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# Riders, Rights and Collective Action

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## Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to develop a conceptual framework for analysing the collective actions and organisational practices of delivery and transportation gig-workers, building on Rosa Luxemburg's colonisation concept and on the power resources theory employed in current trade union analysis. The empirical bases are recent surveys and studies on platform work, the analysis of websites and social media communities for the collective action of platform workers and conversations with platform activists in several European countries. The specific characteristics of platform workers' collective actions and organisational practices are examined with a view to identifying their potential and the opportunities they afford in the light of different trade union power resources.

**Keywords:** sociology of platform work, platform economy, power sources, employment relations

## 1. Introduction

Not so long ago, the only people who looked for “Gigs” were musicians. For the rest of us, once we outgrew our school dreams of rock stardom, we found “real” jobs that paid us a fixed salary every month, allowed us to take paid holidays and formed the basis for planning a stable future [1].

At the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos 2020 [2], several leading platform companies including Uber, Deliveroo and Cabify published the ‘Charter of principles for good platform work’ as a reaction to the growing public awareness of the problems of their business model regarding social and employment conditions. The emergent platform economy is reshaping business models and employment relations in Europe, challenging conventional social agents and regulatory institutions. The term ‘platform economy’ or ‘gig economy’ refers to online platforms that coordinate the demand for specific services with individual service providers using digital algorithms. Digital labour platforms are economic agents providing virtual spaces for matching labour supply and demand via online technologies based on algorithmic management, that is, by automated data and decision making, thereby substantially lowering transactions costs. In the classical economic theory of the firm, transaction costs are the main explanation for the existence of the firm as an organisation in a market economy [3]. The classical entrepreneur was a risk-taker mobilising risk capital. The platform owner, by contrast, shifts nearly all business risks and costs onto others. By eliminating this key reason for the existence of value-creating organisations, “online platforms push the

process of decentralization, networking, outsourcing, subcontracting and breaking up work into single performances or ‘Gigs’ to a new limit in which all that remains of the firm is a profit-making technique” ([4]: 9). “Algorithmic management’ allows these platforms to increasingly track and discipline workers, in many cases circumventing or flouting existing labour and health and safety regulations, to the detriment of platform workers’ social protection” ([5]: 5). Digital technologies are thus giving rise to a new business model with anonymous relations among employers, employees/self-employed and customers, thereby challenging the traditional institutional regulation systems. These gig-enterprises externalise all relationships with customers and employees, thus maximising deinstitutionalisation and flexibilising service provision, working time and labour relations. In particular, the gig economy challenges all collective organisation and representation channels built up by workers in the course of the 20th century in their struggle to civilise capitalist economies and de-commodify labour. This chapter looks at emerging attempts of gig-workers in the transport and food delivery sectors to develop collective action capacities and resistance strategies.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. The following section examines the principal characteristics of platform work through the lens of sociological approaches to conceptualise capitalist work organisation. The third section introduces the trade union power resources approach and examines experiences of collective action to analyse the particular structure of labour relations and collective action in the gig economy. The empirical bases are recent surveys and studies on platform work, an analysis of websites and social media communities for collective action of platform workers and conversations with platform activists in Spain, Germany, the UK and Norway. Section four examines the potential and opportunities of platform workers’ collective actions in the light of different trade union power resources. The chapter closes with a short conclusive reflection.

## **2. The sociology of platform work**

Platform work – the matching of supply and demand for paid labour through an online platform – is an emerging and growing employment form which still lacks a clear definition, shows a heterogeneity of business models and calls for the regulation of the contract and employment status and the working conditions [6, 7]. It includes both web-based platforms, where work is outsourced through an open call to a geographically dispersed crowd (“crowdwork”), and location-based applications (apps) which allocate work to individuals in a specific geographical area (**Table 1**).

The main differences between these types reside in the scale of tasks, the service provision (online or locally), the required skills, the process of contact between clients and workers and the form of work allocation. Other taxonomies of platform work make similar distinctions between location-based vs. remote platform work and between microtasks or microjobs vs. macrotasks or project jobs (see [6, 8, 9]).

