitalism, workers produce more value for their bosses than they are paid in wages which leads to bosses profiting from workers' labor and the general disempowerment of working people in the wider society.

## The Gig Economy

A relatively new sector of the economy characterized by the role of digital platforms in

mediating between consumers, workers, and businesses to organize the delivery of services. These services can range from taxi rides to food delivery, beauty treatments, and child-care.

## Precarity

An experience shared by workers who do not have access to the customary level of protection associated with being a worker in their society. Often classified as "self-employed," this means workers lack (legal and structural) protections from harm, and exploitation, and experience an inability to find security in their day-to-day labor. As a result, they have no access to fundamental protections like sick pay, holiday pay, health care, and minimum wage.

## Zoonotic disease

A disease that originates in animals be-

fore being transmitted to humans, such as COVID-19. Zoonotic diseases are not purely random occurrences but instead are made more likely by factors such as environmental destruction and deforestation that bring wild animals and humans into closer contact.

# Participants

## **Taku Aoyagi**

Taku is the protagonist and filmmaker at the heart of Tokyo Uber Blues. At the start of the film, we witness his entry and introduction into the app work force as the COVID-19 pandemic hits. As a 26-year-old man with \$40,000 of student debt, he needs to find another way to make ends meet. In search of work, he sets off from his hometown of Yamanashi on his bike, heading for Tokyo.

# Key Issues

*Tokyo Uber Blues* is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- The gig economy
- The social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Technology and the future of work
- Migration and migrant workers
- Workers' experiences of work
- Role of debt in determining peoples' futures
- Loneliness, social isolation and alienation



# Background Information

## The Past and Future of Work

Throughout history, human survival has depended on the ability to produce essential goods and resources. For as long as we have existed, we have been engaged in some form of work. However, different societies have organized this work in various ways, with major implications for the structure of their societies and the relationships among the people within them. Often, this organization has been based on dividing people into groups, or classes, with specific roles in ‘the economy’, the network of social relationships through which the members of that society produce and reproduce the things the society needs to continue.<sup>1</sup>

Subordinate classes, such as workers and peasants, have always made up the majority of a society and have done most of the work. However, it is the dominant classes – be they landlords, bosses, kings, or state functionaries – which have owned and controlled the majority of the wealth. These dominant classes do not participate in the process of production itself, but they reap the largest share of its rewards and use these rewards to reinforce their power. Throughout modern history, the economy has been hierarchically.

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<sup>1</sup> For more discussion of how some societies in human prehistory existed without classes, see *The Dawn of Everything* (Graeber and Wengrow). There is also a strong argument that some societies in the recent past have, temporarily and imperfectly, managed to undermine parts of the class system (Mieville)

But despite these continuities, work has often looked very different. For instance, a peasant farming in a medieval English village in the year 1400 had a very different experience of work to the young woman operating a spinning jenny in the cotton mills of Lancashire in the early 1800s during the early Industrial Revolution -- let alone the bike courier rushing burgers and bubble tea through the streets of Tokyo in 2021. To understand the experience of couriers like Taku, we need to place his experience as (1.) part of a historical pattern and (2.) also pay specific attention to how his work is situated in relation to larger structural realities of Capitalism today.

The gig economy describes a new type of work that has emerged over the last decade (Woodcock and Graham). This work is controlled by large 'platforms' like UberEats that connect workers, customers, and businesses (Srnicsek). They profit by taking a cut from all the exchanges organized on the platform. It is often related to the similar but distinct idea of the 'sharing economy', which describes how platforms can be used to facilitate the short-term rental of a range of goods, including property, electronic bikes and scooters, parking spaces, and more. Many services are organized on platforms, including taxi rides, food delivery, childcare, domestic cleaning, and beauty treatments. Most workers in the gig economy are not formally employed and lack the rights and protections associated with employment, such as a minimum wage or paid sick leave.

The gig economy has grown rapidly, supported by large investors hoping for substantial profits through their disruption of existing economic sectors. Some platforms, like Uber, now operate globally and have near-monopoly market positions across many cities. Initially, the gig economy was seen as providing flexible work for workers, convenience for consumers, and new markets for businesses. However, as platforms have gained power, so too has the resistance against them: workers have gone on strike over low wages and campaigned for more formal rights, and legislators have sought to limit platform power. Additionally, businesses have become aware of the long-term impact of relying on platforms they do not control (Vandaele; Umney et al.).

