

Platforms and the Challenges for Workers' Digital Action: The Brazilian Experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Article abstract

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Summary

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Platforms and the Challenges for Workers' Digital Action: The Brazilian Experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

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Keywords: delivery workers; workers' digital action; digital platforms; collective action; Brazil

Résumé

L'article analyse comment les travailleurs brésiliens utilisent les réseaux sociaux pour leur organisation. En suivant les réseaux sociaux des organisations des travailleurs, nous avons vérifié les défis apportés par ce nouvel instrument dans l'action collective. L'analyse porte sur la mobilisation des livreurs de plateformes, réalisée tout au long du mois de juillet 2020, lors de la pandémie de COVID-19 au Brésil. La recherche utilise une méthodologie qualitative en observant, sélectionnant et analysant environ cinq cents publications sur les médias sociaux de ce groupe professionnel. Les médias sociaux les plus utilisés tout au long du processus d'organisation de la grève ont été Facebook, Youtube, Whatsapp, Twitter et Instagram. Ainsi, la recherche s'est concentrée sur ces médias, collectant des publications au format texte, audio et vidéo. De plus, des données empiriques ont été obtenues par le suivi et l'observation directe des déplacements dans les rues, ainsi que par des entretiens avec les participants. La recherche indique que les usages complémentaires entre les actions en ligne et hors ligne, le succès dans l'expansion et la diffusion du mouvement à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur du groupe professionnel, lui donnant une grande visibilité, l'aide à l'organisation d'un groupe professionnel dispersé dans l'espace garantissant l'engagement, l'utilisation des réseaux a joué un rôle prépondérant dans la construction d'une identité collective désormais reconvertie dans l'action politique en tant que sujet politique collectif. Malgré tous ces gains, les défis étaient également de taille. Par exemple, la visibilité a augmenté la capacité des entreprises à réprimer les participants et la fragmentation organisationnelle interne du groupe n'a pas été surmontée hors ligne ou en ligne. Tout cela indique qu'aujourd'hui, malgré le fait qu'il est impossible de penser ces mouvements sans recourir aux réseaux sociaux, il ne faut pas penser qu'ils peuvent à eux seuls résoudre les problèmes politiques et d'organisation.

Mots-clés: Livreurs; Mobilisation en ligne des travailleurs; Plateformes numériques; Action collective; Brésil

1. Introduction

In this article, I will analyze the ways in which Brazilian working-class movements are using social media in their struggles, my aim being to identify the challenges this strategy creates¹. In recent times, social media platforms have been used more frequently in the daily activities of unions and worker associations. This growing presence became even more intense during the COVID-19 pandemic. In our view, there is a need for further investigation into the use of social media by worker organizations, particularly as a means to mobilize workers in Brazil.

Here, we will analyze the recent mobilizations by platform delivery workers. They organized the “Brake the Apps” (#Brequedosapps) movement² on two days, July 1 and 25, 2020. During the COVID-19 health emergency, delivery workers stopped their activities and demanded better pay and working conditions. The “Brake,” like other similar movements around the world, made heavy use of digital platforms as an organizing tool. There were a number of initiatives, in addition to simply bringing together various types of organizations, such as unions, associations and independent worker collectives. The “Brake” is thus an interesting subject for social analysis.

For our study, we used a qualitative methodology for online studies (Fielding et al., 2017; Hine, 2017) based on social media ethnography (Postill & Pink, 2012). We combined the possibilities of online and offline ethnographic practices by observing these movements and by taking part in them. For this study, we observed and analyzed around five hundred posts on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp.

We examined material from three profiles that were very prominent during the “Brake”: @tretanotrampo, @entregadoresantifascistas and @travessia_coletivosindical. In all three cases, digital forms and content were extremely important to labour organizing³. The material included texts, audios and videos that were produced by collective organizations and individual workers. We also participated in five WhatsApp groups from different parts of Brazil, which were used for debates, guidance and movement organization. In a similar vein, we consulted the online editions of a range of newspapers⁴ that covered the “Brake” in different parts of the country. We also carried out direct participant observation on the streets of Rio de Janeiro during movement actions, in addition to interviewing participants, with a view to learning more about the “Brake” organization.

Labour studies have always shown an interest in the impacts of technology on the world of work. Interest has been mainly in the impacts of technological changes on labour processes. There have been comparatively fewer studies on the use of technology by workers to organize and mobilize. Nevertheless, such use has intensified in recent decades with the explosion of digital technologies. For example, during the initial development of the Internet (Web 1.0) a major debate took place about the possibilities for its use by the working class and its organizations (Dencik & Wilkin, 2018). The second wave of the Internet (Web 2.0) has raised a new question: how are workers and their organizations dealing with the impacts of new technologies and using them in their struggles?