Following classical approaches on capitalist development, the gig economy is a new form of capitalist colonisation of non-capitalist spaces. Rosa Luxemburg [10] (1913; see also [11]) distinguished two forms of colonisation of non- or pre-capitalist spaces: external colonisation towards pre-capitalist countries and regions and internal colonisation of non-capitalist spheres in existing capitalist economies. The platform economy combines both forms of capitalist colonisation. Gig work opens new spaces for the capitalist mobilisation of cheap and flexible labour, operating in a no-man’s-land outside the scope of labour and social legislation and without

Name	Description	Example
On-location platform-determined routine work	The platform assigns tasks to workers, which are performed in person	Ride-hailing services such as Uber
On-location client-determined moderately skilled work	Clients choose workers for tasks, which are performed in person	Household task service platforms such as Oferia
On-location worker-initiated moderately skilled work	Workers choose tasks and perform them in person	Household task service platforms such as ListMinut
Online moderately skilled click-work	The platform assigns tasks to workers, which are performed online	Professional services platforms such as Crowdfunder
Online contestant specialist work	Workers perform part or all of a task online in a competition, then the client selects a winner	Professional services platforms such as 99designs

Source: [7]; 6.

**Table 1.**  
*Five types of platform work.*

collective bargaining mechanisms. Looked at from this perspective, gig work is the colonisation for capitalist exploitation of new human spaces and new labour potentials (evenings, weekends of students, housewives, care workers, rural workers in Africa or Asia...) for capitalist value production. Digital networks facilitate temporally and spatially extended access to a labour pool otherwise inaccessible to wage labour [12]. For example, gig workers in Africa or Asia often have to work at night to be in sync with the time zones of their clients in North America or Western Europe ([13]: 67). In his classical study of the development of German post-war capitalism, Burkart Lutz [14], drawing on Luxemburg, described the prosperity decades after World War II as an exceptional period of capitalist colonisation of non-capitalist milieus. The current expansion of platform-based business models may be seen as a new period of capitalist colonisation using the possibilities of globally dispersed digital work and electronic networks [15].

From a historical perspective of capitalism, many, if not all, of the organisational work practices of the platforms are not genuinely novel [5, 16]. Breaking up jobs into small, low-skilled, repetitive tasks, home-based production practices, the ‘putting out’ system, on-demand work, piecework, intermediary-based business models, etc., were part and parcel of early capitalism in Western Europe up to the 19th century and remain common in the global South until today. The gig economy is reintroducing these practices into Western core countries, while at the same time enabling the exploitation of geographical differences in skills, labour costs, environmental and fiscal regulations.

Gig work represents a new form of capitalist work, a new dimension of the recommodification of labour in the context of the shift towards neoliberalism from the 1970s onwards, a new contested terrain to be regulated by politics, labour law, interest groups, etc., a challenge to invent new institutional settings in an emerging field of precarious and flexible work [17]. To a large extent it is low-qualified flexible but standardised work outside regular labour contracts, a sort of digital Taylorism without the Taylorist mass worker [9, 12]. As a new business model, the gig-enterprise represents the complete disintegration of the traditional Fordist organisation and its collective interest groups into a flexible, market-driven, individualised form of enterprise-customer-worker network. “The gig economy can be regarded as the latest stage in the development of atypical forms of employment”

([18]: 36). The institutional form built around the Fordist enterprise with a fixed contractual workforce, collective bargaining and labour relations, labour law, social security, health & safety provisions, fiscal responsibilities and social responsibility is fading away.

The classical transformation problem in the management of labour, i.e. how to convert contracted labour power into effective value-creating work, adopts a new form of managerial control in the case of app-based platform work. All direct and personal control is replaced by an app which exerts total surveillance over the workers through automated messaging, assigning tasks, working time, location, performance evaluation (rating and ranking), etc.; “an algorithmic Panopticon provides a God-like view over the workers’ behaviour through a combination of Taylorism and panopticism” ([19]: 13). “The unremitting process of appraisal and evaluation generates a level of pressure that is of such magnitude, it is completely out of sync with the activity or task” ([9]: 30). The app is the boss and entirely in the hands of the employer, thus representing the completest expropriation of workers’ means of production in the capitalist era.

Having developed a general taxonomy and the main elements of the business model of the expanding platform economy, the following sections on the employment relations will concentrate on the delivery and transport gig-work as one form of location-based platform work where several labour conflicts and worker mobilisations could be observed recently.

