2

COALITIONAL POWER IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY: ALLIANCES OF GIG AND TECH WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

Collective action in the tech industry has become a widely recognised phenomenon today. Low-paid gig workers have been at the forefront of these efforts, but more recently strikes and protests by higher-paid tech workers have taken place as well. This article investigates a case where both gig workers and tech workers have joined forces. Based on empirical data from Berlin, Germany, I analyse how gig workers and tech workers have generated 'coalitional power' vis-à-vis a delivery tech company. I argue that, although more the exception than the rule, coalitions between gig workers and tech workers are possible, especially if both groups can cite common lines of conflict with capital and have a common legal context. In the Berlin case, the migration status of both gig workers and tech workers and the legal instrument of works councils has been a crucial requisite.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In July 2022, the delivery tech firm Lieferando organised a special after-work event for its employees in Berlin. A pool party was supposed to bring together the company's staff and management with "food, drinks, and a pool, exclusively for you" (Lieferando Workers Collective, 2022). However, not the entire staff of the company was invited to the party. Lieferando delivery riders, although formally employed by the company, were explicitly excluded from the invitation. The scandal led to a public protest by riders in front of the venue, highlighting not only the tension between gig workers and management, but also between the higher and lower-paid staff groups of the company.

The story of the Lieferando pool party exhibits a familiar narrative when it comes to the highly polarised tech industry. Well-paid, secure and well-appreciated professionals such as software engineers are placed on one side, and precarious and neglected gig workers on the other. Without denying the existence of such rifts, this article takes a somewhat different angle on the issue. Reflecting on organising efforts throughout the tech sector in the last years, the article looks at instances of coalition-building between gig workers and tech workers in the digital economy. I argue that vulnerabilities of different layers within the workforces of these firms have become more apparent in recent years and are leading to increasingly overlapping conflicts of worker groups vis-a-vis management and owners of these companies.

Based on analysis of preliminary fieldwork in Berlin, I describe possible elements of such alliances and the development of 'common lines of conflict' as pre-conditions for their success. The article starts out by laying out the context of labour struggles of both gig workers and tech workers, as well as the (scarce, but existent) history of efforts by both groups to form coalitions. After describing the methodology, the article provides a description and analysis of a coalition during a series of collective action campaigns at the company Gorillas regarding specific forms of worker power and a possible future of such labour alliances.

2.2 BACKGROUND: LABOUR STRUGGLES IN GIG AND TECH

The tech industry has been described as one of the key industries of contemporary capitalism (Zuboff, 2019; World Bank, 2019). I understand the tech industry as a network of corporations that derive their revenue from the employment of digital technology, most visibly in the form of digital platforms (Kenney/Zysman, 2020).[2] While it appears rather remarkable that labour conflicts have only recently become prominent, the industry has also developed many managerial and ideological methods to fragment labour relations in ways that conventional companies could not do or not do to the same extent (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996; Altenried 2022). Labour dynamics in tech are therefore often seen as blueprints for the future of work and management more generally, although this remains a subject of debate (Ellmer et al., 2019; Schaupp, 2021; Azzellini et al., 2022). In the following, efforts at collective action by gig workers and tech workers will be described, while some tentative definitions of these groups will be proposed.[3]

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[2] Examples of tech companies range from monopoly-seeking and transnational players such as Amazon, Google or Uber to smaller and more regional players. Most companies in the sector are currently characterised by vast amounts of (venture) capital investments and expectations of rapid growth. Companies in the tech industry make use of paid and unpaid labour in various segments, be it through software engineering, on-site platform work, web-based 'cloudwork' or traditional forms of contingent labour (comp. Fuchs, 2012; Srnicek, 2017).

The term gig work has been established as an umbrella term for low-paid service jobs in the platform economy, in fields such as delivery, driving and cleaning as well as for solely web-based tasks such as content moderation or image recognition (Woodcock & Graham, 2020). In the European Union, around 2 percent of workers perform platform gig work as their main income source, totalling 4.3 million workers (Pesole et al., 2018). Gig workers often work remotely or mobile, as self-employed or subcontracted labourers and usually with little training or security. They are faced with a wide-ranging fragmentation in their work: from legal fragmentation through forms of sham self-employment, technological fragmentation through algorithmic management and all the way to spatial fragmentation through the diffusion of labour across cities or countries (Altenried et al., 2020; Della Porta et al., 2022: 10f). Despite such obstacles, gig workers in tech firms around the world have organised collectively in recent years, even leading to a surge in labour struggles generally speaking (Bessa et al., 2022). Especially labour struggles in delivery and ride hailing, often by independent worker collectives, have become notorious and have challenged the leverage of companies, leading to company exits, corporate losses and legislative interventions (Vandaele, 2018).

