



## **Alexandria Taxi Drivers Win Struggle for Economic Justice**

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Immigrant communities across the nation are battling discriminatory practices in the workforce that deny them basic social and economic rights. Such a battle has been fought and won in Alexandria, VA where a group of the City's predominantly immigrant taxi driver work force organized to form the Alexandria United Taxi-drivers Organization (AUTO) in 2002. Frustrated by unfair working conditions for drivers, AUTO, a chapter of the Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee (TWSC), launched a campaign for economic and human rights, and has experienced a recent victory – the complete overhaul of the Alexandria taxi industry laws.

The structure of the Alexandria taxi industry has created a situation where taxi-drivers provide virtually all of the capital, take virtually all of the business risk and provide virtually all of the labor and yet have little economic power. In contrast, taxicab companies -- which provide little if any service, invest little if any capital and provide little if any labor – possessed and controlled the license drivers needed to operate taxis. Additionally, the racial dynamics of this situation are troublesome. The two largest taxicab companies in Alexandria are owned by the same individual, a well-connected white business man. The four smaller taxicab companies are minority owned and the vast majority of the drivers/owners are immigrants of color. When the driver population became largely immigrant people of color in 1980, the law was changed to a system that effectively prevents drivers from switching companies. Consequently, they were at the mercy of companies, and some drivers were forced to endure hostile working environments or risk losing their investment.

Since 2003, Advancement Project and the Latham & Watkins law firm have supported AUTO/TWSC's campaign by advocating changes to the taxicab ordinance that would result in an industry that is fair to drivers and provide better service to customers. Together, we drafted proposed legislation and submitted it to the City Council of Alexandria, which initiated negotiations about needed changes to the City's discriminatory taxi ordinance.

On June 14, 2005, as a result of months of negotiations with AUTO/TWSC and company owners, the City Council of Alexandria passed a new taxi ordinance that is fair and equitable. Victory! After a 20-year struggle for economic justice, AUTO/TWSC was successful in achieving three major changes to the law:

- Licenses needed to operate taxis will no longer be controlled by taxi companies. Instead, they will be issued to drivers;
- Taxi drivers may move from one company to another with greater ease; and
- A dispute resolution process has been created which places a new check on the absolute power of Alexandria's taxi companies and represents a significant shift of the power dynamics between companies and drivers.



## ADVANCEMENT PROJECT

Recognizing that laws are useless if they are not implemented fairly and according to their intent, Advancement Project will continue to work with AUTO and TWSC to monitor the enforcement of the new law. Congratulations AUTO! Your labor has not been in vain.