2. Social Movements and Social Media

Research on collective action has had a long trajectory in studies of social movements. In recent times, with the pervasiveness of digital technologies and social networks in daily life and with their increasing use by social movements, such use has gained importance in this area of research,

particularly in studies of movements during the 2010s, such as the Arab Spring, 15-M and Occupy Wall Street.

Taken as a whole, these studies present the main themes that have guided the analyses of uses of digital platforms by social movements. The first theme is the possible differentiation of the logics of connective and collective actions. For some authors, these activities are guided by two distinct logics, even though they may occur in the same general ecology of action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: 739). In connective action, “communication becomes a prominent part of the organizational structure” as an important organizing element. Other authors disagree with this analysis, claiming that it cannot capture the dynamics of the processes under study. They argue that we should pay attention to possible overlaps between connective and collective actions, looking at what each kind of action can contribute (Kavada, 2018).

The second theme includes the possible intersections and complementarities between collective actions and connective actions, without either one replacing the other (Castells, 2015). The aim here is either to understand digital actions as autonomous or simply to define the real actions of movements (Gerbaudo, 2012).

The third theme covers other aspects. Although social media are undoubtedly key to triggering social movements and causing their initial growth, the use and effects of social media still raise other issues that should be analyzed. Some authors point out that the Internet expands the capacity and speed of movement growth, thus increasing or creating possibilities for people to self-organize. Important doubts remain however on the Internet's role in maintaining and continuing social movements (Tufekci, 2017). Such movements are said to have two characteristics (Tufekci, 2017): “adhocracy,” i.e., they develop without significant previous definitions, making ad hoc decisions as they advance; and “tactical freeze,” i.e., digitally-organized movements end up being stuck with previously successful tactics but now lack the ability to move forward and adapt their practices to later times and stages of confrontation and negotiation, or even to possible victory.

One can even question the relationship between different digital media and their roles in mobilizing the masses rapidly. Too much attention may be paid to those roles as a sufficient or determining factor in the emergence of social movements, particularly if one ignores previously existing non-digital networks (Fominaya, 2020).

A fourth theme covers the uses made of digital platforms by social movements. To what extent might these technologies determine the actions of social movements and their uses of technology? There are multiple possible uses of platforms and technologies, from surveillance and control to connective action. In the case of social movements, one should remember that they are not free of tensions and that social media shape the actions of social movements, given that these platforms are developed according to neoliberal market logics that guide how they operate (Lazar et. al., 2018). In addition, a movement will use a platform generally in line with the technological possibilities available. Technologies thus often frame the operations of a movement without determining the movement itself (Gerbaudo, 2012).

This disinterest in collective identity—or even in whether or not identity is important at all—“obscures the symbolic and cultural aspect inherent in social media activism and in protest communications more generally (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015: 2). It is a mistake to place digital social media and their uses in opposition to collective identity, given the “actual content conveyed through such ‘channels’: to the discourses, iconographies, that activists forge via social media” (2015:2).

3. Workers and Social Media Action

There have been many studies on how social movements use social media. Some research has also pointed out the challenges faced by studies that specifically target working class movements. Dencik and Wilkin (2018) point out their importance: digital media platforms is a fundamental step in understanding contemporary forms of protest and resistance activists often use these platforms to organize and mobilize. However, the same two researchers argue that the literature on platform use ends up focusing on new protest movements to the detriment of historical and more enduring institutions— particularly labour organizations — which have also used social media for the same purposes.

Those studies have brought up some interesting points. Since the Internet's first wave, unions have been very slow to use digital platforms. Additionally, the uses they make of them almost always seem to take place within a long-established culture and within a centralized power structure (Dencik & Wilkin, 2018). Thus, democratization is often a beneficiary of these new technologies while being also a source of resistance to them. For example, new technologies may help reach new audiences, organize the grassroots, make linkages within communities and with other movements, help collectives of workers achieve greater democratization by challenging the bureaucratic structures of their representative organizations, and so on.

In bringing workers closer together, these tools are not substitutes for face-to-face interaction, but rather accelerators that push organizations into new ways of confronting the challenges of precarious work (Drew, 2018), including of course the multiple ways in which these technologies have helped delivery workers form new political collectives (Grohmann et al., 2023).

Despite their great potential, digital technologies and their uses are problematic at various levels. For example, they may cause organizers to focus on gaining greater visibility and access to the media to the detriment of organizing and mobilizing in real life. The safety of activists may also be compromised by their exposure on social media, which makes them easily identified targets (Dencik & Wilkin, 2018).