The term tech work describes occupations such as software engineers, technical writers, UX designers and other white-collar staff employed at tech companies (Dorschel, 2022). Tech workers are wage-dependent employees who work predominantly on cognitive tasks, earn middle- to higher-level salaries and often possess a (relative) secure employment status. In 2020, tech workers accounted for 4.6 percent of total employment in the European Union, totalling around 9 million workers (Rothstein, 2022). While many tech workers are employed in standard labour relationships, a considerable number also work as temp workers or contractors. According to Tarnoff, workplace conflicts involving tech workers appear to fall into three categories: issues revolving around wages and working conditions, concerns for safe and equitable workplaces, and discontent about the social harms of company products (Tarnoff, 2019). In addition to this, there is a volatile and venture capital-driven corporate environment, which is prone to job losses and fundamentally opposed to collective bargaining and trade unions. Since around 2016, tech workers have increasingly organised in the industry, inter alia through public walkouts and unionisation campaigns at companies such as Alphabet and Activision (Jaffe, 2021). In China, employees have for several years been organising against exhausting working hours (Tan & Weigel, 2022).

Although collective action efforts by gig and tech workers usually evolve separately, they often deal with similar and related issues. They are faced with companies that are often highly volatile and short-lived, are subject to algorithmic control (especially gig workers) and confronted with ideological efforts to treat their work as play or leisure (especially tech workers). Given these circumstances and the vast concentration of power in the sector over the past decade, there has been debate about whether the various groups in the industry can join forces (Weigel, 2017). Along the lines of this debate, my article aims to explore the possibilities of coalitional work between tech and gig workers.

So far, common efforts between higher-paid and lower-paid workers in tech are not ubiquitous. Given their different positions in the value chains of tech, lack of sectoral collective bargaining, and the fragmented terrain for organising work described above, this does not appear surprising. Some notable exceptions exist, however. Among the most well-known is the project Turkopticon, a software tool that helps workers on the crowdsourcing platform Mechanical Turk to confront lack of transparency by collectively rating their clients (Silverman & Irani, 2016). The tool was developed by two software designers who are aware of working conditions and was eventually put into operation collectively with platform workers (ibid.). More recent cases include a series of workplace solidarity actions at Facebook in Silicon Valley and Amazon in Seattle, where tech workers have actively supported cafeteria workers and security guards in their unionisation efforts (Tarnoff, 2019; Weigel, 2017). Through the Alphabet Workers Union (AWU) at Google, it was possible to achieve more security for subcontracted data center personnel (Jaffe, 2021).

If studied in more detail, cases of worker cooperation do not just offer insight into the strategic development of worker power. They also provide insight into class relations in the field. What specific circumstances enable cross-class solidarity in tech? How do different groups and actors relate to each other? What kind of actions are taken by protagonists, and how is power maintained in these cases? To shed more light on this, this article will in the following relate a current case involving such a labour alliance in Germany. The aim of the article is to expand knowledge and awareness of such cooperation and to provide conceptual footing for a systematic analysis of these phenomena.

2.3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The analysis performed in this article focuses on efforts to form coalitions by workers during a series of labour struggles at the company Gorillas in Berlin. Empirical research was conducted between May 2021 and November 2022 and included nine qualitative interviews with workers and activists in Berlin as well as three expert interviews with trade union representatives and organisers. Ethnographic fieldwork from organising events, protests and three court hearings in Berlin were included in the research. The research was complemented by insight from a series of public discussion events including tech and gig workers on the issue.[4] Adopting an inductive approach, I first addressed events in the field and conducted interviews, and then developed analytical categories with which to frame the analysis of the material. Coding of the material was based on the qualitative analysis framework developed by Kuckartz (2010).

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[3] It should be noted that my use of the term tech work differs from other authors (such as Tarnoff/Weigel 2020), who use it to describe all forms of work within a tech company. I distinguish between *tech work* for higher-paid office work, and *gig work* for low-paid and technologically mediated work. Just as with the term tech company, definitional boundaries are not always clear and remain blurry.

