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TECHNOLOGY

Seattle Will Allow Uber and Lyft Drivers to Form Unions

By NICK WINGFIELD and MIKE ISAAC DEC. 14, 2015

SEATTLE — The Seattle City Council voted unanimously to approve a bill allowing drivers for Uber, Lyft and other ride-hailing apps to form unions.

Council members voted 9-0 in favor of the ordinance, the first legislation of its kind in the country. The decision was greeted with cheers in a City Council chamber packed with supporters holding placards that read “Driver Unity.” The measure is likely to be challenged in court.

The vote is a victory for the App-Based Drivers Association, or ABDA, of Seattle, an organization of on-demand contract workers that lobbied with the local Teamsters union for the legislation. It is a fight that other drivers around the country have watched closely; union organizers in California have said that the outcome of the Seattle vote could influence actions taken in their own cities.

One member of the City Council, Nick Licata, called the vote “history-setting in what we’re attempting to do here in terms of advancing the rights of drivers.”

The ordinance is also the latest headache for Uber, which is in battles about employment issues across the country. The company faces a class-action lawsuit in California on behalf of some drivers who wish to be considered full-time employees,

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not contractors. Uber has consistently resisted that effort, underscoring the flexibility its service affords those who drive for the company.

In a statement after the vote, a spokeswoman for Lyft said that the ordinance passed would threaten the privacy of drivers, impose costs on passengers and the city and conflict with federal law.

“We urge the mayor and full council to reconsider this legislation and listen to the voices of their constituents who choose to drive with Lyft because of the flexible economic opportunity it offers,” the statement read.

Legal specialists said the measure could run afoul of federal labor laws. Groups of independent contractors engaging in collective bargaining could also run up against illegal price-fixing issues under antitrust law.

The ordinance is raising other concerns in Seattle, which were outlined in a statement the city’s mayor, Ed Murray, made after the vote. He said he supported the rights of workers to organize, but added that he was concerned about the unknown costs of administering the collective bargaining process and other burdens the ordinance will place on city staff members.

As a result, the mayor said he would not sign the bill. But it will still become law even without his signature.

“As this ordinance takes effect, my administration will begin its work to determine what it will take to implement the law,” Mr. Murray said in a statement. “I believe it will be necessary to seek additional clarifying legislation from the Council.”

Speaking before the vote, Tom Rasmussen, a council member, acknowledged that the ordinance would face legal challenges, but said that the council had not allowed that threat to deter it from passing groundbreaking legislation in the past. “Seattle has often led the way on innovative policies,” he said.

Last year, Seattle became the first major city in the country to pass a \$15-an-hour minimum wage law, versions of which were subsequently passed in San Francisco, Los Angeles and other cities.

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Uber did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Nick Wingfield reported from Seattle and Mike Isaac from New York.

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