

Unionizing Delivery Platform Workers. The Spatiality of Struggles over Regulation and Deregulation of Delivery Work in Spain

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Volume 78, Number 3, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110485ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110485ar>

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Publisher(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (print)
1703-8138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

López-García, I., Ribón-Seisdedos, M., Morales-Muñoz, K. & Roca, B. (2023). Unionizing Delivery Platform Workers. The Spatiality of Struggles over Regulation and Deregulation of Delivery Work in Spain. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 78(3). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110485ar>

Article abstract

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Unionizing Delivery Platform Workers. The Spatiality of Struggles over Regulation and Deregulation of Delivery Work in Spain

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Editorial Note

This article contains partial results of the ongoing research project “SPATIALPOLITICS The spatial politics of labour in the logistics industry” (ref. PID2021-122890OB-I00), funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Spain.

Abstract

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Keywords: unions; platform workers; delivery platforms; community unionism; couriers; platform capitalism; industrial action; spatiality of labour

Résumé

Cet article examine les changements récents dans la stratégie syndicale envers des travailleurs sur les plateformes de messagerie en Espagne. Appliquant une approche socio-spatiale à l'étude des processus et conflits de travail, il commence par décrire le contexte dans lequel s'inscrit la syndicalisation soit l'évolution du modèle d'entreprise des plates-formes de livraison et sa réglementation en Espagne. Ensuite, en s'appuyant sur des entretiens qualitatifs avec des délégués syndicaux, une analyse documentaire et une observation participante, l'article documente les premières initiatives d'organisation des coursiers en Espagne, menées par le réseau *Couriers for Rights* (*Riders por Derechos*). Celles-ci peuvent être comprises sous l'angle du syndicalisme communautaire et se sont concentrées sur des spatialités spécifiques (réglementation de l'État et soutien de la communauté). Ensuite, le texte explore la manière dont l'obtention du statut d'employé pousse les coursiers à adopter des formes plus conventionnelles d'organisation syndicale, en se concentrant par conséquent sur d'autres spatialités (principalement les entreprises et les lieux de travail). Enfin, il aborde les principaux défis des modèles syndicaux dans ce nouveau contexte, marqué par la déréglementation et la fragmentation du travail favorisées par le changement technologique, la demande croissante de droits numériques du travail et l'existence d'associations professionnelles de coursiers défendant le statut d'entrepreneurs indépendants et affaiblissant le pouvoir des travailleurs.

1. Introduction

There is currently much interest in forms of labour organization and in (de)regulation of platform capitalism, including the use of space to increase the production and accumulation of corporate power (Vandaele, 2018; Wells et al., 2020). Similarly, researchers in various countries have extensively studied the processes of resistance, solidarity and union action among platform workers—most notably home delivery workers (Peró & Downey, 2022; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2019; Trappmann et al., 2020). Collective action by couriers is conspicuous for showing high levels of innovation and for challenging traditional forms of union representation (Joyce et al., 2022; Martin Artiles, 2021). In an example of what Yu et al. (2022) call “algorithmic solidarity,” food delivery workers in China have used instant messaging channels and complex gamification techniques to circumvent the extreme competitiveness imposed by their employer and by their isolation, thus giving rise to different forms of mutualism. Other studies have highlighted the different ways in which platform workers assert their labour rights, including new digital labour rights (Trappmann et al., 2020; Dufresne & Leterme, 2021). Many studies have also shown the difficulties of platform workers with conventional forms of unionism and their frequent use of community or alternative unionism strategies (Cini et al., 2020; Martin Artiles, 2021; Morales-Muñoz & Roca, 2022).

In their influential work on community unionism, Wills and Simms (2004) propose a 3-stage model to explain how the union movement has evolved in Western countries. First, there was “reciprocal community unionism,” which coincided with the formation of the labour movement. At this stage, unions had a strong community component, which linked their actions and demands to those of a wide range of working class community organizations (e.g., solidarity funds, credit unions, clubs and pension funds). Second, there was “representational community unionism,” which arose after the Second World War. During this stage, the community component remained but was characterized by a division of labour: socialist and communist parties took on the state to campaign for broader social rights, while unions confined their activities to companies and workplaces. For Wills and Simms, the rise of globalization and neoliberal capitalism since the 1970s has led to a profound crisis in that model of unionism, whose main consequence has been a declining union movement in Europe and North America. In response to increasing labour deregulation, they argue, a return to community-based unionism has been taking place. This new community-based unionism attempts to bring together labour and urban issues through alliances with social movements (Kelly, 1999; Fine, 2005; Greenberg & Lewis, 2017). Recent studies have highlighted the success of community-based union strategies in certain industries and categories of workers (McBride & Greenwood, 2008; Sullivan, 2010), despite differences in overall concerns and the sometimes conflictual nature of relations between unions and community organizations (García Calavia & Rigby, 2022).

Our paper will draw on the distinction in Wills and Simms (2004) between “reciprocal community unionism” and “representational community unionism” and the differing spatial components to show how unionism has evolved among platform delivery workers in Spain. We adopt a labour geography perspective, which takes the spatial dimensions of workers’ collective action (Herod, 2001) into consideration, to study the development of collective action among platform delivery workers and to explore how recognition of their employee status has transformed the spatiality of union strategy. Our initial hypothesis is that the process of giving platform delivery workers partial and limited recognition of their employment relationship has led them to move from community forms of activism to other forms that fall within representational unionism.

It is especially relevant to study platform worker unionism in Spain because the state has tried to curb attempts at outsourcing and extreme deregulation by delivery platforms because the central government has a social democratic, left-wing political orientation and because institutional levers exist to regulate labour relations, such as laws and the Labour Inspectorate. Changes to platform work legislation have triggered a major shift in the dynamics of delivery workers' union representation and their action through unions.