### **3. Employment relations in the gig economy**

To evaluate in a more systematic way the potential of collective action and the organisation of platform workers, we refer to the power resources approach widely recognised and applied in recent trade union research. In its current form the literature on trade union power draws on the concept used by Beverly Silver [20] in her historical analysis of workers’ movements since 1870. A research group at the University of Jena developed the concept further with a specific focus on trade union revitalisation [21]. Since then it has been used in a variety of studies on trade unions and labour conflicts (see [5, 22, 23]). Following this approach, workers’ organisations have four traditional power resources, built up during the struggles and conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

1. structural: possessing scarce skills or competences or occupying strategic positions in the production process, giving the union workplace or market-place bargaining power;
2. associational: membership, willingness to pay, providing the union financial resources;
3. organisational: unity to collectively support its purpose and its policies, willingness to act;
4. institutional: legislative support, administration of social welfare, tripartite corporatism.

Regarding potential trade union revitalisation strategies and developing innovative forms of contestation against new forms of exploitation and precarisation in times of crisis and weakness, these traditional power sources require three

complementary, more discursive resources that are not necessarily new, although they may have been slightly forgotten or insufficiently appreciated:

- a. moral: a mission and identity based on achieving social justice and a better society;
- b. collaborative or coalitional: seeking allies and sharing resources with other groups and movements which have goals and interests in common;
- c. strategic: intelligent and more effective use of scarce resources.

The particular working conditions of delivery and transport platforms imply a structural weakness of traditional power sources. Trade unions are trying to organise the growing platform workforces (see the examples below) but effective unionisation results very difficult. Digital labour platforms tend to circumvent existing rules on employment, social protection and corporate taxation. Working in the gig-economy can be extremely isolated, with the app as the only communication channel between worker and employer and hardly any communication among employees. The employers tend to negate their responsibilities by not recognising their workers as employees nor themselves as employers. Those working for them are considered as self-employed or ‘independent contractors’.

Workers are no longer in-house technicians, drivers or operators but external service providers performing their work within the company without belonging to it, without knowing their colleagues, without having any say in the organisation of the work, without knowing either the HR manager or the head of the department for which they are working, without contact to union representatives, without discussing things with their peers over a cup of coffee. Although they work for the firm, they only have a marginal role... The transformation (or hybridisation) of a traditional company into a digital platform means nothing less than the abandonment of the whole field of employment relations by the entrepreneur. A platform is nothing more than a marketplace for services, in which there is no place for labour laws and social security ([16]: 21, 27).

The majority of platform workers are underemployed with poor payment and working conditions, complementing pay from other jobs or combining housework with platform work. Platform workers often achieve wages below the minimum wage, lack all elementary workers’ rights such as paid holidays, sick pay, insurance in case of accidents or disease, social security and have to pay for their own transport equipment (bicycles, motor scooters) and smartphones.

In spite of the individualised labour relations and difficulties to organise collectively, “many workers (28 to 60 per cent, depending on the platform surveyed) have turned to worker-run online forums and social media sites either to get advice or to follow the discussions about issues facing crowdworkers” ([24]: xviii; [25]). With regard to labour relations, at least two different types of platform work have to be distinguished. Delivery and transport platforms such as Deliveroo or Uber provide local services by localised workforces, whereas global internet platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk or Upwork provide their services on a global scale and allow the work to be decomposed into many micro-tasks distributed around the world. Though difficult, it is possible to organise the former and in fact there are increasingly attempts of riders/drivers to take collective action (see below). As regards the latter category, it is extremely difficult to bring such workers together around shared interests [25]. In this chapter we therefore concentrate primarily on the delivery and transport platforms.

Following descriptions of platform work by riders (personal conversations of the author; see also [26], and [27]), international observatories and trade unions [24, 28, 29], the main characteristics of delivery platform work are:

- a. The rider has no say in the contents of the contract imposed by the employer.
- b. The rider is always and easily substitutable just by the unilateral suspension of the contract.
- c. The employer determines all working conditions, the price, the time and the form of delivery without negotiation or consultation.
- d. The employer has a wide range of workers at his disposal, workers without any bargaining power or organisational infrastructure.
- e. The App allows total control of all movements, the speed, the delivery times of the riders by the employer. The employer always knows the location of the worker and at the same time keeps all information on the job under control.<sup>1</sup>
- f. The rider has to provide the vehicle, smartphone and data-contract. All risks (accidents, vehicle defects, sickness) have to be assumed by the rider.<sup>2</sup>

