Mutualism, class composition, and the reshaping of worker organisation in platform work and the gig economy

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes an understanding of mutualism as a foundational element in emergent worker collectivism. We challenge mainstream institutionalist accounts in industrial relations, especially from the Global North, that downplay processes of bottom-up regeneration of working-class organisation. We discuss compositional accounts of class formation and examine previous understandings of mutualism, then apply our conceptual framework to evidence from international literature and our own research on platform work in Italy and the UK. Three important themes emerge in understanding worker self-organisation: the demographics of the workforce, including migration backgrounds and social ties beyond the workplace; the existence of social relations in the ethnic/political/local community; and the relevance of free spaces of resource sharing and recomposition in the absence of a fixed place of work. We conclude that an understanding of mutualism can help to grasp emergent solidarities among new groups of workers within and beyond both platform work and trade unions.

KEYWORDS

Platform work; gig economy; informal solidarity; mutualism; precariousness

Introduction

The problem addressed in this paper is how to understand the widespread, rapid, and unexpected development of worker organisation and resistance in platform work. Despite concerns that platform workers might prove unorganisable (Vandaele, 2021), critical research at the nexus of labour process and class composition has documented impressive levels of organisation and contestation (Anwar and Graham, 2020; Chen, 2018; Chesta et al., 2019; Chinguno, 2019; Cini and Goldman, 2018; Gutierrez Crocco and Atzeni 2022; Ford and Honan, 2019; Iazzolino, 2023; Kwan, 2022; Liu and Friedman, 2021). Strikingly, non-unionised workers account for the great majority of platform labour unrest, especially in the Global South (Bessa et al., 2022). Where unions are present, they are as likely to be new, grassroots unions as traditional, mainstream ones (Joyce and Stuart, 2021). Furthermore, worker self-organisation often precedes unionisation and does not cease afterwards (Cant and Woodcock, 2020; Joyce et al., 2023). The theoretical challenge, therefore, is how to understand these developments in both union and non-union settings. Our dual research question is: how are we to understand processes of worker self-organisation in platform-mediated labour, and what conceptual resources are available for the task?

To answer these questions, we build on research showing how platform workers create solidaristic links despite constraints of algorithmic management, geographical dispersion, and

contractual insecurity. We share the commitment to bottom-up explanations of worker organising developed at length by Atzeni (2021) in his critique of trade union fetishism, and neatly summarised in Atzeni (2016: 194):

> Limiting the analysis to institutional, "top down" responses and strategies does not help in delving deep into the social processes conducive to organisation and action.

The article thus contributes to a growing body of research on the micro-contexts of worker self-organisation, often in highly precarious settings.

Our starting point is the recognition that, to date, platform worker organisation and resistance has been significantly driven by workers themselves, who have devised repertoires of contestation independently of union offices (Joyce et al., 2023). These practices, often highly informal and too ephemeral to register in official statistics, have been largely overlooked by mainstream industrial relations scholarship. We are therefore particularly interested in the informal solidarities generated by workers in and around paid work that contribute to practices of self-organisation, both inside and outside conventional union settings (Alberti and Però, 2018; Atzeni, 2016; Ness, 2014).

We adopt a compositional approach to understanding processes of class formation. The recent resurgence of interest in Italian Operaismo and Autonomist Marxism has informed militant investigations with workers in the platform economy (Cant, 2019; Chesta et al. 2019; Cini 2022, 2023; Cini et al. 2022; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Woodcock, 2021). We build on these approaches by introducing the notion of mutualism as a way of thinking about emergent patterns and processes of informal collectivism. We show how the specific social composition of the platform workforces (see also Woodcock, 2021), including their migrant composition, helps to explain the emergence of worker collectivism and contestation in both unionised and non-union settings.

Industrial relations and labour history scholars have identified mutualism as important for working class organisation (Cobble, 2016; Van der Linden, 2008; Webb and Webb 1897). However, approaches vary and a systematic treatment is lacking. The literature identifies two main forms of mutualism as they emerged in specific historical settings: arrangements between workers for sharing resources, whether money, labour, or other goods and services; or a form of consciousness, the recognition among workers of common shared conditions. We argue that both forms play a role in processes of self-organisation and class formation among new sections of the workforce – including platform workers. We further argue that mutualist practices can be discerned among groups of workers beyond platform work, suggesting a wider applicability of mutualism for understanding processes of class formation. While mainly a conceptual paper, we support our argument with evidence from our own research on platform work and elsewhere (Alberti, 2016; Alberti and Però, 2018; Forde et al., 2017; Joyce et al., 2023).