Our data come from a qualitative ethnographic study we conducted in two stages between 2018 and 2022. During the first stage, the research subjects were members of the Couriers for Rights (RxD) network, the leading association of platform deliverers in Spain. We interviewed 18 RxD representatives from Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Bilbao and Aragon, who were mostly young professionals or university students between 22 and 34 years old. Only one was a woman. They belonged to radical unions except those from Madrid, who were members of the General Union of Workers (UGT). We also conducted participant observation at several actions organized by Couriers for Rights: local and national assemblies; international meetings of couriers in Barcelona and Brussels in December 2019 and 2021; two demonstrations; meetings with public authorities and political parties; and coordination via social media. During the second stage, after passage of the Rider's Law, we studied recent changes to platform unionism by conducting seven additional interviews in Madrid, Barcelona and Navarra with representatives of several unions (i.e., UGT, Intersindical de Aragon, CCOO and RxD). We also studied legal documents, newspaper and magazine articles and documents from unions, consultancies and companies in the same industry. Open and axial coding (Coffey & Atkinson, 2003) was used to analyze the material, which we grouped into two broad categories: reciprocal community unionism and representational community unionism.

2. Reconfiguring Scale, Place and Network: the Spatial Agency of Platform Workers

As shown by labour process theory, platforms derive their power largely from their use of new technologies to alter time and space. Indeed, these technologies have not only increased their control over workers but also opened up possibilities for subverting conventional forms of labour regulation, and thus exacerbating worker exploitation (We et al., 2019; Morales & Stecher, 2023). Platforms use apps to circumvent basic labour regulations. They evade their role as employer and the obligations that it entails by presenting themselves as mere intermediaries between the customer and the product or service supplier (restaurants and supermarkets in the case of food delivery). They thus avoid recognizing their workers as employees and treat them as self-employed or the like. This evasion of employer status may be called "hyper-externalization" of labour (Srnicek, 2016). In addition, platforms can intensify work processes and increase their control over the workforce by using algorithms and other means, such as those for video games, artificial intelligence and geolocation (Rosenblat, 2018; Griesbach et al., 2019; Yu et al, 2022). The power to organize work processes is thus concentrated, while workers are allowed some autonomy and praised for being able to work on their own (Haidar & Keune, 2021). Platform companies encourage workers to see themselves as independent, a perception strengthened by the spread of a culture of entrepreneurship, freedom of choice, self-realization, personal risk-taking and self-reliance (Fleming, 2017). Socialization in this entrepreneurial culture replaces socialization in the corporate culture of the workplace; there is thus a shift in the locus of ideological control (Morales & Stecher, 2023). As a result, delivery platform workers find themselves divided and have to contend with a deregulated economic environment and loss of bargaining power.

We argue here that space is an essential component of labour relations (Herod, 2001; Roca, 2020). In line with Lefebvre (1991), we further argue that space, far from being a fixed ontology, is a social construct created through social practices, ideologies, interests and power relations. Spaces are not created solely by companies, experts or public institutions; workers also play an active role in creating them; for example, by demanding infrastructure and services in their neighbourhoods or by encouraging or opposing efforts to locate industrial sites in certain places. In this way, urban and industrial landscapes are shaped by workers' agency (Herod, 2001; Strauss, 2020).

The use of new technologies facilitates not only the exploitation of a growing section of the working class but also the emergence of new forms of resistance and collective organization, which involve several spatial practices. Although collective action by platform workers varies with the system of labour regulation and the type of technology (Cini et al., 2021; Davis & Assem, 2021), the nonstandard employment offered by platforms tends to undermine conventional forms of union representation. As a result, the latter forms may co-exist or sometimes be overtaken by alternative forms, notably community unionism (McBride & Greenwood, 2009). In the current era of late capitalism, these alternative forms have provided platform workers with an opportunity to revitalize their position in the union world, in addition to being a manifestation of such renewal (Kesselman & Sauviat, 2017).

Each union model has different spatialities. Hyman's (2001) classic typology of union orientation toward class, market or society echoes the strategic choices that lead to the prioritization of certain spaces. Community unionism, as the literature has shown, also has a clear spatial component: the community strengthens the workplace as a space of worker power, or it provides an alternative space (Murray, 2017). Therefore, a socio-spatial perspective can be used to study the dynamics of resistance and collective organization among platform workers.

Space can be analytically separated into different yet interrelated ontological dimensions (Jessop et al., 2008). It has several dimensions: scale (levels of an organizational hierarchy); territory (geographic space demarcated by borders); place (space defined by identity); network (space of interconnections); and landscape (visual aspects of space). The spatial agency, union strategy or union model of workers can be studied through the lens of different spatialities (Roca, 2020). This article will explore how delivery platform workers have changed strategy in response to new models of workforce management, which in turn have been shaped by changes to technology and the regulatory framework. The assumption here is that business practices introduce spatialities that lead workers to construct new scales, places and networks in their protest actions.

Studies of social movements have shown the importance of network-building for collective action (Nicholls, 2009). This is similarly the case with delivery workers (mainly through digital networks, but also through non-digital ones) (Dolber, 2019; Cant, 2020). Also important are scale-building and rescaling (Herod, 2001; Tufts, 2007). Rescaling in particular has been observed among platform workers (Morales-Muñoz & Roca, 2022). Finally, numerous studies have shown how delivery workers use waiting areas and shared spaces to build relationships, thus providing a foundation for solidarity and union action in the absence of workplaces (Wells et al., 2020; Tassinari & Maccarone, 2020; Morales & Dinegro, 2022).

It is important to bear in mind that spatiality is not static and is transformed by changes to labour management practices, regulatory frameworks and work-related technologies. Therefore, we need to understand the process of recognizing delivery workers as employees and how it has affected the spatial practices of workers and unions in Spain.

3. Digital Home Delivery Platforms and Their Regulation in Spain

Currently, digital platforms in Spain are regulated by Royal Decree-Law 9/2021, dated May 11, which came into force on August 12, 2021. It is better known as the "Rider's Law." It provides measures to protect the labour rights of people who distribute products or services via digital platforms and amends the Workers' Statute by ensuring a presumption of employee status for platform delivery workers.