To carry out a concrete analysis of worker power, my article employs the Power Resource Approach (PRA). The PRA is a heuristic research tool used to analyse the potentials of trade unions and social movements, and was developed in the context of trade union revitalisation research (Dörre & Schmalz, 2014). Based on earlier concepts of workers' power resources (Wright, 2000; Silver, 2003), the approach builds on the premise that workers possess strategic choices in their conflicts with capital, depending on their position in the labour process, the labour market, their institutional context and their position in society (Schmalz et al., 2018). Analytically, the approach divides the potential of workers to act in their own interest into several pillars: structural power, associational power, institutional power and societal power. As part of societal power, the framework for coalitional power relates to "pursuing common goals and entering into mutual commitments" (ibid.) with other groups in society. Coalitional power is able to improve worker power by "harnessing the resources of other players […] to mobilise support from these actors" (ibid.). With an extended notion of coalitional power, my analysis seeks to highlight how the pooling of power in the tech industry becomes possible, which obstacles it faces and what advantages it holds out for workers' groups.

2.4 RESULTS

Although Berlin ranks among the smaller hubs in the global tech industry, the city's influence and concentration of investment capital has been growing steeply over the last decade (Staab, 2019: 95). Berlin attracts a mixture of domestic and global tech firms, which can draw from an increasingly international and often skilled pool of workers. A prominent case of both economic growth and labour conflict has been the startup Gorillas, a delivery firm specialising in rapid delivery of groceries. The company was founded in Berlin during the Covid-19 pandemic and expanded rapidly across Europe and beyond. Gorillas was able to raise over USD 1 billion in investments in only nine months, making it one of the highest valued companies in Europe's startup scene (Ewen et al., 2022; Keane, 2021). At the height of its market power in 2021, the company employed over 1500 warehouse pickers and delivery riders in the city and around 600 employees at the company's headquarters (Sell, 2021; Frank, 2022). With some exceptions, gig workers at Gorillas are formally employed by the company, which makes it possible for workers to invoke the co-determination instruments of German labour law.

Conflicts around working conditions at Gorillas arose soon after the company started operating in Berlin, culminating in spontaneous strikes by gig workers in early 2021. Riders on bikes and pickers in warehouses complained about late and incorrect payments, as well as security and hygiene hazards (Ewen et al., 2022). A group of riders founded a workers collective, which later developed into the Gorillas Workers Collective (GWC). In order to establish a formal representation of workers in the company, the group reached out to several groups and unions in Berlin. Among them was the Berlin Tech Worker Coalition (TWC), a collective of organised tech workers in Berlin. Since their foundation in 2019, the Berlin TWC has been involved in several forms of labor organising. The collective offers training workshops for workers in tech, mostly relating to the establishment of works councils. Works councils are institutions of workers' representation at the company, are not tied to unions and are protected by labour law, and have become an increasingly strategic tool for workers and activists in Germany's gig economy.

Alongside with other actors, GWC and TWC met in the spring of 2021 at several meetings to discuss strategic steps towards founding a works council. As one TWC members recalls: "It was around March in 2021, Gorillas reached out to us. […] They were asking what kind of concrete support we can give them, trainings or what next steps there are" (TWC_B01). Through their meetings, TWC members became more aware of the issues of Gorillas workers and got more involved with helping them against union-busting efforts. This became even more important when the conflict with the company escalated a few weeks later, and a series of wildcat strikes and blockades against the company started. Members of TWC then joined in the mobilisation and protests.

Overall, the coalition efforts of GWC and TWC can be broken down into three main groups. First, passing on knowledge and resources, secondly shielding off risk, and thirdly amplifying voices. First of all, TWC members helped to facilitate the resource-intensive process of initiating the formation of a works council.[5] They did so by securing meeting spaces (making sure management could not enter the space), offering directions and organising translators to ensure participation of all workers: "Concretely, we helped them finding translators, provided security with entrance policies, also just/ people standing in the hallways to help with directions in the hotel building, and stuff like that" (TWC_B01). For this, the group was able to make use of their existing networks in the city. Part of the support appears to involved explaining the complicated details and provisions of works council legislation in English and other languages. In particular, TWC could contribute experience with organising in fast-paced tech companies, which tend to differ in their approach toward conventional companies.