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we outline an understanding of class composition. We then examine previous accounts of mutualism, recognising their European/Western roots, and outlining two broad approaches. Next, we review research on platform worker organising through the mutualism lens, focusing on "geographically tethered" platform work (Graham, 2020), such as taxi-driving and food delivery. After a brief description of methodology, we present evidence from our own research. Finally, we draw conclusions concerning the benefits of adopting a concept of mutualism for understanding key processes of worker self-organisation in platform work and elsewhere.

Class Composition and Mutualism

Our understanding of class composition draws from the tradition of Italian Operaismo and Autonomist Marxism (Cleaver, 1979; Gray and Clare, 2022; Tronti, 2019; Wright, 2017). Operaismo brings together two main elements of working class composition: the technical composition (encompassing forces that control and divide workers in the labour process and the community), and the political composition (involving processes of class recomposition). In this way, compositional theory "makes a powerful link between the forms of struggle and changing forms of production" (Gray and Clare 2022: 1190). According to Gray and Clare (2022), the key strengths of this approach are its ability to address the problem of recomposing a heterogeneous and divided working class; its centring of worker agency and subjectivation; its attention to social reproduction and the struggles of the unwaged and marginalised (including migrants, women, racialised minorities); and the relation between universal and particular forms of struggles. Versions of this approach – often combined with varieties of labour process theory – have yielded valuable studies of platform worker struggles (Cant 2019; Cini 2022, 2023; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020), and efforts to develop more general understandings (Chesta et al. 2019; Cini et al. 2022; Englert et al., 2019; Woodcock, 2021).

Discussions of class theory in relation to digitalisation reveal important trends but often at a very general level (Dyer-Witheford, 2015; Huws, 2019). Few studies attempt the difficult task of linking general trends and the detail of workers' struggles – one exception being Schaupp (2022). Still lacking, however, is a conceptual framework for thinking through linkages between immediate work experience and high-level processes of class formation and recomposition.

The key starting point for understanding processes of class recomposition is workers' shared experience of exploitation and the extraction of surplus value within the labour process under capitalist relations of production. Yet worker experience at the point of production, on its own, is insufficient to explain the diverse and uneven recomposition evident across the working class. As one classic study put it, "If capitalism is of a piece, why is the working class it called into life so disparate?" (Zolberg, 1986: 397). That is, while the experience of collective exploitation is the well-spring of collective worker organisation and resistance, the process is mediated. Indeed, a more correct formulation would be: these processes are mediated, since processes of class recomposition are irreducibly plural, historically specific and conjunctural. Moreover, these processes often draw on reservoirs and repertoires of collectivism from outside the workplace as resources that can be deployed to (re)invent traditions of resistance. The importance of workers' collective resources "beyond the factory gate" has been demonstrated many times – whether the factory gate is real or virtual. Historically significant examples include the close neighbourhood relations – including intimate relations – between occupationally segregated women and men workers during the "New Unionism" strikes of the 1880s and 1980s in East London (Raw, 2001), and the integration of migrant community ties into US workplace trade unionism during the militant 1930s (Chinoy, 1955; Friedlander, 1975; Gerstle, 1989). Contemporary examples from the Global South and North include the inheritance of anti-apartheid struggles for building taxi-app worker organisation in South Africa (Chinguno, 2019); the presence of ethnic ties among logistics workers in Italy (Cini and Goldman, 2020); the widespread integration of social movement methods into informal worker organising in many settings (Eaton et al., 2017); and migrant community solidarities among Latinx workers in the US (Milkman, 2020). Recent evidence especially highlights the importance of such resources for worker organising in precarious employment, with high labour turnover and – crucially in platform work – where a fixed workplace may be lacking. Consequently, we build on accounts of class recomposition that emphasise the interplay of dynamics within and outside the workplace, and the importance of social composition within and beyond paid work (see

Woodcock, 2021).

The concept of mutualism has been in use since the 19th century. However, authors have used the term in different ways. Two broad approaches are evident. The most common use describes widespread practices among workers for sharing resources of various types according to self-designed rules; we term this form "mutualism as resource sharing" (M-RS). The second use, which features less often in the literature, encapsulates a form of pragmatic consciousness, whereby workers recognise themselves as sharing conditions and (to some extent) interests with their fellow workers; we term this form "mutualism as pragmatic consciousness"(M-PC).