Platform work thus implies an employer strategy shifting as much as possible all risks and responsibilities of the employment relationship onto the workers. For trade unions, these characteristics minimise all traditional power resources and imply several key challenges to organise and unionise platform workers:

1. The lack of a clearly defined employment contract – many riders work in a self-employed capacity – makes representation and organisation in traditional labour relations institutions very difficult.
2. Platform workers do not come together in a common work centre, they do not share physical spaces, which makes communication and collective organisation complicated.
3. The cultural and educational background of many platform workers – often young highly-educated individuals – imply a distance to traditional trade union representation.
4. The unprotected status of platform workers, exposed all the time to an easy replacement, and their lack of effective bargaining power make unionisation improbable.

Two riders explain their working conditions [30]:

The way to manage our Deliveroo autonomy is really oppressive. Not being able to control your situation when you are really paying some expenses to be able to control it. Another thing that affects a lot is the fact that they tell you some things

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<sup>1</sup> An example for the control strategy is that the riders only get the information on the client's location after having received the prepared food at the restaurant.

<sup>2</sup> In a personal interview with the author a rider reported that in case of an accident the employer asks the rider not to reveal the fact that it happened during the working time to avoid any problems with the health insurance.

when you are going to start that are false, such as that you will not make an order of more than six kilometres or that you will be protected in extreme weather conditions and it is not true. It is not possible that there is no plus if you pass the mileage or driving under a thunderstorm. The biggest drawback is how vulnerable we are in this situation of false autonomous, physically and as workers. (own translation from Spanish).

I did in the beginning write emails - long emails - pointing out ways the platform could work better for [workers]. With screenshots, detailed explanations of how they were making our lives difficult, but I realised that they do not care about that. If you make any issues for them, they'll just fire you or find a way to stop giving you work. (Delivery rider, London, quoted in [28]: 14).

Most platforms, including Uber, Amazon Mechanical Turk, and Upwork, are Transnational Companies (TNCs). The food delivery apps Deliveroo and Foodora had about 50,000 and 7,000 riders working for them in 13 and 10 countries resp. in 2018 [19]. Although organisation and collective action are difficult challenges for platform workers and trade unions, there are an increasing number of encouraging experiences of self-organised platform worker struggles and trade union initiatives to support platform workers' interest representation (see also [31]). The European Trade Union Institute reported 127 platform-worker protest actions worldwide in 2018 [32].

One form of union support is the introduction of a specific website for gig workers trying to build up organisational and collaborative power. The most encompassing initiative to organise and assist platform workers so far is the platform Fair Crowdwork (<http://www.faircrowdwork.org/>), a joint project of IG Metall (the German Metalworkers' Union), the Austrian Chamber of Labour, the Austrian Trade Union Confederation and the Swedish white-collar union Unionen, in association with various research and development partners. On 13–14 April 2016, this network held the first International Workshop on Union Strategies in the Platform Economy in Frankfurt am Main (Germany), bringing together staff members from the above-listed organisations, along with legal and technical experts from Asia, Europe, and North America. It ended with the “Frankfurt Declaration” [33] on fair platform-based work. In a collective learning process, Fair Crowdwork is continually widening its scope and activities (personal conversation with Fair Crowdwork trade union officials).<sup>3</sup> The Spanish trade union confederation UGT (Union General de Trabajadores) launched in 2017 its website <http://turespuestasindical.es/> as a service for platform workers, offering advice and legal assistance from experts, networking and complementary services.

More and more trade union federations all over Europe are offering full flat-rate membership and web services, giving crowdworkers access to legal protection and counselling. In South-West France (Gironde/Bordeaux), the bike courier CGT union has been set up, representing hundreds of food delivery riders. In the UK, the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB), a breakaway from Unite and UNISON and organising predominantly low-paid migrant workers, has supported several campaigns and strikes of food delivery couriers claiming employee status. In October 2018 couriers from 31 groups all over Europe hold the European Assembly of Riders in Brussels to form a Transnational Courier Federation [34].