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[4] The event series "Challenging Tech" took place online in May and June 2021, organised by the Centre for Emancipatory Technology Studies and Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. Documentation of the events can be accessed at: https://emancipatory.technology/news/documentation-of-the-discussion-series-challenging-tech

[5] The very formalised works council format necessitates an initiation process that requires workers to vote on an electoral commission (cf. Fitting et al., 2022). To establish this electoral commission, workers meet in a specific place and elect the members of the commission. As this process requires a lot of resources and knowledge, it is usually hard for people not familiar with the issue to pursue. This is especially the case with migrant gig workers.

Secondly, TWC members also engaged in direct collective action together with the GWC in a series of blockades and wildcat strikes that occurred as the conflict escalated further during the month of June 2021. Strikes and blockades took place in front of the company's hyperlocal warehouses, which deliver groceries to households in a neighborhood. Workers and activists blocked the doors of warehouses and turned bikes upside down so they could not be used anymore. According to TWC members, a main objective of their involvement in the actions was to shield workers from risks and exposure in the public arena. As actions were publicly recorded, protesting Gorillas workers were at risk of being sanctioned for their actions. In some cases, TWC members were also involved in negotiations with warehouse management staff. Later on, TWC members were involved in supporting GWC workers in cases before the labour courts.

Thirdly, TWC supported the GWC by helping with press work, giving interviews and directing international attention tow the cause. Concretely, tech workers amplified the voice of Gorillas workers at a time when attention for their cause was still limited. With reference to their help with press work, one TWC member recalls: "[…] that was something that the GWC was really overwhelmed with, the number of journalists who asked everything from really basic questions […] helping with copy-editing draft releases was one thing, and then just fielding phone calls, having chats, here is this network, can someone contact them?" (TWC_B01). Most clearly, TWC helped draw international attention to the case through their well-established networks in social media and to other actors in Germany and beyond.

Looking at all three forms of support, it can be said that workers at TWC were in the possession of experience, contacts and resources that the GWC was lacking at the time. As employees at several firms, they were confronted with a similar context of legal tools, specifically the works council. This made cooperation likely and useful in practical terms. Asked what TWC had been helpful with, a GWC member recalls: I think they gave us […] this internal structure that we needed […] [and] access to the spaces we needed. They helped us with twitter, […] helping us go viral. Setting up a Soli-Fund, setting up e-mails, a lot of things. Not just that, but they also showed up. […] Like they showed up to protests, demonstrations, strikes" (GWC_B03).

Throughout the research, both tech and gig workers referred to their role as migrant workers, which most of them identified as a common challenge. Regarding the difficulties of organising, a TWC interviewee stated that "what makes it hard to organise is […] a highly migrantised workforce. Specifically in Berlin, you have a group who are not so familiar with the German […] legal tradition, or speaking German." (TWC_B01) Similar aspects were raised by gig worker interviewees. This suggests that their experiences as recently arrived migrant workers (namely language difficulties, legal vulnerability, racism and visa issues) likely shaped their experience in organising the workplace and served as a bond during the cooperation. This also became visible in rifts and conflicts with the trade union ver.di, which according to the interviewees failed to work together with Gorillas workers due to conflicts over what tactics to use (the union opposed wildcat strikes, which it legally cannot support) and due to condescending comments made by a union representative about the German language skills of the workers. While tech workers faced less open hostility from unions, many shared concerns and ambivalent experiences. The vulnerabilities tied to their migrant status varied across individuals and were less severe for most tech workers, but appeared similar enough to relate to each other to some extent.

Although far from all demands in the Gorillas conflict could be met, some were indeed satisfied. A works council could be initiated despite heavy union-busting efforts by Gorillas, the company had to step up safety measures for workers due to public pressure, and developments towards labour law reform were written into the coalitional agreement of Germany's new federal government in the fall of 2021 (Bund Verlag, 2022). All of these changes are very likely connected to the protests and the high degree of public pressure they created on the company and on policymakers. Just like cooperations with other groups, the gig-tech worker coalition contributed to the establishment of longer-lasting networks in the city and beyond.