There have been home delivery platforms in Spain since 2010, when the Danish multinational Just Eat and the Spanish start-up Sindelantal were established. In 2015, the British company Deliveroo and the Spanish company Glovo entered the market. Uber Eats opened in 2017. All of these companies follow a business model that is specific to the digital economy. They act as intermediaries between the customer and the supplier and, with the exception of Just Eat, they classify couriers (also known as "riders" in Spain) as mere associates rather than as employees. At that time, in the absence of any specific legislation, they were governed in Spain by self-employment regulations. Initially, most of them were classified as "Regular Self-Employed." After campaigns by these workers, the platforms changed their status to "Economically Dependent Self-Employed Workers (TRADE). According to Law 20/2007 dated July 11, 2007 on the Self-Employed Workers' Statute, the TRADE status applies to a self-employed individual whose usual economic activity (at least 75% of all income) is conducted primarily with a single client. With either classification, i.e., regular self-employed or TRADE, the company can avoid paying the social security contributions that must be paid for salaried employees. The result is a lack of labour protection for couriers, who are denied the protection of a contract in exchange for having flexible hours and the apparent freedom to choose their working hours. There is much controversy over the TRADE status, which the unions consider to be fraudulent. The gig economy has commodified certain types of jobs by using new technologies to reorganize work. Consequently, workers are losing their labour rights and experiencing new problems: casualization, banning, algorithmic control and the political psychologization of work (Morales & Stecher, 2023).

Also relevant to this study is the way digital platforms diversify their business and operating methods. One method is home delivery by the company's own salaried couriers. Another is to provide the same service through subcontractors, who are recruited through temporary employment agencies (e.g., Jobandtalent and Adecco) or specialized companies (e.g., Stuart, Closer, Grupo Mox, Delorian Transport, Ara Vinc, Deelivers, Gliders Force, Chaskis and Shargo). A third method is to provide customers and member establishments with an app, so that they are the ones who define their relationship with the delivery person. Some companies, such as Just Eat, combine all three methods. There is thus a proliferation of spaces in which a union must work and through which the worker must transit. A courier may move from one platform to another, and this fluidity is accentuated by the instability in the industry. Because of very high levels of competition, companies must continually reposition themselves and increase or decrease their number of workers. They are thus constantly entering and exiting local, regional and national markets. This fluidity and instability is a challenge to conventional, workplace-based unionism.

As in other European countries, Spain has had several union, para-union and political initiatives to regulate platform work since 2017. Progress toward obtaining employee status for couriers has reached a turning point, with many couriers deciding to self-organize through the network Couriers for Rights. Uber and Glovo couriers have also come forward to testify about the practices of their companies. Meanwhile, Law 6/2017 on Urgent Reforms to Self-Employment has been passed with the aim of improving conditions for the self-employed.

The development of regulations in Spain is influenced by the European context of the country's social actors and institutions. Since 2017, courts and unions have been attempting to regulate platform employment. In 2020, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC, 2020) published a series of proposals to regulate the platform sector. In 2021, the European Parliament voted in favour of regulating the labour rights of platform workers. In the same year, through a draft directive published by the European Commission, their status and rights as employees was clarified in contexts where algorithms control their working conditions.

At the same time, the courts and the Labour Inspectorate in Spain have ruled in a succession of cases, brought mostly by trade unions and RxD, that such workers should have employee status. In 2018 and 2019, the courts in several Spanish cities ruled that an employment relationship exists between couriers and companies. Meanwhile, the Labour and Social Security Inspectorate identified almost 18,000 couriers as wrongly holding self-employed status between 2019 and 2020. However, albeit to a lesser extent, there have also been rulings against the employee status of delivery drivers and reaffirming their TRADE status. As a result, the Labour Chamber of the Supreme Court unanimously ruled in September 2020 that couriers were falsely classified as self-employed. Though focused not on the entire workforce management model but rather on the employment status of a single Glovo courier in 2016, the ruling set a legal precedent. This trend toward recognizing couriers as employees means that they are covered by labour law and can act on opportunities for union action to defend their interests. The ruling was met with enthusiasm from couriers and unions and with opposition from the platforms, which claimed to have changed their operating methods since the 2016 case. Couriers are also divided between those who wish to be considered employees and those who wish to remain independent contractors. The latter tend to group together in associations, which are suspected of receiving support from platform companies. The main associations are the Autonomous Association of Riders (AAR), the Spanish Association of Messenger Riders (AsoRiders), the Association of United Riders (ARU) and the Association of Professional Riders (ARP). These associations advocate a self-employment model, defining themselves as “collaborators” of the platform companies.

Following several further rulings in favour of couriers, the companies are beginning to adapt their workforce management model to give couriers more autonomy. For example, couriers are no longer penalized for rejecting orders or for cancelling reserved hours and their rating carries less weight, but they are still unable to negotiate rates and their tasks are still organized by an app.

In 2020, the Ministry of Labour oversaw negotiations between the two main unions, the CCOO and the UGT, and the two main employer organizations, the Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations (CEOE) and the Spanish Confederation of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (CEPYME). The Ministry also held meetings with the main companies in the industry, despite their already being represented by the employer organizations in the negotiations, and with the RxD association, but not with the new worker associations that called for maintaining their status as independent contractors. In response, those associations organized protests against giving employee status to couriers who worked for digital platforms. They mostly felt that self-employed workers should have their situation improved without becoming employees. The improvements would include such measures as higher legal minimum rates, greater protection and the rather contradictory idea of implementing collective bargaining for the self-employed. The protests attracted large numbers of couriers, thus making it much harder for the unions to extend their influence within this sector of the working class.

After six months of negotiations, the Ministry of Labour, the CCOO, the UGT, the CEOE and the CEPYME reached an agreement and the “Riders’ Law” was passed. The law is aligned with the aforementioned Supreme Court ruling in favour of employee status and amends the Workers’ Statute with the explicit aim of protecting the labour rights of people who provide delivery services through digital platforms. It contains two clauses: 1) employee status will be presumed for delivery

platform workers; and 2) union representatives will “be informed by the company of the parameters, rules and instructions on which algorithms or artificial intelligence systems influencing decisions that may affect working conditions, access to and maintenance of employment, including profiling, are based.” Nonetheless, the law left all parties dissatisfied. First, the platform companies and the pro-self-employment courier associations were unhappy that their demands had been ignored. They believed that the CEOE had failed to defend their interests, prompting Glovo to leave the employer organization and casting doubt on its presence in forthcoming negotiations with the Ministry and the unions. Second, the unions and the experts had expected the law to regulate work across the entire digital platform industry and disagreed on the degree of protection from the presumption of employee status. Third, the couriers feared an increase in job insecurity in the absence of collective bargaining agreements and a possible increase in subcontracting.