The notion of mutualism as resource sharing is strongly associated with Sidney and Beatrice Webb (1897), who included "mutual insurance" as one of three "methods of trade unionism", alongside collective bargaining and legal enactment. Their definition of mutual insurance is specific: "the provision of a fund by common subscription to insure against casualties; to provide maintenance … [when] … a member is deprived of his livelihood" (Webb and Webb, 1897: 153). Funds of this type were common during the early days of British trade unionism, when unions mainly organised relatively well-paid craft workers who could afford the substantial membership fees needed to create a common fund to be disbursed in times of economic hardship or during strikes. The underlying principle outlined by the Webbs was that workers contributed equally to the fund but withdrew unequally, according to need. The combination of equal contributions with unequal benefits remains characteristic of many union activities, such as wage-bargaining or pursuing legal reform (Webb and Webb, 1897: 152). Richard Hyman (2001) adopts this broadened version of "mutual insurance" to mean "collective self-protection", as a way of grasping historical and trans-national variation in union organisation.

In Britain and other parts of the Global North, mutual insurance as a central method of trade unionism died out over time. It was characteristic, especially, of craft unions prior to the development of the welfare state. Efforts to build similar funds among low-paid workers foundered in conditions of intense poverty and insecure employment, where workers could not afford the necessary level of subscriptions (Reid, 2004). As trade union membership spread to lower paid workers, unions necessarily adopted other methods. Crucially, as welfare states developed, union insurance schemes became less essential even for workers who could afford them. Although some such schemes continued well into the 20th century, mutual insurance as a "method of trade unionism" became increasingly insignificant, overtaken by legal enactment and collective bargaining.

More recently, Marcel Van der Linden (2008) has broadened the Webbs' approach by including arrangements where members contribute equal amounts and also withdraw equal amounts. Paying particular attention to the Global South – including informal workers, communities of migrant workers, and non-industrial settings – Van der Linden demonstrates that resource-sharing mutualism has been common across the global history of labour, and includes not only the sharing of money, but also of goods and labour; from the exchange of labour in small farming communities to complex savings and loans associations. Van der Linden also moves the focus away from trade unions to include a broader range of worker self-organisation, especially where state welfare provision is lacking. We can therefore expect that workers excluded from social protections – whether due to migrant, contractual or self-employed status (see for example van Doorn et al., 2023), or simply the decay of welfare provisions (Forde et al., 2017) – might look to similar arrangements today.

The second approach identified in the literature we term mutualism as pragmatic consciousness, which we define as collective self-recognition; that is, a collective mutual

recognition among a group of workers of common conditions and (to an extent) of shared interests. This formulation shadows Giddens's (1984: xxiii) notion of "practical consciousness", which he defines as "all the things which actors know tacitly about how to 'go on' in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression" (Giddens, 1984: xxiii).[1] Mutualism as pragmatic consciousness thus concerns the way that workers come to see themselves in relation to each other and to the company for which they work.

Our understanding of mutualism ties in with Fantasia's (1989) understanding of class consciousness in terms of "cultures of solidarity". Fantasia aims to shift understandings of class consciousness away from the purely ideational, to encompass what workers do in situations of class conflict. We share with Fantasia this understanding of solidarity as "the lived experience of workers in collective action" which entails "embodiment of oppositional practices and meanings" (Fantasia, 1989: 18, 17). Solidarity is thus practical and active, not ideational and contemplative.

However, Fantasia is concerned to understand the most dramatic expressions of class consciousness. His empirical cases are drawn from institutionalised industrial relations settings in the US, with relatively secure employment and strong traditions of mainstream trade unionism, and his comparators are the 1930s' high points of US workers' struggles. By contrast, our concern is not with high points of worker struggle but with their origins, the first stirrings of worker collectivity. Our comparators are contemporary: the mass of dispersed, disempowered, decomposed, outsourced, subcontracted, migrant, racialised, platformised and otherwise precarised workers at the bottom of labour markets in the Global South and North. We thus see mutualism as a crucial building-block in the development of active solidarity in collective action among workers. Mutualism – of either type or both – represents an essential step in the process whereby isolated workers develop the capacity for collective action and active solidarity. Mutualism, as both resource sharing and pragmatic consciousness, may or may not entail a direct challenge to capital, yet the everyday practices of mutualism are key steps towards the development of organised collective action and outward contestation. While specific worker struggles encompass varied combinations, the two forms of mutualism run intertwined through the history of worker self-organisation. We can therefore expect to find them again in contemporary settings, including in platform work.

