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# Dynamics of Mobilizing and Unionizing Mobility Platform Workers. A Cross-Country, Cross-Industry Analysis

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Over the past decade, many services have been greatly transformed by the rise of digital platforms, innovative actors who deploy disruptive digital technologies through market-conquest strategies. The global expansion of these "lean platforms" is rooted in an economic model characterized by the "hyper-externalization" (Srnicek, 2016) of physical capital and labor, the use of officially self-employed workers and the ability to bypass work and employment regulations that have traditionally been based on the triple unity of place, time and collective organization (Brugière, 2020; Degryse, 2020).

To study these trends, we focus, in this special issue, on location-based mobility workers in urban settings i.e., app drivers and home meal couriers. They have become prominent in the public space and eye due to their market visibility, through their protests and the controversies they have engendered. They embody new workforce figures who are emerging in institutional, social and territorial grey areas (Carelli et al. 2022; Azaïs, 2019).

Digital platforms have evolved along a timeline of labour market transformations in a broader context of economic and social crisis. The platforms took advantage of a pool of un- and under-employed workers looking for jobs or extra income in the wake of the 2008 "Great Recession." Growth has been especially strong in two different markets: passenger transport, where digital platforms are in competition with taxis; and meal delivery, where they have created a new market. During the COVID-19 crisis, meal delivery platforms took advantage of lock-down restrictions and experienced meteoric expansion that caused a surge in demand for labour. Meanwhile, as demand plummeted for passenger drivers, with personal mobility sharply declining in urban areas, many drivers experienced worsening economic insecurity. Depending on the national context, this segmentation of experiences between the various occupational groups due to differences in working conditions and legislative protection led to disparities in grievances and forms protest. Delivery workers demanded greater protections for deteriorating working conditions, whereas passenger drivers often called for enhanced market regulation and relief from social assistance.

> In addition to these conjunctural issues, both groups have consistently called on authorities to formally recognize their employment status as fully-fledged wage-earners or self-employed (Nasom-Tissandier & Sweeney, 2019, Dubal, 2020, Mazuyer 2022). They have made more specific claims for "digital labour rights," such as "algorithm social rights" (Chagny & Forrestier, 2021). Such demands have taken shape through mobilizations and campaigns to organize unions, which, though fragile and limited, have nonetheless been appearing in local contexts worldwide since the mid-2010s, in particular via the development of new forms of individual or collective struggle (Dufresne, Leterme & Vandewattyne, 2018, Brugière, 2020; Dufresne & Leterme, 2021). These organizational dynamics are part and parcel of current trends towards the revitalization of collective action (Nizzoli, 2017, Kesselman & Sauviat, 2017). They often take the form of workers' collectives (Trappmann et al., 2020), ephemeral groupings or virtual relationships on social media (Bessa et al., 2022) beyond the traditional bounds of organized labor and put the latter to the test.

The articles in this special issue attempt to account for these emerging dynamics of workers struggle in platform capitalism through a comparative analysis of the relations that impel autonomous groupings and other protest initiatives towards more structured collective representation and unionization. The labour movement initially faced a host of obstacles that hindered its ability to represent and defend the interests of platform workers. Among them we find the use of self-employment to bypass labour law, established grievance procedures and collective bargaining, the perpetual and accelerating changes in the industries and the nimble adaptiveness of digital platform strategies. The platforms have largely managed to exploit lengthy judicial procedures by adjusting their business models accordingly. At the same time they have aggressively lobbied and interfered with public authorities, which at times have proved to be complacent or even facilitating, as shown by the recent "Uber Files" scandal in France (Simonnet,

2023). Yet other challenges include the rapid turnover of the workers and their myriad profiles: students; low-skilled full-time workers; higher skilled workers seeking regular or occasional additional income; and legal or illegal migrants. Most platform workers have subsequently become indifferent to, if not mistrustful of, unions. In many countries, transportation employer's associations have teamed up with unlikely allies, like the taxi drivers they employ, to deploy resources and mobilize public opinion and decisions-makers in defense of their vested interests.