The Law has changed the structure of the delivery labour market. In 2019, delivery platforms contributed €708 million to Spanish GDP and provided direct or indirect employment to 15,300 people in catering, retail and associated industries—up 6.7% from the previous year. Although no official figures are available, the number of couriers in Spain was about 29,300 (each of whom could work on several platforms at the same time). Most were immigrant men between 39 and 49 years old, with average earnings of €8 per hour for 40 to 49 hours per week. Finally, that year 4.7 million customers placed 36 million orders (Adigital and AFI, 2020). The effects of the Rider’s Law are shown by a 2022 report, which estimates that the number of workers on contract rose from 5,464 in May 2021 to 10,980 in August 2022, and most were on permanent contracts. Spanish social security benefited from an inflow of 4.7 million euros, thanks to the increase in employer contributions. According to Just Eat, their sales did not suffer, amounting to 1,079 million euros in 2021—up 15.9% from 2020. Other calculations, such as those by NPD Group, show sales of €2,600 million in 2021—up 80% from two years earlier (Esade & Just Eat, 2022).

During ongoing discussions of the Platform Work Directive in the European Union, the Spanish Ministry of Labour, with the support of the UGT and the CCOO, and in line with the positions of courier organizations, such as Couriers for Rights, has consistently advocated a strong presumption of employee status that provides platform workers with a social safety net. This position explains Spain’s abstention at the June 12, 2023 Council Meeting, which ratified the EU’s Platform Work Directive agreement.¹ That agreement weakens the presumption of employee status, originally included in the Directive approved by the European Parliament, by requiring compliance with three out of seven criteria, instead of the original two out of five criteria. Member states can also opt out by refusing to apply this presumption in various circumstances, thus weakening the European standard. During the Spanish Presidency of the Council, between July and December 2023, the unions and the government hoped to influence discussions on the draft directive during the last stage before approval, i.e., the trialogue between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council. At the time of writing, the outcome is still unknown. As the new directive is aligned with the Rider’s Law, the Spanish legal context will remain unaffected unless there is a change of government.

4. Community Unionism prior to the Rider’s Law

Delivery platform workers in Spain began to organize in April 2017, several months after the UK Deliveroo couriers formed an independent union (Peró & Downey, 2022). In Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, where delivery companies had been operating since 2016, couriers staged a series of protests primarily in response to the platforms’ unilateral changes to working conditions. In April 2017, Deliveroo, which dominated the industry at the time, ceased to guarantee 20 working hours

per week and minimum hourly pay. Glovo, in turn, reduced or removed bonuses for working during peak hours or in rainy conditions.

In response, several workers drafted a letter, which was signed by 130 couriers and sent to Deliveroo with a series of demands: payment of insurance; basic pay per hour of work (instead of per order); guaranteed contracts for 20 hours per week; and bonuses for working at peak hours, on long routes and on rainy days.

The delivery workers faced one problem as they tried to organize: an absence of physical spaces where they could develop the solidarity and mutualism traditionally required for union action. In Spain, as in other countries, couriers were able to build mutual aid networks through social media, thus providing each other with support in the event of accidents or robberies. Initially, the Deliveroo platform required couriers to be online and available in waiting areas referred to as “centroids” in the company’s jargon. These spaces played an important role in worker self-organization. One delivery woman explained:

We all got together at the centroids and as time went on we had a great time in there while we waited. People would come and go, and at the end of the shift we would go and get some beers.

Neus, former Deliveroo courier in Barcelona, member of Couriers for Rights, translated by the authors

In response to the first protest action, the company negotiated conditions individually with some couriers and eliminated the physical spaces for workers, as these spaces acted against the spatial atomization sought by the platform to prevent workers from organizing and could provide the courts with evidence of an employment relationship.

Faced with the company’s response, a group of couriers in Barcelona joined the independent union Intersindical Alternativa de Catalunya (IAC) and set up a union section at Deliveroo. Meanwhile, activists created RxD, a network to mobilize couriers from platforms all over the country. Like courier organizations in other countries, it carried out an energetic communication campaign using social media and traditional mass media to condemn the poor working conditions of couriers and “false self-employed” status. As a result of the campaign, the courier with a box strapped to his back became viewed in the Spanish collective imagination as the prototypical precarious worker of platform capitalism.

RxD was initially led by Deliveroo couriers, although it welcomed workers from other platforms, such as Glovo and Stuart, who suffered similar problems. One of RxD’s main areas of action was to establish alliances with a wide variety of organizations, including radical unions, labour lawyer associations and human rights organizations. These alliances enabled RxD to strengthen its discursive work and expand its activities to other cities, such as Valencia and Madrid. This initial union model provided platform workers with representation, thus filling a vacuum left by established unions and associations for the self-employed (Pérez-Chirinos Churruca, 2017).

In response to RxD’s campaign, Deliveroo changed the couriers’ status from independent contractor to TRADE, an intermediate status between self-employed and employee. The new contracts did not, however, meet any of RxD’s demands, and the couriers held protests in front of the company’s headquarters in summer 2017, with extensive media coverage.

In retaliation, the company “disconnected” (dismissed) 13 couriers who had been identified as organizers in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia. The couriers responded with a 48-hour strike, calling for the dismissed workers to be reinstated and for action on the working conditions that had triggered the protests. Hundreds of couriers supported the strike during peak demand hours,

forcing Deliveroo to suspend service. During the following days, workers who refused to sign the new contract were automatically “disconnected.”