Although digital resources are key to recruiting, organizing and mobilizing workers, digital unionism is still far from becoming a reality. A group might have as many activists on social media as it does at the grassroots level, but this does not translate into engagement with unions via digital platforms (Carneiro & Costa, 2022). There are still some limitations to digital organizing, with the top-down, vertical model being replicated in the new media to the detriment of a more interactive and horizontal one. Online activism can thus reproduce the same hierarchical processes that exist in offline organizations (Carneiro & Costa, 2022).

As can be seen, researchers are examining a set of empirical, theoretical and methodological issues not only in the more general literature on the use of social media by social movements but also in the specifics of how labour movements use these technologies, with a view to identifying points of consensus and disagreement over the use of new technologies. With the above points in mind, let us now analyze the use of digital technologies in the case of the “Brake” movement.

4. The “Brake”

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Brazil in March 2020, bringing along with it organizing and mobilizing issues that increased the challenges faced by the Brazilian working class and its unions (Campos, 2020). Regressive policies against workers were bundled into the labour and social security reforms of the Michel Temer (2016-2018) and Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) governments. These policies were due to the unfolding global crisis of capitalism that began in 2008. Even previously,

Brazilian workers had to deal with employment precariousness, a large informal economy and unemployment. The health crisis intensified these problems and made their impact even more serious.

As Campos (2020) shows, public health measures limited union activities and the grassroots work of labour leaders. Restrictions were imposed on both people's mobilities and activities in workplaces, thus challenging organized labour's ability to dialogue and represent workers. In some industries where workplaces continued to operate, unions maintained some of their routines, albeit in a limited way, visiting these spaces and staying in direct contact with the workers they represented.

The health crisis made unions incorporate new dynamics based on the use of digital technologies (Pessanha & Rodrigues, 2020). Labour organizations agreed to social isolation, while seeking to maintain contact through meetings and assemblies. They continued to work on numerous subjects by launching campaigns, by creating WhatsApp groups and so on, while often operating via digital technologies. The new communication technologies helped maintain contacts and reduce isolation, but not without challenges. Among other things, they were often adopted in non-interactive ways. In any case, they enabled the grassroots to join in many experiences that brought them closer to their unions and made them more involved.

In this exceptional context, use of social media became prominent in collective actions by the Brazilian working class, especially in the case of the movement to organize delivery workers. This movement drew the attention of social researchers, who were attracted to its multiple dimensions and importance (Santana & Braga, 2020).

Delivery workers have a long history in Brazil, going back at least to the 1970s and 1980s. This labour sector faced new challenges with the development of delivery platform applications ("apps") from the 2008 crisis onward (Escoto & Gonsales, 2021). It then expanded during the pandemic, while also undergoing qualitative transformations. Historically, this sector has generally been composed of workers who deliver products, documents and goods, and who have been traditionally identified as "motoboys" (motorcycle couriers) (Escoto & Gonsales, 2021). These "motoboys" could be formally or informally associated with a company, local restaurants and pharmacies for example, or even large corporations. They could also work freelance or on contract for third-party intermediaries. This segment of the working class was nonetheless able to create unions and associations that represented their interests in various parts of Brazil.

This legacy has not been erased by the arrival of delivery platforms. At a time of high unemployment rates (around 14%⁵), a hegemonic ideology of entrepreneurship and growing use of the "apps" (IFood, Rappi, Uber Eats, Loggi, etc.), this new technology served as one of the central means by which large contingents of workers in search of some paid activity could enter the delivery sector. In the period immediately before the pandemic, between 2018 and 2019, the number of people looking for work through "apps" grew by around 104%, according to official statistics⁶.

This picture changed even further with the arrival of the pandemic in 2020. Fear of contagion, closure of many economic sectors and social isolation policies led to the delivery sector becoming an integral part of Brazilians' domestic lives. More than a practical necessity, it increased health security for families. The number of requests for home deliveries increased dramatically during the pandemic, especially in the food delivery sector.

With rising unemployment, the number of app-based workers in the delivery sector also grew enormously, rising to around 680,000 workers by November 2020 (Lapa, 2021). Unlike other workers, this segment of the working class ensured the social isolation of other groups by continuing to work in the streets at the risk of infection. Delivery workers thus became essential,

even though they were never “officially” considered to be. Being totally unprotected from the virus, and coming from the most vulnerable part of the Brazilian working class, they had to choose between risking infection and starving to death. As an informal rap song put it “Now they give two options to those who are poor: die on the street of corona or starve at home. Between dying at home and dying on the street, I prefer neither” (@tretanotrampo, 2020).