Collective agreements with platform companies to gain some institutional power are very rare so far. In Denmark, the United Federation of Danish Workers concluded in 2018 a 12-month pilot collective agreement with the private cleaning

<sup>3</sup> A similar initiative has been started by a research group at Oxford University founding the Fairwork Foundation (see <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/projects/a-fairwork-foundation-towards-fair-work-in-the-platform-economy/>)



sector digital platform Hilfr on wages and working conditions for the platform's users. Workers benefit from a pension scheme, paid holidays and sickness pay. In May 2019, the Italian food delivery company Laconsegna signed a collective agreement with three trade union federations that clarifies riders as employees. They are covered by the national collective agreement for the logistics sector and benefit from all social protections.

In Germany, several platforms, along with the Crowdsourcing Association and the Metal Workers' Union, have established an Ombuds Office. These platforms have signed a code of conduct for crowdsourcing and crowdworking. In Cologne, Deliveroo, Foodora and Lieferando riders managed to set up a works council with the support of the Food&Beverages Union NGG in February 2018. A WhatsApp group and Facebook site (<https://www.facebook.com/liefiernamlimit/>) served as coordination and network media. Deliveroo contested the initiative with the non-renewal of the contracts for all works council members. However, the struggle for worker representation continues: Delivery Hero (Foodora) had to accept worker representatives on its supervisory board in accordance with the German co-determination law.

In the face of the difficulties associated with collectively bargaining with the platform companies, some trade unions are trying to include platform work in overriding regional or sectoral agreements. In Catalonia/Spain, trade unions and employers' organisations signed in July 2018 a cross-industry framework agreement (Acuerdo Interprofesional de Cataluña, AIC), which contains a section on platform work and explicitly defines the relationship between a platform and a service provider as an employment relationship. All these initiatives represent attempts to strengthen the weak associational, organisational and institutional power of platform workers.

Besides such incipient forms of self-organisation and unionisation, there are already some experiences with strikes and collective action [18, 32]. In Belgium, riders are free to join a trade union and have set up a self-organised, network-based Riders Collective.<sup>4</sup> When Deliveroo unilaterally changed its contract model from an employee status to a self-employed model in 2017, several rider groups - mainly in Brussels - organised strikes and the temporary occupation of the Deliveroo building. Although the actions disrupted food delivery, Deliveroo did not alter its contract model or make any concessions [35].

In October 2016, Foodora riders in Turin organised strikes and shitstorm campaigns against the conversion of their contracts from hourly contracts into delivery contracts [18, 36]. Besides disrupting deliveries, public campaigns and protest rallies damaged the platform's image and resulted in a slight wage increase, although all other demands of the riders were ignored. The contracts of all strike activists were not renewed and most of them are now working for other platforms. The probably most important impact of the strike was the increase in public awareness, leading to parliamentary initiatives to regulate the delivery and transport sector.

In Spain, Deliveroo and Glovo riders in Barcelona and Madrid created the platform 'Riders X Derechos' to support their demand for employee status and better working conditions.<sup>5</sup> In summer 2017, they organised several protest rallies, petitions and short strikes which were countered by repression and dismissals. To gain logistical support and legal counselling, the platform workers contacted the regional Catalan grassroots union Intersindical Alternativa de Cataluña (Alternative Trade Union Confederation of Cataluña).

<sup>4</sup> See the Facebook web-site of the collective <https://www.facebook.com/collectif.coursiers/>.

<sup>5</sup> The example was followed in Italy by the platform RidersXiDiritti [37].

They sell you the nice idea that you are free to work whenever you want, but in reality you are subject to the way each company distributes the schedules. The problem is that there are more and more riders and not enough work for everyone”, stated one rider. “Keeping us in a self-employed and low-income regime suits them, because it avoids a group feeling arising, gets us competing against each other for jobs – and they always have a rider available. (El Diario, 30.06.2017; own translation from Spanish).

A rider from Deliveroo in Madrid who had participated in a public lawsuit against the company explains the forms of repression: “Before my testimony I worked 30 hours a week. Then the platform reduced them to four, without any explanation. It is their new strategy. Instead of disconnecting you, if you complain, they reduce your work hours until it becomes unfeasible.” (El País, 23.02.2020, own translation from Spanish).

In May 2019, hundreds of Uber drivers in the UK went on strike as part of an international protest initiated in several North American cities. They were demanding to be recognised as employees and paid the minimum wage (The Guardian, 08.05.2019). The action was supported by the Independent Workers of Great Britain union.