Afterwards, the couriers turned their attention to legal battles. Aware that they could not force the company to negotiate with them directly, the union activists, with support from their lawyers and other allies, attempted to make gains in different political-legal spaces: the courts; the Labour Inspectorate; and the multiple levels of the state. The disconnected workers sued the company for wrongful dismissal, and then reported their false self-employed status to the Labour Inspectorate. In December 2017, the Valencia Labour Inspectorate handed down the first ruling confirming an employment relationship between Deliveroo and its couriers, and claiming €160,000 in unpaid social security contributions from the company. At around the same time, the Court of Justice of the European Union ruled that Uber must comply with national legislation as a transport service, which helped increase the media impact of the couriers’ legal actions and protests. The ruling echoed decisions by the Spanish courts, which considered the app the main means of production and deemed it to be proof of the existence of an employment relationship between the couriers and their platform.

Following the disconnection, some RxD activists in Madrid and Barcelona created their own courier cooperatives, which, while solving their own personal and work issues, also distanced them from the struggle led by other delivery workers. The companies, meanwhile, tried to adapt their work processes to the new rules to avoid being forced to recognize employee status. They offered couriers accident insurance to evade criticism and worked with business and pro-self-employment associations to propose specific statuses “to reflect the new labour situation of the platforms.”

5. A Return to Conventional Union Practice after Passage of the Rider’s Law

The Rider’s Law obliges companies to recognize their workers as employees unless those workers can be proven to be genuinely self-employed. The law was approved in May 2021, and platforms were given a 3-month deadline to make the necessary adjustments. By August 2021, when the law came into force, the extension of employee status should have been completed. However, the platform companies adopted a series of strategies to avoid recognizing their workers as employees. This foot-dragging has shaped worker organization and union action.

5.1 Deliveroo, Uber Eats and Just Eat after Passage of the Rider’s Law

Deliveroo left Spain in November 2021 because of its declining market position, a decline exacerbated by a series of sanctions for failing to comply with labour legislation. This departure left 3,800 people jobless, most of them couriers. They were included in the collective layoff, in which Deliveroo paradoxically recognized its couriers as employees. Those couriers then scattered to other platforms, to their own cooperatives or to employment in other occupations.

Just Eat, which already had its own network of couriers, has taken three main measures: maintaining its workforce; improving their working conditions, and continuing to outsource their service. In December 2021, after eighteen months of negotiations, Just Eat, the CCOO and the UGT reached a collective agreement for the company’s 1,000 employees. This is the first agreement of its kind in Spain and a huge achievement for the two leading unions, as it sets an example for workers on other platforms and demonstrates the efficacy of conventional unionism. In addition to pay raises, the agreement includes the following clauses: right of employees to take 15 of their 30 days of annual leave in June, July or August; a maximum limit of 9 hours of work per day; right to digital

disconnection to ensure that employees do not receive notifications outside their working hours; supplying of workers with cell phones by Just Eat; and extra pay for the workers' use of their own vehicles. The agreement also regulates tips and restates the Rider's Law stipulation that workers are entitled to information about artificial intelligence and algorithms and how they affect their work. The work by the CCOO and the UGT paved the way for union elections, after which the agreement could be converted into a collective bargaining agreement. The leading unions were thus favourably positioned electorally, as confirmed by the electoral results at Just Eat Valencia in June 2022, when the UGT obtained six delegates and Feticó three, and at Just Eat Barcelona in November 2022, when the CCOO obtained all nine possible delegates. Just Eat's willingness to dialogue with its workers and unions stands in contrast to its decision to continue subcontracting "as long as the system allows." It remains to be seen how long this will be. Following a CNT union complaint in June 2022, the courts forced Just Eat Valencia to give permanent employment to 150 delivery workers who had been working through the temporary employment agency JY Hiring.

Uber Eats is another company that refuses to recognize its workers as employees. Its strategy after passage of the Rider's Law has been to get rid of its 3,000 self-employed delivery workers and to increase outsourcing to external companies. This strategy has prevented union action within but not outside the company. In the eyes of the CCOO and the UGT, with the backing of court rulings and the Labour Inspectorate, an employment relationship exists between the company and the workers who provide its delivery service as self-employed people. Therefore, the increase in its outsourcing is an illegal collective dismissal and an indirect transfer of its workers to subcontractors. This practice has been formally reported to the courts by the main unions.

5.2 Glovo and the Struggle to Enforce the Rider's Law

Glovo, meanwhile, neither recognizes its workers as employees nor outsources their work on a large scale. It employs workers in two of its twelve divisions: Glovo Grocery, which operates "ghost supermarkets" that are not open to the public; and Glovo Business to Business (B2B), which is the last-mile logistics line. Recognition of its workers as employees in these two divisions came after a series of worker protests and a CCOO strike in August 2021. "We organized a 3-day strike, and afterwards we achieved permanent contracts," explained the first CCOO delegate. The workers in the other ten divisions still operate as they have always done, either through external companies or as self-employed people.

Unlike the other major platforms, Glovo has chosen to continue using the self-employment model for its 8,000 workers while modifying their agreements. In doing so, it endorses the position of digital self-employment with better, more flexible conditions in line with the Rider's Law, pending a European regulation for such a status. Better conditions for the self-employed is part of an international Glovo campaign launched in October 2021 and called "The Couriers' Pledge." It is supported by the research and activism group Fairwork at the University of Oxford and the WZB Berlin Social Science Center. According to the unions, Glovo has made no substantial improvements to working conditions in Spain and has instead introduced its changes primarily to erase all traces of an employment relationship and to avoid flagrant breaches of the new law.

