

Obama strategist jumps aboard controversial Uber app (Update)

August 19 2014, by Glenn Chapman

A political strategist who ran US President Barack Obama's winning campaign in 2008 has hopped on board at controversial smartphone car-hailing service Uber.

The move signals that Uber has no intention of backing down in the face of growing pressure from regulators and traditional taxi operators intent on putting the brakes on Internet-age car services.

David Plouffe will become senior vice president of policy and strategy at the San Francisco-based firm beginning late September, Uber said Tuesday.

Plouffe will manage Uber's global policy and political activities, communications, and branding efforts, Uber chief executive Travis Kalanick said in a blog post, describing Plouffe as "a proven field general and strategist."

"I couldn't be more excited about Uber's new leader, who will be bringing the expertise, wisdom, and strategic mindset to the next phase of the Uber movement, shepherding us well beyond the challenges of the Big Taxi cartel and into the brave new world of software-powered transportation."

Uber has upset the established taxi set in several countries.

In June, taxi drivers snarled traffic in downtown Washington in protest

against smartphone car-hailing services such as Uber, which they say are cutting into their business.

Several hundred cabbies took part in the demonstration on wheels spearheaded by the Washington DC Taxi Operators Association, affiliated with the powerful Teamsters union.

Taxi drivers in London, Paris, Berlin and Rome staged similar protests that same month, saying unlicensed drivers and chauffeur services using Uber have been chipping away at their client base.

South Korea's capital Seoul in July revealed plans to ban Uber, saying it raised passenger safety issues and threatened the livelihood of licensed taxi drivers.

The Uber app, which allows clients to connect directly with "black car" services, was launched in Seoul in August last year.

'Taxi industry cartel'

Uber is the most prominent of the apps that are shaking up the traditional taxi landscape in cities around the world.

It has already faced significant resistance from regulators in several countries, who accuse it of unfair competition and lack of standards.

"Uber loves to portray itself as a plucky little tech startup fighting against an imaginary Goliath," Taxicab, Limousine & Paratransit Association president Robert Werth said in an email statement to AFP.

"But look who just bought themselves one of the best spin doctors in the country... they are going to need him."

The US nonprofit industry association uses a whosdrivingyou.org website as part of a campaign against "ridesharing" services.

While Uber is the main target of the taxi industry's ire, it's only one of many new smartphone-dependent car services seen as bypassing strict regulations faced by licensed cab drivers.

Uber is present in more than 170 cities spread about dozens of countries.

"Uber has the chance to be a once-in-a-decade—if not a once-in-a-generation—company," Plouffe said in the blog post.

"Of course, that poses a threat to some, and I've watched as the taxi industry cartel has tried to stand in the way of technology and big change. Ultimately, that approach is unwinnable."

Plouffe said he was looking forward to doing what he can to make sure Uber remains an option for people despite opposition by "those who want to maintain a monopoly and play the inside game" to stymie new services.

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