This organizational diversity, embedded in national experience, defies any reductive paradigms pitting grassroots collectives against traditional unions and institutions. (Cini et al., 2021) On the contrary, players in these two intricately entwined spheres have often cooperated in a meaningful, increasingly frequent, and more or less sustained and formalized manner. A number of unions have accommodated new organizing strategies or even overhauled their governance structures in several ways: providing logistical and media support for protests, legal and financial support for employee reclassification lawsuits, and even labour organizing (Vallas, 2019). Workers have been organized through affiliation of workers' collectives and associations (Sachs, 2019) and through direct recruitment of individual workers, even to the extent of amending union bylaws to allow self-employed workers to join (Gasparri & Tassinari, 2020). In the broader political sphere, organized labour's voice has joined the public debate over the ways and means to regulate platform work.

It is important to emphasize the diversity and ambivalence of such actions that have proliferated worldwide in response to the sprawling entry of similar and simultaneous market-conquering business models and strategies, thus making the study of the "shared shock" of digital platformization a singular comparative exercise (Thelen, 2018). The ways these new economic models have been received in various countries have, understandably, produced locally specific power relations, depending on the degree of socio-political consensus, notably around the relative influence of embedded groups (Carelli & Kesselman 2019, Kesselman 2022). This comparative dimension lies at the heart of this special issue and the articles herein presented. The actual degree of "disruption" (Davis & Sinha, 2021, Ford & Honan, 2019) can be best ascertained, we contend, by comparing platform workers' collective actions and labour organizing experiences in countries with different union cultures and national experiences on multiple continents: Asia, South America and Europe. Through the lens of such comparison and recent research, we hope to identify current trends in regulating platformized markets (Chagny, 2019; Dufresne & Leterme, 2021).

Ultimately, the questions that underpin this thematic dossier can be summed up as follows. First, what variations can be observed in the forms and dynamics of unionization and mobilization in response to the global phenomenon of platformization of mobility-related sectors? Second, how do such forms and dynamics play out on various levels and dimensions—local, national, transnational or virtual—and how successful are they?

These two questions address four overlapping concerns:

1. How platform workers represent themselves collectively in dynamic terms, given the fast-changing organizational forms adopted by the various stakeholders, the nature of their relationships, how these elements are positioned within the national industrial relations landscape, and how they are impacted by recent economic and health crises.

2. The platform workers' repertoires of collective action, their various modes of action, either "classic" (demonstrations, strikes, rallies, corporate headquarter blockades) or emerging (app boycotting, slowdowns, misclassification lawsuits, alternative modes of organizing and communication), their links with various kinds of stakeholders and their cooperative relationships in context.

3. Organized labour's role, demands and strategies, analyzed in their diversity: agreements and discords over major issues in platform work (employment status, income, working conditions, social protection, social dialogue); and particularly links to the regulatory framework, the workers' social profiles and their occupational groups.

The degree of disruption by platformization will be studied here through international comparisons of unions and labour relations, with particular attention paid to the power dynamics among a growing number of stakeholders. The various contributors to this special issue attempt to provide a nuanced understanding of actual and effective regulation and the various alternatives in environments of rapid economic and political change. In this context, a wide range of players navigate in grey areas: institutional (governments, public agencies, courts, unions), non-institutional (lawyers, experts, consumer associations), traditional (taxi companies) and emerging (platforms, collectives, cooperatives) (Carelli et al. 2022; Azaïs et al., 2017).