Delivery workers are described by statistics from 2020 in terms of their growth and characteristics (Lapa, 2021). They are young (38% between 20 and 29 years old), black (60%) and male (95%) (Lapa, 2021). The growth of this sector, intensified by the pandemic, was accompanied by changes in the types of transport used by workers for their activities. In addition to motorcycles, many workers were using bicycles— sometimes “rented” from a bank-sponsored urban mobility project — or even delivering on foot. These changes would strengthen the identity of the “delivery worker” and weaken that of the traditional “motoboy.”

Those “new” workers are typically linked to one or more delivery platforms, either directly as individuals (through the “cloud”) or indirectly through outsourcing via the so-called Logistic Operators (LO). Through these platforms they maintain a relationship in which they are subordinate and strongly controlled (Abílio, 2020). Because the “apps” circumvent any kind of formal connection between the platform and the workers, the platforms try to pass themselves off as simple intermediaries between producers and users of a service. In reality, they determine the activities of the workers linked to them from the beginning to the end of the working day (Antunes & Filgueiras, 2020). The platform is the agent that triggers the delivery process, defines the deadlines and pays the workers. Additionally, it employs non-transparent methods of discipline over its workers. The whole process is mediated solely by the logic of the algorithm (Woodcock, 2020). By exempting itself from any employment relationship, the platform dodges legal provisions for labour rights and can exploit a large, fragmented, individualized and precarious workforce.

It was during the pandemic, with its quantitative and qualitative changes to the delivery sector and with the intensification of the precarity of work, that the two *#brequedosapps* took place. The “Brakes” were the culmination of a series of local movements and work stoppages that had already been taking place in different parts of the country before the pandemic. The two nation-wide “Brakes” can be considered a success, while also demonstrating some of the limitations of this form of labour mobilization.

The delivery workers became collectively known through the “Brakes” by making their demands explicit, by organizing nationally and by mobilizing in the public arena. The movement carried out strikes and demonstrations of various intensities in many Brazilian cities, including major state capitals. Although the movement could not completely stop the “apps,” it had a clear impact on the delivery sector and also on consumers. Orders fell dramatically during the first “Brake.” The stoppage became a social media trending topic on July 1, with the success of the *#brequedosapps* hashtag.⁷ The “app” companies publicly minimized the impact of the mobilization, but clearly felt its consequences⁸.

The delivery platforms took advantage of the pandemic to increase both their profits and their control over workers. The “apps” received a large influx of new workers, thus increasing the earnings of the companies while simultaneously reducing those of the former. Most delivery workers saw their pay and income fall during the pandemic⁹. The situation of delivery workers thus became even more serious. They began to demand “the most basic of the basics”, which translates in their words: better pay; personal protective equipment (PPE), like alcohol gel and masks; insurance for motorcycles and accidents; sanitary facilities; and an end to unjust punishments, like “blockages,” that prevent workers from receiving orders (@tretanotrampo, 2020; @entregadoresantifascistas, 2020; @travessia_coletivosindical, 2020). This was a movement that combined economic issues with calls for social recognition and dignity at work.

The two “Brakes” had the same base: a diverse set of worker organizations, including associations, unions, autonomous collectives and new leaders¹⁰. The stoppages also created new groups within *#brequedosapps*. Basically, the workers prepared for their actions by using WhatsApp and by posting messages that widely publicized the movement across the country. This is why *#brequedosapps* took on national dimensions on July 1, 2020, with demonstrations and public events happening for example in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Porto Alegre. This first “brake” was more intense than the second one on July 25¹¹ for several reasons, such as internal divisions within the movement and pressure from the app-based companies.

The companies did not respond passively to the “brakes.” As is common in such cases, they responded either directly or indirectly. They ran very expensive media campaigns to show what they had done to improve working conditions. These campaigns were refuted by the movement on social media. The logistic operators applied pressure to shut down the movement. Organizers and strikers were also blocked by the platforms, especially those who stood out as leaders during the mobilization and who had gained visibility through appearances on social media.

Having had their image damaged on social media by workers' complaints¹², the companies loudly announced a set of measures that would supposedly improve working conditions. The largest of the app-based companies, IFood, released a statement on social media and through TV commercials, claiming that it had created, months before, a fund to support couriers during the pandemic. IFood also denied that it had unfairly blocked workers on the “app” and highlighted the benefits it gave workers, such as income and accident insurance, and provisioning of personal protective equipment. Workers criticized these measures on their social media profiles, claiming that the measures aimed to deflate the movement, that they were mere self-promotion, that they did not meet the workers' needs or demands and that they were difficult for workers to access.