Recently, mutualism has returned somewhat to research agendas in industrial relations and related fields. Cobble (2016: 183) argues that "we are in the midst of an upsurge of worker mutualism … a moment of experimentation and invention as we transition to a new and reconfigured labour movement". Cobble identifies three "models of mutualism": occupational unionism; self-employed unionism in the platform economy; and relational unionism in the service and care economy. These three models represent new departures in trade unionism, albeit with deep roots in older forms. Other broadly commensurate accounts of mutualistic pragmatic-consciousness type relations can be found in recent research on insecure workers, especially from migrant communities in Europe and elsewhere. Però's (2020) account of migrant worker organising in London highlights the importance of pre-existing "communities of struggle" (based in ethnic or migrant associations) for emergent practices of "transformative collective action" (see also Smith, 2022). Likewise, scholars in Italy have documented the importance of trust-based personal relations as a precursor of grassroots union organisation in low-paid services, especially via co-nationals already involved in grassroots unions (see Iannuzzi and Sacchetto, 2022). Thus, while expressed in different terminology, contemporary research into novel and emergent forms of worker organisation and mobilisation frequently deploys M-PC–type formulations.

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[1] Giddens (1984) contrasts practical consciousness with "discursive consciousness", which concerns knowledge that humans can express on a discursive level.

The argument of this article is that understandings of worker self-organisation can be usefully strengthened and extended by adopting a more explicit framework of mutualism, including articulations of its pragmatic consciousness and resource sharing forms. Moving to platform work, we explore how these twin mutualisms underpin forms of work-based conflict and collective action, in both unionised and non-unionised settings.

Mutualism in Platform Work: Bringing Together the Two Forms

Although it has not to date been treated systematically, there is considerable evidence for the importance of mutualism in the development of worker organisation in platform work. Bessa et al. (2022) found that, from a global sample of 1271 platform worker protests, only 31 per cent showed evidence of trade union involvement, and only 18 per cent involved traditional, mainstream unions. Almost half (48%) took place without any formal organisation at all. In the Global South, the picture was even starker, with less than 20 per cent of platform-worker protests in Africa, Asia, and South America showing union involvement. These findings, together with considerable case study evidence, demonstrate the importance of grasping informal processes of self-organisation if scholars are to construct adequate accounts of such developments. While current evidence suggests that mutualism as pragmatic consciousness is more common in this context, there are also cases where the two forms intermesh, both inside and outside unions.

A rich account of platform worker collectivisation is provided by Chesta et al. (2019), who investigated food delivery workers in Italy. Chesta et al. (2019: 822) explicitly use the notion of mutualism to capture informal "resources for reconstructing social ties between workers" and highlight the importance of social spaces and infrastructures – especially social centres – for self-organisation among fragmented workers. Emergent mutualisms enabled workers to explore "conditions and strategies" before and alongside the growth of informal riders' unions. Again, these processes span the spheres of production and reproduction, at times involving pure socialisation or leisure activities. What is critical to us in this understanding of mutualism is that it allows the creation of social structures from below "as pre-political actions breaking isolation and framing conditions of exploitation as something collective" (Chesta et al., 2019: 838). This framing is a close parallel with what we term mutualism as pragmatic consciousness: the elementary – and, in this case, emergent – awareness of shared conditions and (to an extent) of shared interests.

Similarly, Cini and Goldman (2021) highlight the importance of non-workplace social spaces in facilitating class formation and emergent collective subjectivity – including "informal capacities and resources that workers exhibit and develop unwittingly in their daily interaction" (Cini and Goldman, 2021: 953) – among Italian logistic and delivery workers. These processes are redolent of M-PC, though Cini and Goldman also find evidence of resource sharing arrangements such as collectively organised bike repair clinics. Meanwhile, Vandaele (2020) emphasises the "organisational creativity" of platform workers as a potential source of union revitalisation after years of decline. Again, while not explicitly theorised, Vandaele highlights the importance of inventive, informal practices in emerging worker organisation. In their study of the 2018 Fast Food strikes in the UK – which included platform workers – Cant and Woodcock (2020) show how union organisation followed worker self-organisation and collective action, rather than the other way round. All these studies point to forms of mutualism in working class re-composition.