# The contribution of this special issue

The eight articles provide insight into comparative analysis and debate about union dynamics in the era of platform capitalism. We bring together a geographically diverse range of case studies: three from Europe (Belgium, Spain, France); two from South America (Brazil); and three from Asia (China, India, Japan). This sample provides an opportunity, as mentioned above, to reflect on the local variations of this form of globalized capitalism through its convergences and disparities, be they between continents or between the Global North and the Global South. On a smaller scale, within single countries, fieldwork shows how regulations and public policies affect the structure and dynamics of organizing initiatives and collective action in terms labour relations and also markets for platformized services. The contributors have examined "on-demand" passenger app transport—as distinguished from taxis—or meal delivery, and often both in parallel.

These various levels of analysis provide theoretical and empirical insights into the forms of platform worker mobilization and unionization, which can be broadly grouped into two patterns of collective organization (henceforth referred to as axes). On the one hand, there are well-identified "bottom-up" organizing practices, through grassroots collectives that are more or less informal, long-lasting, autonomous and mistrustful of traditional unions. On the other, there are mainly "top-down" organizational initiatives by existing unions, usually through rapprochements with collectives in platformized industries beyond their usual jurisdictions.

# Bottom-up Dynamics: Challenges of Regulating Self-Organization among Platform Workers

The first axis of this special issue covers four articles on the various forms of self-organization among platform workers who have come together on the fringes of established labour organizations. The two mobility worker industries have been studied on the three continents.

In the first article, Cirlene Christo, Simone Oliveira, Denise Alvarez, Letícia Masson and Marianne Lacomblez use an ergological approach (group and individual interviews) to study alternative forms of worker organization in passenger transport and food delivery in Brazil, a country where industry and labour regulations are sparse. Platforms have emerged in both industries especially by taking advantage of neoliberal labour market reforms and structural labor market informality. This context helps explain why platform workers have distanced themselves from wage labour and trade unions and turned to developing autonomous collectives and cooperatives (mainly delivery

workers in the latter case). This first article is about the ways these "relatively significant collective entities" have experimented with various strategies in support of initiatives to regulate working conditions and remuneration systems, notably by joining an exceptional national strike movement during the summer of 2020.

The second article on Brazil, by Marco Aurélio Santana, is precisely about this mobilization of motorcycle couriers—the *Breque dos apps*. Based on analysis of social media posts, combined with interviews and fieldwork observations of demonstrations, the author shows how online activism, in conjunction with actions on the ground, has mobilized workers and introduced a new type of collective action that could be added to the traditional repertoire: the digital strike, whereby couriers massively boycotted platforms by disconnecting from apps. Digital activism has thus helped build collective identity and bring more visibility to the movement within and outside the occupational groups, while unfortunately thereby providing the platform managers with a weapon for repressive action. Although social media have been key to mobilizing platform workers, they are not sufficient to overcome the vulnerability and fragmentation that particularly characterizes this group.

The third article, by Swati Reddy Chintala, is based on ethnographic fieldwork and online research in another country of the Global South and BRICS member: India. It provides original insight into trends in mobilizing and organizing drivers and food couriers. The author shows how platformization can create favourable conditions for collective worker action in a labour market dominated by informality. By eliminating hierarchical intermediaries—that are omnipresent in the informal economy—and by formalizing a technological and organizational network, algorithmic management can give workers a lever to identify each other in public and digital spaces. This is the basis of occupational solidarity as well as the vector for identifying the platform as the recipient of their demands, in addition to the state, that was previously the only interlocutor for informal workers.

A final contribution is a study from a European country: Belgium. Drawing on ethnographic materials, Meike Brodersen, Anne Dufresne, Anastasia Joukovsky and Vitali Zephyr examine the consequences of a recent policy to regulate platform work for food delivery and passenger transport through a comparative analysis of the two industries. By introducing an official and standard category of "platform worker," based on the presumption of wage employment, this policy has tended to bring unions closer to grassroots collectives, which had previously developed in the two industries on the fringes of traditional labour. The necessity to face these new challenges has given rise to a real process of convergence, albeit an ambiguous if not fragile one.