The companies resorted to various means to confront the movement. According to an article by the Pública Investigative Journalism Agency, in the face of “the visibility achieved by the strike, IFood's communication strategy was not limited to commercials on TV that defended the company's reputation”¹³. For example, IFood created a real-life intelligence and digital monitoring agency, to complement its TV commercials. “Eight days after the 'Brake,' the 'Don't brake my work' page was created on Facebook. The objective was to soften the impact of the strikes and confuse the workers' mobilization.”¹⁴. In addition, a fake delivery worker was infiltrated into the movement to spread competing agendas and slogans.

The confrontation waged by the workers was neither small nor simple. They were facing old forms of capitalist exploitation wrapped in new digital clothes, with updated and powerful practices for attacking and demobilizing working-class movements. The platforms combined online and offline strategies to achieve their goals.

Despite support from different labour groups and unions, the “Brake” movement was still far from being a solid union organization. As we said, delivery worker unions already existed in some regions of the country¹⁵, so many in fact that they competed against each other to represent workers. Because of their diversity, including organized associations and independent collectives, they hold very different perspectives and operate in a very diversified and fragmented scenario. Labour arrangements in the delivery sector are thus highly complex and varied. Different types of labour legislation are advocated by different groups. Some support the same standards as those of Brazil's Consolidation of Labour Laws (CLT). Others consider such standards to be outdated, demanding specific legislation for their sector or even arguing that there is no need for any regulation at all. These differences did not however keep workers from organizing the “Brakes.”

As with other experiences around the world (Cini et al., 2021), we see here a series of different ways of organizing and mobilizing at the same time, in combination or not. Across Brazil, delivery workers are a very diffuse and widespread professional group that operates through unions,

groups and associations connected to each other through social media. This interconnectedness, of course, has guaranteed the potential and strength of their mobilizations. In any case, the movement itself had already succeeded on its own by making its demands public, and even by politicizing parts of the delivery workers.

The movement used social media platforms quite intensively and extensively throughout both “Brakes.” It specifically used social media — already employed by workers in their daily lives — to organize workers and mobilize politically. As in other situations (Cant, 2019; Woodcock, 2021), WhatsApp was undoubtedly the most utilized social media tool. WhatsApp groups were created to exchange information, communicate and debate with movement members and participants around the country. These groups were mostly used to circulate and exchange information, but also became forums for much debate, mainly due to the different positions among the workers.

Other social media platforms were widely used in addition to WhatsApp, the most popular ones being Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. These platforms were used in different ways not only by unions, worker associations and collectives but also by individual workers and/or “leaders” (via their personal pages and/or channels on social networks). Videos were broadcast from several cities across Brazil in which workers, individually or collectively, described their living and working conditions, denounced the “apps” abuses, called for mobilization, provided information on efforts to organize in their locality, and so on.

The movement stimulated this type of practice by issuing calls to “send a salvo from the stoppage. Put on your mask and helmet and record a video alone or with your colleagues... calling for stoppage and talking about which city you are from. Let’s brake Brazil” (@tretanotrampo, 2020).

In these uses of social media, the pages, posts and hashtags of the first “Brake” received a great deal of consumer solidarity, with engagement in posts and comments criticizing the companies and the workers’ situation. Mostly, posts urged other consumers to support the “Brake” and not use the “apps” during the stoppage. This was explicitly demanded via social media by the movement. The Treta no Trampo profile released a manual for supporters on how to guide consumer actions during the “Brake” (@tretanotrampo, 2020). Paulo Lima (Galo) from the “anti-fascist delivery workers” tweeted: “Do not order via App. Rate apps with a low rating on the PlayStore or AppStore, leaving comments in support of the strike. Use the #BrequeDosApps. Support the Antifascist Deliverers” (@entregadoresantifascistas, 2020). The same tactics were used by the @travessia_coletivosindical.

The “Brake” clearly combined collective and digital action: face-to-face organization at the workers’ meeting points throughout the cities; actions at shopping mall entrances; and concentration and circulation of large groups of workers who would sit on their motorcycles in urban areas while revving their engines and honking their horns. Through social media, the movement combined online and offline activities, calling for people to “go to meeting points, bring the crowd together and block malls, markets and large restaurants. If you are not going to hold to the stoppage, turn off the apps and stay at home” (@tretanotrampo, 2020).

These tactical innovations varied according to where the movement was being developed. All of this was recorded and posted on social media in real time, thus enabling widespread dissemination of information both to workers who could not join the movement and to a wider audience beyond that of delivery workers.