The significance of the gig economy for the working class is that it serves as a testing ground: the technologies and legal models developed there are now being implemented elsewhere. For instance, technologies of algorithmic management that were first developed in food delivery are increasingly implemented in other forms of delivery services and warehouses (Altenried; Delfanti; Gent). The struggles of workers in this sector to make ends meet and handle the demands of their algorithmic managers reveal one possible future if societal trends continue unchecked.

In addition to the gig economy, student debt in the United States is at an all-time high in 2024 which leaves students leaving higher education institutions in need of work to begin repaying the money they borrowed. The debt economy ensures that workers will persistently live in situations where money is owed, therefore money must be earned, despite the working conditions or fairness of wages. It puts all workers in challenging positions when making decisions about the future of their lives and work amidst unequal structures of power.



## The COVID-19 Pandemic

The events shown in Tokyo Uber Blues are prompted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The pandemic was a profound example of how sometimes we need a disruption of the status quo to truly understand what the status quo demands. Unemployment forced people like Taku to enter the gig economy in hopes of earning a living, only to discover a reality characterized by poverty, precarity, homelessness, and struggle. During the pandemic, gig workers were designated as “essential workers.” Instacart deliveries became a lifeline for the vulnerable – and desperate people, who needed any income they could find, began working for very low wages to deliver that service (Bhuiyan).

The first cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in Japan on January 16th, 2020. Initially, however, a series of states of emergency declared by the government effectively ‘flattened the curve’ of infection by encouraging people to avoid crowded places, close-contact settings, and enclosed spaces. Japan pursued a Zero-COVID strategy, using its island borders to try and prevent any transmission (Jecker and Au). However, as of 2024, the disease killed over 74,000 people in the country. The vast majority of these deaths occurred in three distinct waves: the first in spring 2022, then summer 2022, then winter 2022/23. This coincided with the spread of the Omicron variant of the disease and the abandonment of Zero-COVID policies as vaccination became widespread. The social impacts of the pandemic in Japan were significant, despite the initial success in flattening the curve. Unemployment rose sharply in early 2020, and many people suffered from the negative consequences of the lockdown such as anxiety and loneliness (Sugawara et al.). The Japanese government offered a universal ¥100,000 (\$930) payment to all citizens in April 2020 (this is the payment Taku discusses on the phone with his family during the film.)

The COVID-19 pandemic might seem like an exceptional situation, but sadly, novel zoonotic diseases (diseases transmitted from animals to humans) are likely to become more common as a result of habitat destruction, which brings humans and wild animals into closer contact. We are unlikely to have lived through our last pandemic (Malm).

## **The workers fight back**

The story of Tokyo Uber Blues intimately illustrates how the gig economy's promises of freedom, flexibility, and autonomy do not reflect the reality of work. Taku was not the first person to discover this. Since the late 1800s, workers have been organizing to fight for better working conditions and fair wages. This type of organizing is often referred to as the labor movement, which is an international collective effort to improve the day-to-day realities of the workers of the world through solidarity.

In 2017, I worked for a different platform (Deliveroo) in the UK and found the same thing (Cant). However, this realization doesn't always lead to individual despair. Repeatedly, gig workers have responded to their poor working conditions by organizing into coalitions and consolidating their individual power through collectivizing. One classic form of this self-organization is the wildcat strike. This form of action has spread globally over the last seven years (Bessa et al.). Many of these strikes occur on a small-scale, localized scale and go unnoticed by the media. Whilst workers are implicitly positioned by the platform as competitors, all looking to beat each other to get the next delivery, bonds of solidarity can emerge that overcome this isolation.

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# DISCUSSION PROMPTS

## Starting The Conversation

The discussion prompts, which follow specific chapters of the film, are an invitation to dialogue. These questions should be open-ended, requiring critical engagement on the part of the viewer. There should be 4-6 prompts, each prompt with 3-6 questions. The Discussion Prompts always begin with “Starting the Conversation” which asks broad questions to the group as a warm-up. The discussions around the questions should last for 20? minutes.

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- What is a prominent feeling that this film brought up for you? Why?
- Were there parts of Taku’s experience that were familiar to you? If yes, in what ways?
- What are some, if any, connections you were able to make to Taku, or other workers featured, in Tokyo Uber Blues?
- If you could talk to Taku, what would you say to him?
- Who determines how much “value” different “types” of work are “worth?” In your opinion, does this seem fair and balanced?
- What alternatives can you imagine to make society more fair and balanced in terms of labor and wages?