Due to the sheer number of Glovo's self-employed workers, the company's behaviour has greatly impacted the industry. Some competing platforms believe that Glovo has hurt their businesses by continuing to operate with its own self-employed workers. For these competitors, recognizing employee status has incurred higher costs, and any couriers who wish to remain self-employed have gravitated toward Glovo. In response, Uber Eats, after formally protesting to the Ministry of Labour, decided in September 2022 to resume using self-employed workers. Glovo thus lost its monopoly on freelancers. To comply with the law and to attract workers, Uber Eats introduced several changes: couriers can set their own rates; they can change them whenever they wish; they receive only offers equal to or higher than the chosen rate; they know the pickup and delivery

points and the distance to be traveled before deciding to accept an order; and they are not penalized if they reject or ignore an order. The company also abandoned the rating system used by the algorithm to assign orders. These changes have led the Minister of Labour to warn that she will be “ruthless in compliance with the law” and will put “all the resources” available from the Labour Inspectorate to ensure compliance. Indeed, the Inspectorate has become the main Government tool to fight this workforce management model. The same month that Uber changed its strategy, the Inspectorate imposed a historic penalty on Glovo of 79 million euros and an obligation to give employee status to more than 8,000 workers from Barcelona and more than 2,000 from Valencia. Four months later, in January 2023, the Inspectorate imposed another fine of 57 million euros on Glovo and an obligation to hire more than 3,000 workers from Andalusia. Glovo appealed those fines, while setting aside enough money to pay them and perhaps others from pending legal cases. Those fines should be enough to make most companies change their practices, but an expanding start-up like Glovo is focused on gaining a dominant position in the market. It will thus continue to limit employee status as its sales and market share increase, with the intention of paying any fines over the long term. In December 2022, given the incorrigible behaviour of Glovo and Uber Eats, the Spanish government amended article 311 of the Criminal Code to punish such behaviour with prison terms of six months to six years. In addition, to expedite the work of the Inspectorate, it changed the Employment Law in March 2023, so that the Inspectorate could fine companies for false self-employment without confirmation from a judge.

5.3 Shop Floor Elections and Conventional Unionism in Glovo

After passage of the Rider’s Law, the counter-strategies by platform companies left little room for union action. Nonetheless, there was energetic action from traditional unions. Unionized workers sought first to gain recognition of their employee status and then to hold union elections in companies and workplaces in order to fight for their own collective agreement and to request information about algorithms from their employers.

As couriers began to be recognized as employees, the unions tried to hold shop floor elections. That effort, however, proved to be challenging. The number of new employees fluctuated considerably for several reasons: the high turnover; the majority who were part-timers; and the large numbers of foreign couriers coexisting with contract workers from temporary employment agencies. Under such conditions it was difficult to calculate the number of delegates and even determine the number of eligible voters.

The first union election at Glovo was held in May 2022 in Barcelona, where Glovo began to grant workers employee status after the August 2021 strike—at a time when the same workers had acquired the six months’ seniority they needed to vote in a union election. The election was fraught with difficulties. “Even the workers themselves did not believe it. In fact, uncertainty was always present until the day of the vote. It was something unthinkable” (Franz Morales, Support for Digital Platform Workers, CCOO-Catalonia). At Glovo Barcelona, the workers elected ten CCOO representatives and three UGT representatives, a result that can be explained by the work of the CCOO Secretariat of New Realities of Work and Precariousness and by a split between the riders and the less numerous ‘pickers’ (stock clerks).

The CCOO began in October 2020 to provide advice and support to improve the employment situation and was involved in a series of protests. According to the directors of the Secretariat, it was difficult to initiate union action in a company, particularly in a previously non-unionized industry, and the difficulties were exacerbated by other problems, including the fact that most of the workers were foreign, especially Latin American. Many saw unions as mafia-like organizations linked to a corrupt government. They often had no knowledge of unionization procedures due to their lack of experience with unionized companies. In addition, they were more accustomed to voting for a single charismatic leader than for lists of candidates. The latter system required much

education by union members to make sure the workers understood the electoral calendar, rules and system. This educational work was made all the more difficult by the social atomization of the workplaces. Because Glovo has nine workplaces in the province of Barcelona, workers could not be informed in a single session, and trade unionists had to travel around the different workplaces and organize WhatsApp groups, which became the most effective way of providing information. The problems caused by social atomization and the usefulness of WhatsApp groups and video calls became apparent during the two days of the election. The ballot box had to travel from one centre to another, and workers had very little time to cast their votes.

At a large centre, it's very easy. You arrive, you put the ballot box down. But not here. Here you draw up routes and coordinate. Sometimes we would say, he's 15 minutes late, no, he's on his way, wait. And it was a very intense two days. We stayed in touch through video calls, with the guys who were working. They were not all there because they had to be working.

Liliana Reyes, *New Realities of Work and Precariousness*, CCOO-Catalonia

According to the CCOO Catalonia leaders, they had to overcome not only the workers' distrust of unions and their lack of knowledge of how unions work but also their fear of the company itself as an all-powerful organization that allows no room for opposition and, therefore, no room for union participation.

They also perceive the company itself as powerful, that no one can fight against Glovo. And you hear people saying things like Glovo has bought out the government... incredible things like that, that they are untouchable and that... we didn't obtain another candidacy... simply because of that fear. There's no doubt that it's a factor.

Morales, CCOO-Catalonia

The election results can also be explained by the split between two groups: the couriers, who had poorer working conditions and a more combative attitude; and the stock clerks, who, in the words of one courier, "feel more like bosses in the working dynamic." According to a CCOO member, "the clash was so deeply felt that the couriers did not even want a 'picker' as candidate" (Franz Morales, CCOO-Catalonia). Although the CCOO eventually included a courier on its list, the differing perceptions of riders and stock clerks enabled the UGT to get its candidates elected and split the vote between the couriers, who mostly voted for the CCOO, and the stock clerks, who mostly voted for the UGT.

Following the first election, Glovo Barcelona employees set up the first committee with the capacity to set its own goals. With this new initiative, the Secretariat of New Realities ceased its formal support for the workers and transferred its authority to the Federation of Commerce. The first, most exciting goal for the workers was to abandon the retail industry collective agreement and negotiate a company-wide one, although they were warned that the process would be long and gradual and that they would need to address company-specific conditions, such as bonus payments on Sundays and public holidays. Another very important goal was to gain knowledge about the algorithms used to run the platform. This information was first requested by the Barcelona committee, which made the request on October 25, 2022 and gave the company fifteen days to supply the information. If this request is successful, it will be a milestone for conventional unionism. If it fails, Glovo will have committed yet another infringement.