These strategies ensured the prominence of mobilization in the public eye, not the least because many of the links supplied by the posts were circulated by groups supporting the movement through social media platforms. There were countless shares. In a sense, the use of social media also helped the movement create guidelines and dimensions for organization through discussion of the movement’s name and the choice of the term “brake,” instead of the traditional “strike”¹⁶,

and through efforts to manage and structure the movement: monitoring of actions; guidance for logistics; calls for support, attention to certain urban locations; and so on.

As a new movement, it conformed to the scenario at hand through a kind of “adocracy” (Tufekci, 2017). Many things were being created at once, and actions did not necessarily follow beaten paths, with new tactics and/or old ones becoming fragmented during some local stoppages. Some tactics were very distinct, such as workers stacking their backpacks in front of places where actions were taking place or dozens of motorcycles parading together through urban areas, thus drawing attention to the movement through the concentration of their vehicles and the loud sound of their engines. These tactics were later repeated elsewhere and formed the basis of a repertoire for future collective actions. Undoubtedly, many elements were incorporated either from local strikes already taking place or from other working-class movements. Tactical innovations were thus added to the movement (McAdam et. al., 2009).

Analyzing the movement’s impacts requires looking at different levels and dimensions. It can be said that the social, political and labour contexts shifted after the delivery workers’ actions on July 1 and 25, 2020. Legislative bodies at the municipal, state and federal levels took steps to meet the crisis. The legislatures in the states of Rio and São Paulo for example, started debating the movement’s demands for labour regulation. At the federal level, the president of the Chamber of Deputies began by meeting with the delivery workers’ representatives to find some sort of solution. At that time, many bills¹⁷ on these issues were already winding their way at a very slow pace through the Brazilian parliament. One can thus see the attempt, at least by part of the movement, to experiment with new spaces for action with a view to seeking channels for handling and implementing policies, all this in a bid to avoid a “tactical freeze” (Tufekci, 2017).

These movements have not brought about immediate changes, as they have also had to deal with pressure from the platform companies. The latter have tried hard to reduce as much as possible the prospects for regulating their ways of managing and using work, such ways being central to their business strategies¹⁸. Legislative measures have thus been held up in those parts of the country where some progress was being made to regulate and protect delivery work. Since the “Brakes” little progress has been made. Only in the Federal District has legislation been approved to create support points that provide workers with access to bathrooms, rest areas and so on. This was an important victory for people who are away from home for twelve hours a day taking orders via “apps,” although Law n° 6.677, passed in September 2020 by a local decree, has not yet come into force three years after ratification. These designated spaces were created only in July 2022, through the joint efforts of several local unions from other professional groups in the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), the largest trade union federation in Brazil.

Nation-wide “Brakes,” as a form of organization and mobilization, would be tried in other periods, but with much less success than with the two set in 2020. Local movements began to develop in different cities across the country, sometimes linking together more than one city, as this was the case in São Paulo state. Interestingly, the nation-wide “Brakes” were already an organizational leap forward after the successive local stoppages that preceded them. Afterwards, and with the little success achieved by new attempts at organizing “Brakes”, the movement returned to being organized around local bases of support and events¹⁹.

Thus, by struggling against the precarity of their jobs and lives, the delivery platform workers set a striking example for many other labour sectors in the country during a difficult period. Mobilization, above all, explicitly placed the work and struggles arising from this sector at the centre of public debate. One cannot talk about the pandemic and its impacts on labour in Brazil without mentioning the resistance of the working class and especially the resistance of its precarious workers.

5. Conclusion

When we observe how social media were used to organize the “Brakes,” we can see great similarities between the case under study and some points already presented in other academic studies. In the case of the “Brakes”, social media networks were used in combination with digital and action in real life (Gerbaudo, 2012; Castells, 2015). The resulting feedback loop created new forms of organization and mobilization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Social media turned out to be a crucial instrument to connect workers who were geographically dispersed by the nature of their work process. The joining of online and offline actions opened up possibilities for more active participation by many workers. But even in WhatsApp groups, as is regularly the case in this type of communication structure, organization ended up being a process geared much more toward posting and disseminating news, rather than toward creating a more open space for participation and debate. In addition, this space was occupied more by prominent figures than by other participants who supported certain positions. The structure of the platforms tended to limit not only communication (Lazar et. al., 2018) but also how the workers acted within these limitations (Gerbaudo, 2012).

Social media actions played an important role in helping build a collective identity (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015), thus replicating forms of belonging that were already established but now used for collective political purposes. Those purposes noticeably included preparing a minimum consensus for the struggle, in addition to the many demands already being voiced by different groups. Social media also helped in presenting, discussing, defining and disseminating this minimum consensus. An important contribution was thus made to the movement through social media, and/or the material produced in it and for it, by providing a space for producing and disseminating images, videos, photos, music, testimonials and life stories, forms of self-definition and images of struggle — always with the underlying message of “take your cell phone and do it yourself.” An entire genre of class expression and language was thus created.