The specific employment conditions of delivery riders mean that collective action has certain characteristics. First of all, the contents of negotiations and agreements are very basic, addressing elementary labour rights such as regular contracts, minimum wages and working hours, the right to holidays, sick pay and social security. Platform workers have to start where the labour movement began in the 19th century. Whatsapp is the main communication media when calling a strike, while Facebook is the main organisation and publication media. Strikes are short, concentrated in the main delivery hours and accompanied by public campaigns against the platforms. Attacking the platforms’ branding and pressuring public authorities to control and regulate the sector are the most important objectives.<sup>6</sup> Drivers and riders thus mobilise discursive power resources (moral, collaborative and strategic) to compensate their weak traditional ones.

Most platform labour conflicts concern workers’ employment status. Platform employers try to avoid conventional employment relationships, exploiting labour law fuzziness to force their workers into a self-employed regime. National responses across the European Union are divided, with some Member States plumping for the existence of an employment relationship while others support the idea of platform workers being independent contractors [38]. Regarding the case of Uber, the Court of Justice of the European Union has ruled that Uber carries out a classic transport service and the legal relationship with its drivers should be deemed an employment relationship.<sup>7</sup>

In Spain, three recent judgements of courts in Barcelona, Valencia and Madrid confirmed that Deliveroo and Glovo ‘riders’ do have an employment relationship with the platform and should be considered as employees. The courts dismantled Deliveroo’s position of the alleged autonomy of its riders, arguing that the platform exercised constant control over the riders, that the company was the sole holder of the information necessary for the business and that the real means of production was the platform in itself and not the phone and bicycle. The riders performed a personal service under organised conditions directed by the company [38, 39].

<sup>6</sup> In all conversations with activists and unionists involved in mobilisations of delivery and transport workers the public reputation of the platform appears as a most important pressure means. The public image is a priority concern for platforms and thus one of the very few weaknesses the riders and drivers can use in case of labour conflicts.

<sup>7</sup> See Judgement of the Court 20 December 2017, In Case C-434/15, ECLI:EU:C:2017:981

Furthermore, the firm used geo-location monitoring (GPS) for the constant surveillance of every worker and every delivery. Therefore, the platform owner had to be considered an employer. It is important to notice that the plaintiff in this case was not a rider or a union but the Spanish Social Security following a detailed investigation by the labour inspectorate. These examples show the importance of legislative institutional power in the sector and the potential of support by political agents and trade unions.

Other key but less-discussed problems of platform workers are their social isolation, voicelessness and non-communication. A delivery platform worker in the UK stated:

The company itself is a strange one to work for, ... you can only communicate with them via email. I've never met anyone officially from [name of platform] since the first day when I was interviewed... There's a phone number you can ring during the shift if you have a problem with the delivery or if you have a problem with the app, but you are not allowed to ring that number to discuss anything like shifts or other problems. Like sometimes they mis-paid me. You have to email, and it's quite a slow process and it can be quite frustrating... even if it's their fault, they do not pay until the next payslip, and then they make another mistake and, all of this, you have to go through emails, explaining again, to a different person each time, what the situation is ([40]: 41).

Many platform workers think that this lack of direct personal contact leads to negative behaviour and arbitrary decision-making that would normally be unacceptable in face-to-face relationships with managers. The employers are invisible, hidden behind the apparent neutrality of the algorithm technology. Information, ratings, evaluations, all communications are anonymous pseudo-objective messages, yet the consequence of the programming and decisions of platform management. Social isolation and high work intensity under the pressure of ratings and algorithmic control are problems reported by all gig-workers and unionists. With workers having no influence over the contents of the apps, they are left without any control over their means of production.

Another type of player has emerged in a number of countries: cooperatives organising self-employed workers and providing them with a range of services. One of the most established is SMart (Société Mutuelle pour Artistes), an organisation founded in Belgium in 1998 as an association of creative and cultural freelance workers and then transformed into a non-profit cooperative [6, 35]. SMart is currently active in nine European countries and has extended to other sectors beyond creative work. In exchange for a fee, it provides self-employed workers with a wide range of services, including help with invoicing and the declaration of income, getting paid as an employee (and therefore gaining access to social security), debt collection, pay advances (through a mutual guarantee fund) and access to training and co-working spaces.