The second Glovo election took place in June 2022 in Navarra. Glovo Express Navarra began the process of granting employee status in November 2021, first to stock clerks and managers, and then to couriers. Only one CCOO representative was elected, thanks to persistent efforts by Youth Space, a section of the Youth Secretariat, with support from a Federation of Commerce unionist and with inspiration from the activities of CCOO Catalonia. CCOO unionists used the platform's app to find the physical locations of Glovo couriers. They would split up into two groups of five people, visit the locations and talk to the couriers. Sometimes, they would go around on bicycle. They would put up posters and hand out leaflets and forms with QR codes, which the couriers could use to state their problems and interests. Although few responses were received, the exercise did provide contact information from couriers who wished to join the union. Youth Space provided the couriers with an information meeting, which was attended by Carmen Juarez, Secretary of New Realities at CCOO Catalonia, who was the public and media face of the CCOO at Glovo Barcelona at the time. Thus, when Glovo began to grant employee status, CCOO already had a presence at the company and supported couriers by checking their contracts and requesting improvements.

According to union sources, the second election was hindered by a series of problems, including dismissal of the worker who had run for the top position on the list and dismissal of others affiliated with the union. Workers overcame the communication issues caused by disparate schedules and spaces by using social media, in this case a Telegram group, although its efficacy was limited by leaks to the company's managers. In the election, the couriers supported the CCOO while the stock clerks appeared to remain on the sidelines. The latter perceived the union as having focused its activities on the couriers, who, as at Glovo Grocery Barcelona, were viewed as having different interests.

The company has far more direct contact with the pickers [stock clerks] and puts them in much more of a managerial role, even though they are paid the same. And they think they are better, despite having terrible conditions. The company makes sure to sow division.

Carlos de la Torre Verdejo, Youth Space, Secretariat of Youth, CCOO-Navarra

The delegates had a very difficult role during this period. There was an ongoing labour dispute, as well as significant worker discontent due to a poorly planned transfer of the supermarket headquarters and, above all, to the imposition of an industry-wide agreement that provided worse conditions and failed to correspond to the activity in question.

The third Glovo election took place in September 2022 in the Grocery section in Madrid, with the workers electing eight UGT delegates and five Solidaridad delegates. Solidaridad is not a class union. It is linked to the far-right party Vox, has little representation among workers and echoes the interests of most platforms by advocating continued self-employed status for delivery workers. Its emergence in a precarious segment of the job market is an anomaly that may be explained by the ongoing labour dispute at Glovo Grocery Madrid in the months leading up to the elections.

In an attempt to erase all traces of an employment relationship, Glovo had stopped providing its couriers with company insignia. In July 2022, once they had been hired as employees, Glovo decided to supply them with company-branded motorcycles. This move would enable it to regain visibility in the streets and save on paying the couriers for using their own vehicles. The couriers perceived this measure as a cut to their income and refused to accept it. Negotiations began and were attended by the UGT, which had already begun union work to get a foothold in the company. The CCOO was absent due to a lack of union activity. The negotiations ended with an agreement to introduce use of company motorcycles and to reduce the payment to riders per kilometre they travel. The workers ratified the agreement in a vote, but some perceived it as a deterioration in

their working conditions and blamed it on the socialist union. Many Glovo Grocery Madrid employees had previously worked as self-employed couriers, were members or supporters of pro-self-employment organizations and were critical of the Rider's Law. At the third election, those workers would support Solidaridad, whose list of candidates used anti-communist discourse and opposed not only the Rider's Law but also class-based unions.

5.4. Asymmetry in Collective Bargaining and the Crisis of Community Unionism

Once the elections were over, relations between Glovo and the unions began to normalize but normalization did not prevent labour disputes from continuing, especially over collective bargaining. At Glovo Barcelona, the CCOO presented itself as a negotiator and as “the working class's counterweight against the logic of platform economies in the capitalist system.” It could thus step away from past disputes and focus on dialogue between the company and its workers as a way for both parties to grow. At Glovo Navarra, the CCOO and the company have held numerous meetings at different levels to implement improvements to safety conditions, wages and agreements, although these efforts have not yet proven fruitful. The unequal power relationship has hindered talks between the CCOO delegate and Glovo. According to union interviewees, union representatives have negotiated with “many middle managers who don't have the power to make decisions” and whose strategic vision is nation-wide. There is thus an asymmetry between the two sides. “They always speak at the state level. They always look beyond [...] I am talking about Navarra and they talk about the fact that if that agreement is applied, they would have to make a state amendment for all workers throughout the state” (de la Torre, CCOO-Navarra). At Glovo Madrid, the UGT believes that the company is gradually accepting traditional union action as a way to resolve disputes.

The fragmentation of platform work has led to a fragmentation of collective agreements for those workers who have been recognized as employees since passage of the Rider's Law. These agreements have come about rather chaotically. Just Eat workers have an agreement with the CCOO and the UGT. Uber Eats workers depend on third party companies and are covered by agreements with the subcontractors for whom they work. Glovo Grocery workers in Barcelona and Madrid have drawn up their conditions in accordance with the retail industry agreement. Meanwhile, workers in Navarra have switched from the retail industry agreement to the wholesale industry agreement, which offers worse conditions and does not correspond to their type of work. Following the elections in Madrid, Glovo has expressed its intention to negotiate a company-wide agreement. To this end, it is encouraging union elections in the other provinces where it operates, and the UGT has appointed a National Works Council Coordinator. Although some union federations are in favour of obtaining their own agreement, others prefer to have an industry-wide agreement for platforms in general or last-mile logistics distribution as a basis for negotiating the company-wide agreement.

Union elections have marked a turning point for unions. They are helping unions gain recognition as counterparts and thus form bargaining units, but the new scenario of elections has favoured a certain separation between unions and the RxD network. Although the RxD network shares the same goal of gaining recognition of employee status, it has always criticized the UGT and the CCOO for coming late to the struggle and being part of the capitalist system that caused the situation of precarious employment. As a result, some of its members' sympathies have leaned toward radical unions with less representation. The RxD network has also seen its status change with the process of recognizing the employment relationship, the restructuring of the delivery platform business and the passage of the Rider's Law. Although it still maintains a strong presence on digital social media and even in institutional dialogue (with a focus on political advocacy at the national and European levels), it lacks members and has been left with a secondary role at the local/workplace/company levels. In the words of a union representative: “They have ceased to have a meaning,

beyond being a space that could reach out toward self-employed workers [...] and organizing the self-employed is very complicated” (de la Torre, CCOO-Navarra).