Nonetheless, the digital actions also expressed much of the actual fragmentation and divisions among the delivery workers. The movement never developed a more organic centre that would at least unify production and dissemination while not reducing plurality and diversity (Fominaya, 2020; Kavada, 2018). While becoming more dynamic, it failed to progress to the same extent in creating organic organizational and mobilization continuities that would persist beyond the “Brakes”. Although digital organization ensured the expression of a plurality of views through specific and atomized channels, which mostly mirrored the channels of production and circulation, it failed to advance in the sense of helping forge a broad consensus among the workers. One may thus wonder to what extent a real-world political problem was made better or worse by using social media (Fominaya, 2020).

Social media helped circulate information about mobilization not only among delivery workers, but also beyond them, thus greatly expanding the movement’s reach. This, in turn, provided the movement with greater visibility and opened up possibilities for networks of solidarity (Dencik & Wilkin, 2018). Despite the absence of centralized leadership, which typifies many contemporary movements that rely more on “soft leadership” (Gerbaudo, 2012), many activists were able to express themselves, gain exposure and emerge through their activism, key roles, participation and projection. On the other hand, while this visibility served the movement, it also raised other issues, such as security. It provided the delivery platforms with a means to monitor the workers and thus conduct repressive actions — not only by identifying and blocking the higher-profile workers but also by attacking and persecuting them.

In the case under study here, it can be said that Web 2.0 has had significant impacts on Brazilian labour movements. Certainly, we can see the extreme importance of social media in triggering the mobilization. It cannot be said, however, that these new technologies played an important role in

consolidating the mobilizations in the medium and long term (Tufekci, 2017; Kavada, 2018). Even though they have opened up necessary spaces in this direction, they have not permanently reversed the model of vertical, top-down communication, nor have they democratized the structures for organizing and mobilizing (Drew, 2018; Carneiro & Costa, 2022). They have certainly achieved a tactical complementarity between collective action and digital action. We can also see that this complementarity was achieved parallel to the workers' ability to overcome the initial "tactical freeze" (Tufekci, 2017) they had faced during the more local and isolated stoppages prior to the nation-wide expansion of the movement via the "Brakes". But this did not work as a permanent tactic after its initial success.

All these issues may come to define, expand or limit the scope of these movements in the new contexts they now face. It is practically impossible to think about organizing and mobilizing today without including the digital dimensions of such actions. Workers, their organizations and their movements cannot do without social media. The new technologies are not, however, a panacea. Digital action is not the only and exclusive solution to the challenges of worker movements. Depending on the context and how they are used, such actions may not only fail to solve existing problems through collective action but also strengthen them and even produce new ones. It is therefore increasingly necessary to think about the political and ideological orientations that guide working-class movements in their use of social media.

Notes

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[2] *Breque* [stoppage] and the verb *breicar* [to hit the brakes] were the terms chosen by the app-based delivery workers to name their work stoppages. These words refer to the act of hitting the brakes on a motorcycle, which in Brazil is called *breque*." (<https://passapalavra.info/2021/07/139179/>)

[3] These profiles, which have a national reach due to social media, are linked to different independent workers' collectives. They are not linked to official delivery worker unions and encompass militants, activists and workers with different political perspectives.

[4] The newspapers serve different cities in the country. We consulted *Brasil de Fato* (Rio de Janeiro), *Folha de São Paulo* (São Paulo), *O Globo* (Rio de Janeiro), *Estado de Minas* (Belo Horizonte), *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre) and *Folha de Pernambuco* (Recife).

[5] I.e., 14 millions people according to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics – IBGE – October 2020.

[6] Data from the Institute for Applied Economic Research – IPEA – July 2019. Around 200 thousands people (data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics – IBGE – July 2019).

[7] According to the website *Poder 360°*, in the late afternoon of July 1, "the subject was the one most commented on Twitter, with more than 153,000 mentions. On Instagram, there were 7,870

posts with the protest hashtag. ((<https://www.poder360.com.br/brasil/entregadores-de-aplicativos-promovem-greve-nacional-veja-fotos/>)).

[8] It is difficult to estimate the service reduction in numbers because of the companies' total control of information. But Brazilian newspapers published many accounts by restaurant managers who compared the protest days unfavourably with average days and talked about reductions in orders and deliveries being delayed up to one hour, etc.