Informal worker organisation is also present in by far the largest market for platform labour: China (Wu et al., 2019; Chan, 2021). Exploring platform worker protests and strikes, Lei (2021) argues that despite obstacles including "platform architecture" and legal constraints, these workers are more inclined to develop and escalate collective grievances. Lei (2021) finds that, contrary to

usual assumptions, the absence of human supervision (replaced by algorithmic control) increases worker access to free spaces where they share material and immaterial resources to develop collective action (see Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020). Also contrary to usual assumptions, Liu and Friedman (2021) argue that platform arrangements provide Chinese delivery workers with distinctive new sources of leverage that encourage low profile – almost invisible – forms of protest, often mediated by social media groups, such as "quieter, small-scales strikes". For us, Liu and Friedman (2021) illustrate how everyday mutualist consciousness intermeshed with resource sharing can (and does) develop towards overt unrest and active solidarity. Mutualism thus seems inscribed in a variety of informal practices among platform workers in a range of settings.

It is not possible to fully understand the emergence of mutualism in platform work, however, without considering the social composition of the workforce (Gray and Clare, 2022; Woodcock, 2021). It is not only the experience of exploitation and labour processes, and participation in spaces of socialisation and forms of protest, but who the workers are, that sheds light on processes of class formation, collective bonding, and collective action. It is not coincidental that forms of mutualism in non-platform precarious work (Cobble, 2016; Però, 2020; Iannuzzi and Sacchetto, 2022; Jiang and Korczynski, 2021) emerge in contexts of highly diverse labour compositions, where ethnic, racial and migration bonds exist alongside and intersect with work identities as a response to intersecting systems of oppression and exploitation (Tapia and Alberti, 2019). Research on migrant labour in digitalised logistics and manufacturing in Germany demonstrates how legally constructed precarious migrant statuses and algorithmic work controls combine to configure the commodification of migrant labour (Schaupp, 2022). The role of migration regimes in producing specific labour sources (Anderson, 2010) – including platform companies that rely on a supply of migrant workers with insecure employment statuses – also explain "selective formalisation" processes (van Doorn, 2021) where algorithmic control and standardised labour processes facilitate the inferiorised incorporation of migrant workers as "a new class of disadvantaged workers who … engage in various forms of politics from below" (Schaupp, 2022: 322). Schaupp (2022) shows how self-aid groups emerge among asylum seekers with temporary work permits to deal with immigration authorities, and that bonds created in that sphere spill over into self-organisation for improving working conditions.

Turning to platform work, Woodcock's (2021) militant inquiry with workers in Deliveroo in London similarly revealed that the migrant (social) composition of many groups of workers facilitated the formation of collectives – including WhatsApp groups – before accessing the platform. Informal community connections in specific migrant communities (such as Brazilian and Algerian students) help to explain solidaristic information-sharing around issues such as job-access, best delivery routes and avoiding police, as well as social conversations. Similarly, Cant (2019) argues that pre-existing organisation in workers' migrant communities constitutes a base for collective action, not only to improve working conditions but also to counter racism in their daily encounters with the city.

The migrant composition of the workforce is also a critical component in the self-organisation of workers in our research. We now turn to situating such practices in the context of fieldwork conducted between 2016 and 2021.

Methodology

This article draws on research conducted jointly and separately by the authors across different national contexts, on platform and gig workers and their forms of resistance, between 2016 and 2021. We carried out fourteen formal semi-structured and in-depth interviews on the UK and Italy

as part of a comparative study of eight EU countries between 2016 and 2017 (Forde et al. 2017). Participants included platform workers (mainly delivery and ride hail sectors), who described their work and organising experiences; expert interviews from trade union and third sector organisations (including worker cooperatives and free-lancer unions); and policy experts. This article focuses mainly (though not exclusively) on evidence from workers and grassroots organisers. During the five years following the publication of the report, both authors conducted follow up interviews with participants. In 2020, a further eight interviews were carried out with members of the IWGB Couriers and Logistic Branch, comprising food delivery and other courier workers, in the UK. We also conducted further informal interviews as part of ongoing discussions with platform workers and activists in grassroots unions across Italy and the UK – an under-rated form of longitudinal research (Joyce et al., 2023). We further attended local and international activist meetings and workshops throughout the period. One of us has been engaged in a long-term quantitative study of platform worker protest from 2017 to date (the Leeds Index of Platform Labour Protest; see Bessa et al., 2022), which gives a "birds eye" view of global patterns of the issues under discussion.

Content-based thematic analysis of interviews was informed by critical research questions around the subjective experience of these workers organising inside and outside trade union organisation and the emergence of new organisational forms and collectivism in historically non-unionised sectors of the digitalised service economy.