- What, if anything, did you learn about the daily reality of working in the gig economy from Taku's representation?
- In what ways did Taku show his respect for other workers' labor?
- Taku was a very hard worker. What promises were you taught about "hard work?" Have these promises come true?
- How often do you see detailed daily accounts of other people's working lives in the media? Why do you think it seems unusual to get this kind of insight?
- Were there any moments or vignettes that stood out to you as particularly revealing?



## **Loneliness in the City**

In an interview about the film, Taku said: ‘When the old lady told me how Tokyo was totally flattened during the war, it suddenly occurred to me that our inner world today was similarly being “firebombed” even if the buildings were still standing. I wanted to make that clear to myself by daring to state it in the film.’

In scenes varying from his lonely birthday in a hotel to the final monologues on the bike, we get a sense of how difficult Taku finds his isolation in Tokyo.

- Do you think people are more lonely now than they used to be? If so, what are the social impacts of this change?
- What role does the workplace usually play in people’s social lives? Has this changed over time?
- What type of power can workers create when they are not siloed, separated, and isolated? What types of changes can come about through organizing and collective power?
- Can you think of any examples in your own community or state where collective power has made a difference that one person or politician could not?
- How could life be made less lonely? What changes in the social and economic system would need to take place to achieve this?

## **The Power (and Art) of Filmmaking**

- This was Taku's first film and he made it as a student. What did you learn about the power of documenting day-to-day realities?
- How might empowering students to recognize the inherent value in their lives and experiences make a difference in the world?
- What are other creative ways people can make otherwise invisible experiences more visible and what is the power in making these experiences and day-to-day realities visible on a larger scale?

# OPENING/CLOSING ACTIVITY

## OPTIONAL

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions.

1. How are the issues we have discussed having an impact on your community?
2. What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What might change if everyone knew it?
3. If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be and why? What would you hope their main takeaway would be?

## TAKING ACTION

If the group is having trouble generating their own ideas for next steps, these suggestions can help get things started:

### **Suggestion one: Investigate the conditions facing delivery workers in your area**

We all see and interact with delivery workers all the time, but often have no real understanding of their experiences of work. By starting to investigate their experiences of work we can build community and identify other avenues for action. This could be as simple as asking someone delivering a parcel how their day is going or talking to couriers waiting on the street corner about their experiences of work. If you want to find more resources that can guide you on the methods and approaches your investigation could take, check out the online resource: [transform your work](#). You can also modify the guide set out by Swedish social historian, Sven Lindquist, in [Dig Where You Stand](#) to produce a local history. Once you have some answers, try sharing them with your local community through a discussion event or via a written leaflet. The key to achieving change through this kind of process is to support workers to take action themselves - because positive change can only come from the bottom up.



# OPENING/CLOSING ACTIVITY (cont)

## **Suggestion two: Support local workers when they take action**

Because all working people belong to the same class, victories for one group tend to have cascading positive effects for the rest of us. If workers in your area are involved in action like running a unionization campaign or striking for better wages, go along to their events and share your support for their cause. Unionized workers in the middle of a dispute often collect money for a strike fund, so that they can replace the wages they lose during a strike. Running a fundraiser for the strike fund can be a really easy way to help out.

## **Suggestion three: Research the history of work and working-class organizations**

Understanding a problem is the first step towards solving it. There are many influential histories of work in the US in lots of different formats. Forming a reading/listening/watching group and engaging in a process of collective study can help you decide what you think the best way to achieve change is. If you want some preliminary recommendations, try these:

- Book: Mike Davis, Prisoners of the American Dream
- Book: Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States
- Podcast: [Fragile Juggernaut](#)
- Film: Harlan County, USA
- Film: Union Maids
- Film: American Union
- Film: Union
- PBS: [Workers Rights & the History of Labor Day](#)

# Resources

**Democratic Socialists of America (DSA):** DSA Labor (the National Labor Commission or NLC) is a body of DSA members active in the labor movement, including union members and stewards, union staff, workers center activists, union officers, labor journalists, union retirees, students in labor solidarity groups, and labor-oriented intellectuals.

**Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC)** - Resource to support workers who are interested in forming unions within their workplaces in the United States

***Tokyo Uber Blues*** – film website

**United Electrical (UE):** “UE” is the abbreviation for United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, a democratic national union representing tens of thousands of workers in a wide variety of manufacturing, public sector and private service-sector jobs.

**Know Your Rights in the Workplace** A resource for workers to understand and exercise their rights to improve workplace safety and conditions with guidance on protected actions under U.S. labor laws.

# Credits & Acknowledgments

## About the Author

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