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The forms of collective action used by workers are strongly influenced by the type of work regulation system, the type of work process and the type of technology (Cini et al., 2021; Davis & Assem, 2021). In a context of fragmentation, dispersion and misclassification of the delivery platform workforce, the spatial practices of Spanish platform delivery workers have evolved, thus providing innovative and effective responses to new forms of work organization and to the exclusion of workers from regulatory frameworks that protected them as the weaker party in the employment relationship (Morales-Muñoz & Roca, 2022). As this case study shows, community-based actions have shifted public opinion toward support for recognition of the employment relationship. This shift in opinion, along with an institutional regulatory framework for ongoing monitoring through labour inspections, has been key to providing workers with employee status.

However, in this process of regulatory change, collective action by platform delivery workers has exhibited differences in logic and spatial practices (mainly the creation of spaces for activism and the scale of activism). There has thus been a progressive shift from community unionism toward representational unionism (two models of unionism that imply different spatialities). This shift has gone through three main stages.

During the first stage, collective action emerged as a response to deregulation and the imposition of false self-employment. It was organized independently by couriers who communicated and expressed mutual support through instant messaging technology and through meetings in the streets and at waiting areas. By creating such interrelational spaces, couriers could recognize each other, help each other with everyday problems and share strategies to optimize their income via the delivery apps. It was against this backdrop that the main collective actor at this stage—Couriers for Rights—emerged to fight the platforms for making unilateral changes to working conditions, as well as to gain recognition of the workers as employees, to create networks of couriers in the country’s biggest cities and alliances with other actors (unions, anti-precarity movements, networks of lawyers, etc.) and to influence public debate through social media. This form of community unionism is exemplified by the collective structure of Couriers for Rights as a network of associations and individuals at the local level and as a platform of associations that call for regulation of platform work. This form of community unionism, which is more reminiscent of 19th century than 20th century union activity, is predominant among platform delivery workers worldwide (Joyce et al., 2022), reflecting the widespread deregulation of the labour markets in which the platforms operate. Community-based initiatives were thus prevalent at this stage, although RxD did collaborate with unions (the UGT in Madrid and several radical unions in other cities).

During the second stage, recognition of employee status had become the main focus of debate about platform work, as a result of the above collective actions. Now, RxD and the unions turned toward a new spatial strategy. They acted at a new level by targeting the state and by focusing on legal action and social dialogue. Because the companies were continually being fined for breaches of labour law and because a succession of court rulings deemed couriers to be employees, there emerged another relevant actor: pro-self-employment associations, which, despite having goals that stood in contrast to RxD’s goals, also employed practices that may be described as community unionism. Echoing international trends (Joyce et al, 2022), the collective action of these associations had three priorities: associative power, rather than structural power; enactment of legislation, rather than collective bargaining; and geographic unionism, rather than workplace unionism. In

associations of self-employed couriers, mass protests were organized via internal communication among multiple large groups on instant messaging apps. Meanwhile, a community of mostly Venezuelan couriers would offer each other mutual support for common problems and needs.

The third stage began when the Rider's Law came into force, and involved organizing new levels of action. Although recognition of the employment relationship has been partial and limited, it has brought significant change to working conditions wherever it has been granted. Such change poses challenges for companies, which must comply with unfamiliar agreements and procedures, and for workers, who must channel at least part of their activity through more conventional union action (to improve working conditions at the workplace/company level through collective bargaining). In this new framework, workers act collectively mostly within the company and/or the workplace, where they must elect union representatives to convey and negotiate their demands. Such action entails a shift toward a more representational form of union action, that, by definition, then, is spatially situated.

Recognition of the employment relationship is challenging for all the collective actors involved. For the most representative unions at the national level, it has led to a move away from the centralized, vertical action that used to shape the regulatory process and toward action through regional and industry-wide federations that must now be introduced into workplaces and whose activities are not limited to a single industry. Many intermediate union leaders are unfamiliar with how these union federations are supposed to work. Ad hoc labour statuses created by companies (couriers, stock clerks, etc.) further complicate implementation of occupation-based agreements that were drawn up for other activities or forms of corporate organization. Jurisdictional conflicts may also arise between different industry-wide sections of the union because the collective agreement does not clearly define the division of responsibilities, or there may not be a single set of collective agreements. In this context, unions obtain mixed results from their organizing campaigns. Clearly, when a union makes an effort to get closer to the workers and their workplaces, it achieves better results through union elections (as illustrated by the CCOO in Catalonia and Navarra and the UGT in Madrid).

As for non-union actors, such as the RxD network and the associations of self-employed delivery workers, they are becoming partially committed to representational unionism. Their actions now include delivery workers with employee status. This partial commitment is shown as much by pro-self-employment associations and the Solidaridad union led by the far-right party Vox as by militant unions such as Intersindical in Catalonia and Asturias and LAB in the Basque Country in the case of RxD.

In sum, the presumption of employee status under the Rider's Law of 2021 has not only caused changes to worker spatiality (i.e., conventional unions now focus on shop floor elections and collective bargaining at different levels) but also resulted from such changes (i.e., RxD has shifted from targeting the companies to targeting regulatory institutions at the national and European levels). We should not, however, see community unions and conventional workplace unions as opposing models. Although they have experienced different impetuses throughout the struggle, they have maintained connecting bridges and produced synergies for the ongoing cause of regulating and dignifying platform work. This is especially relevant because platform regulation has run into considerable political, corporate and worker opposition and may be reversed with a change of government. Finally, there is no single union model for all delivery workers. One size does not fit all.

Note

[1] Twenty-two member states approved the general text at Luxembourg's Employment and Social Affairs Council (EPSCO). Only five abstained, i.e., Estonia, Germany, Greece, Latvia and Spain. There were no votes against.

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