Gig Worker Mutualism in Italy and the UK

In an early strike by platform workers in Turin, Italy, in 2016, Foodora riders challenged changes in the payment system from hourly to piece rates (Chesta et al., 2019). As part of a larger comparative study (Forde et al., 2017), we interviewed one of the workers involved, who also participated in the first rider collective in Turin. The worker described the process of collective formation among the riders:

> …after a while we noticed that the [Foodora] office was not as collaborative. For example … some colleagues were hurt while working ... and every time we would ask for a minimum coverage to help repair or replace the bike etc., the company said that they could not do it … [We] started to collect signatures for a petition where we asked to meet formally the head of Foodora, to discuss these kinds of problems, to ask for a contract that would include protection and coverage for these types of accidents ... for a fixed budget that would be available to repair the bikes and funding for a self-managed bike workshop, *that we would then maintain for free.* (Foodora rider, October 2016)

Thus, in their negotiation with management, these workers included a form of mutualist practice: a self-run bike repair workshop. Instead, Foodora "made an agreement with the network of bike shops here in Turin, where repairs would have been discounted by 50 per cent".

Furthermore, moments of socialisation and conviviality among the riders were perceived as threatening and repressed by local management:

> We had started to call all our colleagues into assembly … at the social centre of Torino la Cavallerizza, or otherwise in the public square, something really social and relaxed, where we would have a beer and talk among each other … There were no plans of protest, nothing about revolts! Until when the head of the office passed by on his bike and spotted us all together – there were also some of the girls who are the promoters, who distribute the flyers … *there was nothing wrong about hanging out together* outside of the working shift to have a pint and something to eat, we are all friends after all … The day after we, found out that the two girls were dismissed … we were shocked.

Turin riders also emphasised the importance of socialisation outside their shifts, prior to joining the grassroots union ADL COBAS (and conducting a legal dispute against the unfair dismissal):

> We were just organising to demand basic improvements in the contract, we organised the meeting because the last shift ended at 11:30pm, if at midnight you were still about you could pop by Piazza Castello and there was always someone who brought food and drinks to refill yourself, but then you would go back home, it was just something very *convivial*. (Foodora rider, October 2016)

These testimonies echo the dynamics found elsewhere (Chesta et al., 2019; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020), where social centres and town squares provide spaces where workers aggregate and overcome the fragmentation of platform work. They also indicate the important interweaving of processes of collectivisation around specific work grievances, socialisation as pure leisure activities and forms of everyday mutualism (here, the sharing of food).

Yet the specific conditions under which workers are hired, the social composition of labour (Chan, 2021; Chesta et al., 2019; Iannuzzi and Sacchetto, 2022) and the wider political context of regulation of the "pre-platform" gig economy (Atzeni, 2016) are critical in understanding how processes of class formation and self-organisation emerge in different contexts. The ambivalent role of informal intermediaries – sometimes termed "digital gangmasters" in the Italian context, and also highlighted by Liu and Friedman (2021) in the Chinese context – introduce constraints on worker action while nevertheless triggering new opportunities for mutualism and resistance. This pattern also emerged in our observation of another grassroots worker collective, Deliverance in Milan. Compared to Turin, Milan's food delivery workforce is known for its migrant composition (Chesta et al., 2019). As articulated by an activist, it is especially those who struggle most to access employment because of their migrant status that need to share platform accounts to access work; but these practices should be differentiated from "digital gangmasters" who buy and sell accounts "for a percentage of the earnings". By contrast:

> *A different thing is the sharing of one account* on the part of couriers who normally have no access to the labour market and who pass each other the log in details for the apps, to help each other as a way to overcome the barriers to enter a market which is unwelcoming to them. In this latter case we are witnessing a *practice of mutualism,* necessary and legitimate, although considered illegal especially at the times of the Security Decree [immigration law]. (Deliverance Milan, 2019)

Indeed, in September 2019, the prosecutor in Milan opened an investigation against the food delivery company Uber Eats, accused of subcontracting work to other fraudulent companies. Deliverance is also critical of the gangmaster system which, similarly to other sectors with high levels of informal, subcontracted and migrant employment – such as Italian agriculture (Piro, 2021), or the hotel sector (Iannuzzi and Sacchetto, 2022) – gives rise both to forms of exploitation by employers and labour brokers and forms of mutualism by workers across the fields of production and social reproduction (Gray and Clare, 2022).