## "Top-Down" Responses: Union Initiatives to Institutionalize Labour Relations in Platform Work

The second axis brings together research on both industries of platform work—in Asia and Europe—on the dynamics of attempts to regulate work relations and institutionalize labour relations in platform businesses. These articles focus on actions by official unions, while not losing sight of the key and inseparable role of autonomous groups.

Irene López-García, Maria Antonia Ribón-Seisdedos, Karol Morales-Muñoz and Beltrán Roca focus on Spain to study union organizing and collective action after implementation of the August 2021 Rider Law, which introduced a presumption of employment for platform food couriers. Through a socio-spatial approach, illustrated by the *Riders por Derechos* network, they shed light on a process of union institutionalization, i.e., a transition from community and local unionism to a more conventional model of company-based collective bargaining, in dialogue with public authorities.

This process is hampered, however, by the industry's fragmentation, by limited union rights and by industry professional associations that are opposed to wage labour.

In France, which has relatively little digital work regulation, major labour confederations such as the CFDT and the CGT have nevertheless recently given critical support to platform workers, with the ultimate aim of unionizing them. Guénolé Marchadour portrays the precarious conditions of male, migrant and racialized workers through a comparison between app drivers and couriers, combined with an intersectional approach. His analysis shows how these trajectories are linked to the hybrid, fragile nature of labour mobilization and unionization drives, which have nonetheless made real progress. There have been legal victories, though whose scope and concrete implementation remain limited, and a re-appropriation of strike action by workers, albeit with a consequent rise in tensions when this traditional union tactic ended up becoming a "routine" at the impulse of unions.

Ke Huang uses data collected in the field and online to reveal the dynamic actions of institutional unions in China—a BRICS member and the world's second largest economic power, whose developmental model is based on a combination of capitalist production and state control. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), the only officially recognized union, initially failed to stem the anarchic development of platform capitalism, which, as elsewhere, was outsourcing work and circumventing labour regulations. This failure was also due in part to pressures from the Chinese government. Despite the state's directives, however, the union was impelled into action through the social conflict launched by the autonomous collectives of delivery workers. By expanding its sphere of representation to these workers, it broke with the dominant model of paternalistic, corporatist unionism.

In a final article on Japan, Kenshin Nakano describes how the main Japanese trade union confederation (Rengô) made a similar turnaround in response to the rise of community unionism by couriers, thereby breaking with the country's traditional hegemony of company-based, shop floor unionism, propelled by a broad-based bottom-up movement toward union revitalization. In Japan, app drivers are experiencing an opposite dynamic than elsewhere, one of deregulation of a transport industry that has historically been highly regulated with a predominance of employees. This employee-employer relationship had previously laid the basis for an alliance between employers and driver employee unions in opposition to platforms through the introduction of national market entry barriers. Such stop-gap measures have nevertheless tended to erode, especially with the pandemic and with taxi companies partnering with platforms in view of gaining the latter's technology.

# Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the various contributions to this special issue shed light on the organizational dynamics of platform workers and how they interact with the revitalization of labour unions. These dynamics include not only bottom-up initiatives by worker collectives on the fringes of established unions but also top-down ones, initiated by the latter, which were in retreat during the early phases of platform growth. Are these examples part and parcel of an ongoing global process of institutionalizing labour relations in platform capitalism? Current evidence doesn't allow such a broad generalization. These articles also show the vulnerability of organizational initiatives—in particular, grassroots collectives—to various structural constraints: the resilience of platforms in defying government initiatives to regulate markets just as the difficulties of public authorities in bring them about, and sometimes their ambivalence toward such action. While it goes without saying that unions are most active in those countries where they have long been established, a longstanding presence remains insufficient to ensure their getting a foothold in platformized

industries or being able to influence the regulation of such industries. Numerous obstacles have preventing them from doing so, including digital platforms' aggressive business models and the context of ongoing crises that has created broader societal challenges for the labour movement. Yes, "bottom-up" and "top-down" dynamics are showing signs of convergence, but this trend remains fragile and uncertain in times of economic and political volatility.

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