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**Identity**

# Lyft and Citi Bike Stand With the Protesters— Just Not Past 6pm

As cities enact curfews, public bikes and scooters could easily stay in service. Instead, companies are taking a side that hurts protesters and essential workers.



By [Hannah Smothers](#)

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JEFF GREENBERG/CONTRIBUTOR VIA GETTY

— or two hours before the city’s temporary 8 p.m. curfew. Revel, which operates electric scooters around a handful of NYC neighborhoods, announced it’d be doing the same thing. In Los Angeles, Bird, Lime, and Lyft-owned electric scooters shut off each night when the city’s curfew hits, suddenly shutting down wherever they may be. In Washington, D.C., the city’s bike share and numerous scooter services have also gone dark this week.

Until now, all of these transit options, and others like them across the country with their own Black Lives Matter protest–related curfews, have operated seamlessly throughout the coronavirus pandemic, in many cases even expanding service and eliminating membership costs to better serve essential workers.

“During this crisis, we want to do everything we can to help New York City recover, and right now, that means helping healthcare workers get to work safely,” Frank Reig, CEO and co-founder of Revel, told Streetsblog in late March, as the multimillion-dollar scooter company expanded its service area and made rides free for health care workers.

Citi Bike similarly granted a month of free membership to first responders, health care workers, and transit employees in New York City under its Critical Workforce Membership Program. “Having seen higher demand for Citi Bikes near our critical hospitals, Lyft [the company that operates Citi Bike] has arrived at a generous and creative plan that will help get first responders where they need to go,” Polly Trottenberg, the commissioner at the city’s Department of Transportation, said at the time.

Lime granted free scooter rides to health care workers in more than a dozen cities, as the company’s chief policy officer nodded to the “critical role of micromobility in

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micromobility services were happy to take financial hits in the interest of serving certain communities. In doing so, they also solidified themselves as essential infrastructure, seemingly immune to lockdowns or curfews. Now, as protests highlight the public health crisis of police brutality, these companies' decisions to accept edicts from local officials to shut down early is not only a significant disservice to essential workers but also potentially dangerous to protesters who've come to rely on them.

Almost all of these micromobility services operate separately from public transit systems and exist via public-private partnerships with each city. Many also have demonstrated histories of acting without concern for regulation. Revel has more than \$30 million in funding and appeared with no municipal oversight in 2019. Bird and Lime have both brought in funding in the hundreds of millions, and scattered their scooters around LA before they were allowed under the law.

New York City's Citi Bike system is the largest micromobility service in the country, with more than 12,000 bikes across more than 700 docking stations. The program's original sponsor and namesake, Citigroup, is a multibillion-dollar investment banking firm. The bikes now operate under the country's largest bike share company, Motivate, but since Lyft acquired Motivate in 2018, the rideshare company has taken over its contract with the city. A contract with the city's Department of Transportation grants Citi Bike total exclusivity on bike shares in New York City, along with pages of requirements it must meet.

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2018, shortly after Lyft took ownership of the program, Citi Bike violated its contractual obligation to keep at least 97 percent of its fleet in operation at all times, when nearly half of the system's bikes were removed for repairs. At a contract-stipulated penalty of \$15 per bike for each day the fleet was below the 97 percent benchmark, Citi Bike eventually accrued nearly \$1.4 million in fees owed to the city. The city never collected these damages.

Citi Bike has issued a number of acknowledgements of its disrupted service during this “challenging time for the city,” as it alludes that its hands are tied by the mayor’s office. “We recognize what a challenging time this is for the City and are appreciative of all the work by our public officials on behalf of New Yorkers,” a spokesperson for Lyft told VICE via email, echoing the sentiment shared by the Citi Bike Twitter account. “Citi Bike is a public-private partnership, and we were required by our partners in New York City government to discontinue service during curfew hours. We know how disruptive this is to everyone who relies on Citi Bike, especially essential workers, and apologize.”

The company is likely concerned that simply releasing the bikes in solidarity with essential workers and protesters, would be a breach of contract, giving the city cause to sue or void the entire agreement. In the past, Lyft has pushed back on city regulations when those regulations threatened their bottom line; why that isn’t an option now, as the essential workers the company recently promised to serve are stripped of access, remains unclear.

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Plenty clear is the vital role Citi Bike has played in the week’s protests, especially as people scramble to comply with the city’s curfew, with driving banned in most of

among the many other tools they have at their disposal, would have unfettered access to bikes they often use to intimidate and kettle protesters, while civilians' personal transportation access is cut off.

Even historically annoying features of the Citi Bikes are now being put to use by protesters: Riding or slowly walking alongside a bike helps a person maintain social distancing, even in a crowd, thanks to its clunky frame. At 45 pounds, they're a pain in the ass to ride up even a very slight incline, but protesters have used their heft for things like forming a barricade or breaking through something made of a material such as glass. In Paris on Wednesday, protesters even made an effective demonstration out of piling bikes and scooters up and lighting them on fire.

Cutting off access to micromobility services on a whim is a transparent protest-squashing move by the cities giving these directives. But it's hard to believe that the penalty for disobeying or even challenging the orders would be something that any well-funded company couldn't handle. Releasing the scooters and bikes, in the service of solidarity against police brutality, would certainly have more impact than previous gestures, like Citi Bike's introduction of rainbow bikes during Pride—which, some might remember, began as an anti-police protest.

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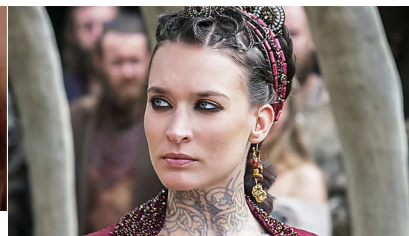
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