SMart is based on a participatory process: all members are invited to participate in the annual general assembly, and all profits are reinvested. SMart, as with other similar workers cooperatives, does not usually bargain on behalf of its members. Only occasionally it publicly voices the concerns of freelancers and advocates on their behalf. The agreement between Smart and Deliveroo in Belgium including insurances and minimum wages was thus an exception [6]. The model proposed by SMart is not uncontroversial and has been criticised by some unions as it "legitimises grey zones" instead of fighting them [41].

In autumn 2018, the Spanish 'Riders X Derechos' launched their own cooperative delivery platform 'Mensakas' to create decent jobs and fight precariousness.

Mensakas is an app for online ordering and home delivery. The cooperative will be self-managed by its own workers. Everyone will have an employment contract

and therefore taxes and social security contributions will be paid. Using the digital tools, logistics, and media that we have developed, we will contribute to the drive towards a social and solidarity-based economy, as well as responsible, local consumption. Our bicycles and electric vehicles mean we'll be riding through the city in an environmentally-friendly, sustainable way [42].

Mensaka joined the European federation of bike delivery coops CoopCycle (<https://coopcycle.org/en/>) founded in 2016 and operating in 16 European cities. In New York, after several labour conflicts with Uber and Lyft, the first worker-owned ridesharing platform TDC (The Drivers Cooperative) was founded to offer a human, self-managed alternative to the Uber business model [43].

The need to regulate the platform economy and to guarantee fundamental rights for users, workers and citizens is also felt by city administrations. During the 'Sharing Cities Summit' 2018 in Barcelona on 12–15 November, 31 cities from around the world, including Amsterdam, Barcelona, Lisbon, Madrid, Montreal, New York, Paris, Sao Paulo, Seoul, Milan and Vienna, signed the 'Declaration of Principles and Commitments of Collaborative Cities' to **claim their sovereignty when negotiating with large digital platforms** negatively impacting their economies, as has been the case with Airbnb and Uber [44]. The search for sustainable and socially responsible models of the platform economy may be a natural ally for employee initiatives on labour rights in the sector.

As the platform economy is growing and to a large extent made up of young highly-educated workers familiar with new communication technologies, it can be assumed that collective organisations and forms of interest representation will emerge in spite of adverse working conditions. The ways of organising and the forms of collective action to be developed are still quite open. There are divisions between those relying on traditional unions and those thinking of alternative self-organised interest organisations or between those fighting for labour rights in the current platforms and those in favour of creating alternative, more coop-oriented platforms. "Currently emerging patterns hint at a possible co-existence or combinations of mainstream trade unions and other unions and union-like organisations defending platform workers' needs and interests" ([5]: 6).

#### 4. The power resources of platform workers

Drawing on the examples and experiences reported so far, in this section we come back in a more systematic manner to the different power resources of gig-workers. To examine their potentials to surmount the difficulties of collective organisation and develop alternative power resources we analyse the Foodora strike in 2019 in Oslo, which is rather exceptional but very suitable in analytic terms.

In general, the *structural power* of platform workers is low due to their easy substitution, the low skill requirements of their work and their disorganised position in the production process. This at least applies to the on-demand delivery and transport workers. The situation may be somewhat different for high-skilled freelance workers in creative industries, but these platform workers are not likely to organise in trade unions.

Their *associational power* is also low because of the evident difficulties to unite dispersed workers without a clear employment relationship in stable and structured membership organisations.

Their *organisational power* is stronger than initially expected. Although organising is difficult without a common workplace and shared working experiences, the communication culture of the young, often highly-educated workforces via social media and informal contacts facilitates coordinated responses to employer abuses,

self-organisation practices, online communities, campaigning and wildcat strikes. Nevertheless, power relations are very asymmetrical, with the platforms able to simply disconnect or exclude troublemaking couriers and adjust their algorithmic control mechanisms.

Their *institutional power* is almost non-existent as they work outside traditional trade union and representation structures and are not recognised as a distinct collective with regular rights in the established public institutional system. In some exceptional cases such as the Foodora riders in Germany who send representatives to the company board or their Austrian colleagues with their works council, platform workers have been able to benefit from existing representation institutions. But even in these exceptional situations, their institutional power is very limited as the platforms can easily relocate their headquarters to another country.