Looking at the case through the lens of power resources makes it possible to reflect on the pooling of power by both groups. Generally, gig workers at Gorillas appear to have generated associational power (the ability to mobilise workers) very quickly, meaning they have been able to come together collectively to go on strike at their workplaces.[6] However, Gorillas workers lacked the knowledge and experience to create a works council, a tool of institutional power (the ability to make use of institutionalised rights) that the TWC as well as other groups could assist them with through workshops and knowledge-sharing. The cooperation helped to establish the works council as an important, legally secure tool of formal workers' representation and decision-making at the company. The support of tech workers during wildcat strikes points to two additional aspects: on the one hand, an increase in associational power through direct support, and on the other, a boost in societal power (the ability to receive support by the general public) that was established by the 'amplifying of voices' on social media and traditional news outlets described above. By boosting the message of Gorillas workers through well established connections and accounts, TWC was able to introduce the GWC as a legitimate actor vis-à-vis the company in the public arena.

Overall, the cooperation increased the strength of the GWC and made it possible to achieve some workers' goals. This is also remarkable because the structural power (the ability to withdraw labour power) of the tech workers and other cooperation partners did not play a role here. The TWC members involved were not part of Gorillas staff, but could nevertheless reinforce the effort, most likely with their own experience of union-busting techniques at tech companies. The fact that no Gorillas tech workers were involved in the actions also points to the advantages and disadvantages of in-house alliances. On the one hand, in-house tech workers have structural power and essential knowledge about workplace and management structures. On the other hand, they are often not trusted actors and might have conflicting interests or loyalties within the company. Therefore, cooperation with non-affiliated tech workers might make more sense for gig workers, especially if in-house staff is not unionised.

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[6] This is a potential that specifically grocery delivery couriers and pickers appear to have, as they are located in physical workspaces and can socialise and create common bonds there easily.

Lastly, some questions remain on motivations for the described alliance. Did the TWC also benefit from the alliance, or was its support mainly altruistic? Some interviews suggest that the involvement in gig worker struggles helped TWC gain legitimacy among other groups who often view tech workers as ‘part of the problem’ in labour conflicts. Again, this points to an increase in coalitional power for the group. Still, the reasons for the involvement of TWC as an advocacy group beyond a single company are naturally different. As with other activist groups, cooperation might also evolve from notions of “groundless solidarity” (Elam, 1994) or at least without expectation of reciprocity (Jaeggi, 2021). Nevertheless, familiarity with the industry and an overall sense of fighting a common enemy have likely contributed to the cooperation. Generally, the strikes at Gorillas were the product of a large number of coalitional efforts, among which there was only one with TWC. Crucial and often closer cooperation took place with the syndicalist base union FAU, other rider collectives, the anti-fascist migrant movement Migrantifa, as well as a media collective and several individual activists and lawyers.

2.5 CONCLUSION

Although often at the opposite ends of the corporate hierarchy, gig workers and tech workers are able to enter into labour alliances and thereby advance their worker power. During the labour conflict at Gorillas in Berlin, organised tech workers helped gig workers by sharing their resources and networks, shielding off risks during direct action and amplifying gig workers’ voices in public. Shared or related experiences and challenges as migrant workers and migrant organisers provided common ‘lines of conflict’ for the two groups, both vis-à-vis the corporation and to some extent in contrast to traditional trade unions. Shared experiences of migrant workers in tech appear to be a fruitful avenue for gig-tech alliances more generally, as the share of migrant labour within both gig and tech work professions is high in many countries (Amrute, 2016; Altenried, 2021). A second common issue is the legal context, which made the instrument of the works council relevant for both groups.

The concept of coalitional power has proven useful as a lens through which to look at the combination of power resources and its overall increase through cooperation. Although just a small part of the Power Resource Approach, coalitional power as a basis might be useful in developing more elaborate concepts with which to analyse and compare specific forms of coalitions, such as those at Amazon Mechanical Turk, Facebook and Alphabet. The analysis also suggests that traditional trade unions need to find ways to respond to such conflicts and especially to the demands and tactics of precarious migrant workers. The main part of the observed coalition between TWC, GWC and other groups appears to have filled a void that formal trade unions failed to provide. Although some experiments with semi-formal and informal unionism have been made in the last years (Heiland, 2020; Niebler & Kern, 2020; Basualdo et al., 2021), unions in Germany and Europe have so far been somewhat reluctant to utilise the tactics of migrant and gig worker organising. Considering the most recent crisis of the tech industry and its lay-offs across divisions, opportunities for conflict and organising will surely arise. In the long run, cross-class coalitions could be an important lever in winning back worker power.

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