[9] The research of Abilio et al. (2020, 8) showed that 47.4% of delivery workers reported a weekly income of up to BRL 520.00 (around \$113.00 US). Of these people, 17.8% reported earnings of up to BRL 260.00 per week (around \$56.00 US). During the pandemic, the share of delivery workers earning less than BRL 260.00 a week practically doubled, comprising 34.4% of respondents. If 51% of the workers earned BRL 520.00 a week before the pandemic, during the crisis this proportion dropped to 27%.

[10] Though viewing itself as a movement without leaders, certain organizers stood out, such as Paulo Lima – “Galo” - from São Paulo (SP), Edgar Francisco da Silva – “Gringo” - from São Paulo (SP), Ralf Alexandre – “Ralf MT” - from Rio de Janeiro and Alessandro Conceição - “Sorriso” - from the Federal District.

[11] This decrease is not clearly documented. However, it was reported by various media (e.g., “Breque dos apps’ on Saturday is smaller, but protests occur in the big cities” - (<https://www.uol.com.br/tilt/noticias/redacao/2020/07/25/breque-dos-apps-no-sabado-e-menor-mas-protestos-ocorrem-nas-capitais.htm>)). The difference in engagement was also noticed in terms of visibility on social media. Piaia et al. (2021) found a difference after analyzing the posts about the two “Brakes” on Twitter, in terms of specific groups.

[12] According to @tretanotrampo, evaluation of delivery “apps” even dropped one point on PlayStore after the “brake.”

[13] See (<https://apublica.org/2022/04/a-maquina-oculta-de-propaganda-do-ifood/>) . Accessed: 4/4/2022.

[14] See (<https://apublica.org/2022/04/a-maquina-oculta-de-propaganda-do-ifood/>) . Accessed: 4/4/2022.

[15] Historically, in the delivery sector, the “motoboy” had different unions in different states of the country, such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul, Pernambuco and Amazonas. With the arrival of app-based delivery workers a new, more complex scenario has developed. As these workers are not recognized as employees, they become totally informal workers. Today, there is some form of app-based delivery worker representation across the country. Collective representation has become very competitive. “There is a broad debate within the app-based delivery worker movement about who effectively represents these workers. Could it be the motorcycle couriers’ unions ? Self-employed associations ? The anti-fascist deliverers ? Some app-based delivery workers who became regional prominent figures ? Parliamentarians who are drafting laws ? There are other kinds of delivery workers that have been active in this movement in addition to some regional leaders, there is a series of associations of self-employed workers throughout Brazil, with different positions and political views” [(<https://www.esquerdadiario.com.br/Quem-representa-os-entregadores>) - July 2020 Accessed: 29/7/2020]. In certain situations, the National Union Federations have participated in negotiations on these

workers' rights. Part of the movement is critical of the union form of organization. They have been organizing their own forms of representation, such as local associations.

[16] During the first “Brake,” the profile @travessia_coletivosindical used the term “strike” more often than “brake”? During the second, the profile used the term “brake” more often than “strike.”

[17] A study by CEPI FGV-SP (2020) of 40 bills (PLs), introduced in the National Congress between March and November 2020 shows that “Two themes predominated in the set of projects analyzed, regardless of their type: health and safety at work (e.g. supply of equipment) and assistance in case of misfortune (e.g. coverage in case of accidents)” (2020: 1). In this sense, looking in more detail, we have found that around “70% of the bills provide for better working conditions and another 70% provide for some benefit. The most recurrent concerns are health and safety (22 bills) and supply of materials for work (20 bills). In relation to benefits, rules on misfortunes stand out, such as illness, damage, theft or loss of the vehicle used for work (19 bills). Finally, 33% of the bills provide something about remuneration.” (2020: 5)

[18] At the federal level, for example, bill 1665/2020 began to be debated in April 2020. It aimed to provide minimum protection for app-based delivery workers during the pandemic period. But it was passed only in December 2021. The bill came into force in early 2022, when the pandemic was already on the way out. App-based companies would have to insure their workers against accident and theft, in addition to providing disability compensation. In cases of COVID-19 infection, workers would be entitled to a 15-day paid yearly leave. Furthermore, app-based companies would have to provide information about the risks of coronavirus and the necessary precautions to avoid contagion and spread of the disease, in addition to providing masks and alcohol gel. Product suppliers would have to allow delivery workers to use their sanitary facilities and provide access to drinking water. Failure to comply by the platform company or the product supplier could result in a fine of \$970 US per infraction.

[19] The creation of the National Alliance of Delivery Platform Workers (ANEA) was an important step toward a national organization. It was founded in December 2022 by bringing together several groups of delivery workers from across the country.

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