The main finding from the observation of the grassroots delivery union in Milan is that class formation and social relations are double-edged: the informalisation and even criminalisation of certain activities, and the particular social position in which undocumented migrant workers find themselves, demonstrate the advantages of informality, which provides new opportunities for mutualism as both pragmatic consciousness and resource sharing. Here, mutualism facilitates access to work and offers workers some protection vis a vis the state, employers and gangmasters.

Moving to the UK platform economy, the importance of informal, bottom-up dynamics at

the origins of platform worker organisation is witnessed in the experience of workers interviewed for both the comparative research project (Forde et al., 2017) and subsequent studies (Joyce et al., 2023). Interviews were conducted over a period of several years with members of the Couriers and Logistics Branch (CLB) of the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB), whose members include platform delivery workers and increasingly platformised couriers, among others.

A striking feature of this evidence is the way that interviewees framed their experiences of collective organisation in terms of relations between workers rather than as relations within a union. Even though union membership was important to these IWGB activists, almost all the interviewees had experiences of organising prior to, or more broadly than, their union involvement. Some brought experience of union membership from other jobs, mostly in other industries. Like many platform workers, some worked two or more jobs; some were union members in non-platform employment (including other precarious work) and were even engaged in strikes. Others brought experience of political organising – such as activism in Palestinian struggles. Several recalled being involved in informal worker organisation, in urban spaces or online. One described rider meet-ups:

> … we used to meet up outside a cycling café in town which isn't there anymore – so I was quite sociable [with] the other riders … [the platform] just hired too many people and so we just all sat around doing nothing most of the time. And there was like sometimes protests outside the [platform] office. (CLB 1, March 2020)

In common with platform workers across the world, the workers we spoke to were all involved in online groups – usually at city level and often involving hundreds of workers – that operated prior to and independently of union organisation. Interviewees described the functioning of these groups as a mix of general chat and work-related discussions:

> I think most cities have a kind of informal organised WhatsApp group or similar kind of thing. Where writers kind of … moaning about stuff, kind of problems, or "*help* I've got a puncture", or *sharing* news. (CLB 6, March 2020)

Activists understood the importance of these groups as forums of worker collectivism, a resource for developing organisation. The same worker told us:

> It's kind of a funny balance between not wanting to only be the union person, but also try and remind people kind of maybe where they want to direct their anger. (CLB 6, March 2020)

Workers also provided evidence of the practical linkages between informal mutualistic organisation and later unionisation. Some recalled actively looking for a union, hoping it would strengthen their capacity for pressing grievances collectively. Some had initially joined mainstream unions, only to become disillusioned and subsequently join a grassroots union:

> I remember having a meeting with a representative from one of the main unions. I mean for whatever reason couriers can be quite difficult to, you know, to get organised. People might not have, you know, *the right documentation to work*, some people might not be paying their taxes. So, they don't really want to … put their heads above water … (CLB 2, March 2020)

Workers with a background in traditional cycle courier riding vividly described pre-existing social networks of couriers, which they described as "community led" (CLB 2, March 2020), and "never a work-related thing" (CLB 3, March 2020). This rider collectivism included resource sharing

mutualism in the form of a basic system of mutual insurance for riders injured in road accidents on the job who, because of self-employed status, were not eligible for sick pay. This system made one-off payments to riders unable to work. The scheme was financed by fundraising events and the sale of merchandise rather than by regular membership payments, which had proved unsustainable due to the low pay and irregular earnings of these workers; indeed, there was no formal membership for this scheme. Nevertheless, it had run successfully for many years.

The combination of these pre-existing mutualist practices – both resource sharing and pragmatic consciousness – clearly provided the raw material for later union organisation and successful collective action (Joyce et al., 2023). Importantly, however, mutualist practices did not die away with the move to union organisation but continued to be important resources for collective organisation and activism in the unionised context.

Furthermore, the process of unionisation could involve various transitional forms between informal organisation and conventional membership-based models of trade unionism. One activist described becoming a union member and taking up worker grievances with managers, but with no formal union base. The experience led to more concerted – and eventually successful – unionisation efforts:

> I started to organise on my own at work … a sort of self-elected go-between with management. And you just realise that they're fobbing you off …not taking it that seriously. And I suddenly thought, you know what, I need to make use of this union membership I have … So I got in touch with the union. We had a meeting, you know, they sort of said we gotta get more members … that got the ball rolling with taking the official course of action to hold the company to account … that's *when the seed was planted.* (CLB 4, March 2020)

The evidence from our research in Britain and Italy emphasises the importance of non-union forms in processes of platform worker self-organisation. Mutualism appears as both an important raw material and continuing resource for union organisation among these workers. The accounts offered by these worker activists did not begin or end with the union, even though they were committed to it as members and activists. Rather, their main point of reference was the organic, everyday collectivism among their fellow workers – including both forms of mutualism – born of a mix of work-based experiences and mutualist resources derived from other spheres of their lives.