In this situation, complementary *discursive power* resources such as moral and collaborative power resources gain in importance. As the riders are visible on city streets, strategies like public campaigning, grassroots protests and online ‘naming and shaming’ actions may result in effective power resources being placed in the hands of platform workers. Not only the platform owners but public authorities and courts of justice are feeling the pressure to become active in defence of the labour and social rights of these new collectives. Examples like the Riders Union Bologna, a network of food delivery riders who went on strike on 23 February 2018, thereby forcing the platforms to suspend their services, show the potential of grassroots discursive power. On 31 May 2018, the riders union managed to sign a ‘Charter of fundamental rights of digital work in an urban context’ with the three main trade union confederations, the centre-left city council and some local food delivery platforms. In a ‘naming and shaming’ move, both signatory and non-signatory platforms are listed on the city’s website. Other cities are set to follow Bologna’s example ([5]: 17).

The example of the Foodora strike in August/September 2019 in Oslo illustrates the different power resources mobilised.<sup>8</sup> A group of Foodora cyclists organised in the ‘Foodora Club’ joined the Transport Workers’ Union in demanding a collective agreement with improved wages and regular representation structures (elected shop stewards and a works council). When the Foodora management declared the demands to be unaffordable, some 200 riders went on strike, organising several weeks of colourful cycle rallies on the streets of Oslo (‘pink parades’), social media campaigns, a public ‘Foodora cyclists’ soup kitchen’, etc. In doing so, they received public support not only from the trade union confederation LO but from political parties, local politicians, academic circles and public media. The successful outcome of the strike – a collective agreement guaranteeing decent wages and employment conditions and including institutionalised representation and bargaining structures (works council) – shows the effectiveness of combining power sources available in the Norwegian context. The local labour market is forcing employers to pay competitive wages and give workers employee status, a form of structural power that platform workers in other countries largely miss. The established power of the trade unions and the advanced labour rights add significant institutional and associational power, effectively used by a group of militant workplace leaders (organisational power). Finally, the riders on strike were able to mobilise public support and visibility, putting the company and public authorities under pressure to listen to their demands (discursive power). “People see and know us in the streets. We are always friendly to them” (a strike activist and now works council member, IntOslo1). This exceptional availability

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<sup>8</sup> This paragraph is based on a long personal conversation with one of the strike leaders in December 2019.

of the main trade union power sources was able to overcome the isolation, precarity and lack of collective organisation and bargaining power largely dominant elsewhere in this sector.

Transportation, food delivery and care-work platforms show certain emerging discursive and associational power sources [45]. Delivery workers with their branded backpacks and vehicles are visible and often meet in urban hotspots and waiting areas, while care-workers often form strong personal ties with their clients. These conditions allow for some embryonic forms of solidarity, communication and public support, especially as these workers are not as easily replaceable as other crowdworkers. ‘Brand shaming’, a practice originally developed by alternative consumer activists, is an additional power resource in the hands of riders, opening up opportunities for further coalitions with other civic movements in urban contexts.

## 5. Discussion

Given the attractiveness and growing relevance of the gig economy, this chapter has concentrated on the potentials and emerging practices of collective action and the organisation of platform workers in the face of structural obstacles and on innovative attempts to counterbalance the asymmetrical distribution of power resources in the platform sector. The mismatch between the existing categorisation and regulations of work and the volatile work practices of the platforms have left many workers without protection and at severe risk. Political authorities and social partners are called on to act and tackle these challenges. “The application of big data, new algorithms, and cloud computing will change the nature of work and the structure of the economy. But the exact nature of that change will be determined by the social, political, and business choices we make” ([46]: 61).

Platform work is a new form of re-commodification of work with no clear definition, quite heterogeneous practices and some common features with general trends of work reorganisation and flexible business models. “It forms part of a spectrum of rapidly-changing and overlapping forms of just-in-time work that draw to varying degrees on digital media for their management” ([40]: 50). In this chapter we have focused on delivery and transport workers and their attempts and potentials to collectively organise and take action. Our power sources analysis has revealed the importance of the public reputations and branding of the platforms as a specific foundation, upon which collective action and pressure in favour of the recognition of labour and social rights of platform workers can be developed. To what extent platform work represents an extreme form of a common ‘platformisation’, ‘uberisation’ or ‘precarisation’ of our economies ([40, 45]: 48; [47, 48]) remains an open question, as does the possibility of finding new forms of collective self-organisation outside the traditional trade unions. Looking at both trends, the spread of gig-work practices across labour markets more generally and the emergence of new forms of flexible collective action and online-community organisation, we have found empirical evidence of their emergence.

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