Discussion and Conclusions

The experiences of platform workers in our Italian and British cases recapitulate experiences shared across the globe, where informal self-organisation in a variety of online and offline spaces proves essential to emergent worker organisation and struggle, whether unionised or not, and reflects specific social compositions of the workforce in different contexts. The linking process, we argue, is mutualism – both resource sharing and pragmatic consciousness – as a key constituent of the capacity for collective action. By reviewing literature on mutualism from the very origin of Western industrial relations (Webb and Webb, 1897) to more contemporary accounts (Hyman, 2001; Cobble, 2016; Van der Linden, 2008), and including research on platform and other precarious work that has examined mutualist practices in more or less explicit ways, we have drawn on theory and evidence from the Global South and North on the role of mutualism in the development of worker collectivism.

We have emphasised the social composition of the workforce (Gray and Clare 2022; Woodcock 2021) in shaping worker collectivism, including its migrant composition (Cant 2019;

Schaupp, 2022; van Doorn et al., 2023). Rather than examining cultures of solidarity at high points of unionised workers' struggle (see Fantasia, 1989), we have prioritised everyday practices of mutualism as a key building block in the development of worker collectivism, and as encompassing informal ways and spaces of organising that enable forms of mobilisation, collective action and active solidarity, in platform work and the low-end service economy, inside and outside of union organisation.

We also emphasise the importance of social ties outside occupational, professional or workplace-based identities (see Cobble, 2016), including migrant and ethnic minority cultural traditions, "communities of struggles" (Però, 2020; Smith 2022) and existing social networks of support outside of work, from which workers draw mutualist resources to develop active workplace solidarity and collective action (Alberti, 2016; Jiang and Korczynski, 2021; Milkman et al., 2021). Similar practices have been found in the self-organising of Latino contract workers in the low paid service sector in London (Alberti and Però, 2018), or among outsourced migrant workers in the Italian hotel sector (Iannuzzi and Sacchetto, 2022). Case studies in the Global South show how "Informal workers are organising and engaging in collective action with or without support from the existing trade union movement" (Eaton et al., 2017: 17). We expand this argument and respond to Atzeni's (2016) call for "delving deeply" into the self-organisation of precarious workers beyond the top-down strategies of institutionalised mainstream unions, by foregrounding the notion of mutualism as a central concept to understand processes of class formation and worker self-organisation, with a focus on platform mediated work in the gig economy. Indeed, the use of "non-work-related strategic capabilities" (Cini and Goldman, 2018) and physical spaces that "insert the recomposed community in political processes" (Chesta et al., 2019: 825) can clearly be found in platform work.

In summary, three important aspects emerge from the notion of mutualism as applied to contemporary fields of precarious platform work: the importance of the social composition of the workforce and their social ties beyond the workplace; the pre-existence of such social relations in the ethnic/political/local community; and the importance of micro-spaces of mutualism, so called "free spaces" of resource sharing and recomposition in the absence of a fixed place of work: the social centre, the café, the bike clinic, the square, the online group.

Given the ambivalent functions of unions as organisations constrained by their own internal institutional and strategic interests (Atzeni, 2020), scholars and practitioners need to pay attention to new opportunities for self-organisation that emerge from processes of informalisation and fragmentation such as subcontracting (Liu and Friedman, 2021), as well as the migrant composition of the workforce (Schaupp, 2022; Woodcock, 2021). Furthermore, foregrounding mutualism may lead to greater attention to everyday social relations springing up before, within and beyond the spaces of work, that lead workers to aggregate, challenge power and demand change. Future research in platform work and other forms of precarious work may further develop understanding of mutualism viewed through the compositional lens, and becoming more sensitive to issues of migration and social reproduction (Gray and Clare, 2022). In this way, we would argue, mutualism, as both resource sharing and pragmatic consciousness, offers significant insights into the conditions and processes of worker self-organisation in platform work as well as in wider sectors of insecure employment.

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