

Gig Watch

Studiecirkel via ABF - del 5

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Frågor till texterna:

- Välj ut ett stycke från varje text som du tycker är intressant, som du vill diskutera på studiecirkeln.

- Vad är det vi vill uppnå - ingen gig ekonomi, mindre gigeekonomi, en reglerad gigeekonomi, eller något annat? Är ett specifikt mål i denna fråga något som hjälper eller inte?
- I Sverige finns det en inställning bland fackföreningar att gigarbetare är "svåra" att organisera, men i andra länder ser vi flera exempel på organisering bland gigarbetare - både i och utanför traditionella fackföreningar. Varför ser vi inte liknande tendenser i Sverige? Vad behövs för att vända trenden här?
- I filmen The Hand that Feeds, vilka svårigheter med organisering beskrivs? Hur överkommer de problemen?
- Hur skulle framtida organisering kunna se ut? Vilka lärdomar går det att dra av de exempel på kamp vi lärt oss om?
- Vad krävs för att reformer ska vara systemförändrande snarare än systembevarande? Kan de vara det?

Kan den svenska modellen reglera gråzonerna?

Något om kampen för att teckna kollektivavtal för matbud.

Blogginlägg av Johan Lif på johanlif.substack.com den 1a februari 2021

Foodora uppges i dag ha godkänt det förslag på kollektivavtal som bolaget förhandlat med Transport. Nu väntar beslut i Transports styrelse. Om avtalet accepteras av båda de förhandlande parterna får det betraktas som ett genombrott i regleringen av den så kallade gigekonomin i Sverige. Ännu vet vi inget om detaljerna i den föreslagna överenskommelsen, men förebilden ska vara det avtal som Foodora i fjol tecknade i Norge efter att cykelbuden strejkat i över en månad. Avtalet sägs också vara ett specialavtal tecknat direkt med Foodora. Det innebär att det kan innehålla avvikande villkor i förhållande till Transports andra avtal.

Av Svenska Dagbladets rapportering framgår att även Wolt - en konkurrent till Foodora inom leveransbranschen - ändrat sin tidigare avisande hållning till att ingå kollektivavtal. Däremot kvarstår Uber Eats vid den inställning som vi hittills kommit att förknippa med plattformsföretagen: företaget ser sig över huvud taget inte som arbetsgivare. I ett mejl till SvD förklarar Uber Eats:

Leveranspartners som använder Uber Eats plattform är antingen egenföretagare eller anställda av ett leveransföretag och kan i båda fallen vara anslutna till kollektivavtal genom sina respektive arbetsgivare.

Detta känns igen från framför allt den amerikanska arbetsmarknaden. Där kan gigekonominns företrädare glädjas åt att de nyligen vunnit en för dem viktig seger, på bekostnad av villkoren för de som utför arbete åt Uber, med flera företag. När Kalifornien gick till val den 3 november 2020, i presidentvalets skugga, fanns även ett lagändringsförslag på valsedeln, den så kallade "Proposition 22". Förslaget handlade om hur de som utför arbete åt gigekonominns digitala plattformar ska klassificeras: som företagare eller som anställda.

Proposition 22 röstades igenom, med 58 procents majoritet. Företagen i Silicon Valley jublade. De hade investerat 180 miljoner dollar i lobbying och propaganda för att säkerställa att Instacart inte skulle behöva anställa sina matbud och Uber inte behöva anställa chaufförer. Det var den mest påkostade kampanjen för en lagändring i delstatens politiska historia.

Propositionen 22 ändrar en lag som Kalifornien antog 2019, "Assembly Bill 5", och som förutsätter att den som utför arbete ska klassificeras som anställd. AB5, som den kom att kallas, tillkom efter en lång kamp, som bland annat utmynnade i ett uppmärksammat rättsfall i den Kaliforniens högsta domstol 2018 där chaufförer för leveransföretaget Dynamex efter en rättslig helhetsbedömning befanns vara anställda.

Denna konflikt - kampen om klassificeringen av arbetskraft - berör kärnan i gigekonominns affärsmodell, som jag skrev något om i fredagens inlägg. "Proposition 22" tillerkänner giggarna vissa grundläggande villkor, utan att klassa dem fullt ut som anställda. De placeras helt enkelt i en mellankategori, en gråzon, som halvföretagare, som inte har möjligheten att sätta sina egna priser eller välja sina kunder, eller som halvanställda, utan full tillgång till trygghetssystemen.

Gigekonominns företrädare har arbetat hårt på att etablera synsättet att just deras verksamheter inte låter sig regleras som övrig näringsverksamhet, vare sig arbetsrättsligt eller skatterättsligt. Argumentationen har uppenbarligen vunnit gehör hos vissa debattörer och andra samhällsaktörer, även i Sverige. Låt oss ta en aktuell svensk rapport som exempel. Tankesmedjan Ratio, delfinansierad av Svenskt Näringsliv, släppte i augusti 2020 "Varför gigga som matkurir?". Rapporten är inte ointressant – bland annat innehåller den flera vittnesmål från "giggare" inom matbranschen som komplicerar den överdrivet negativa bilden av arbetsförhållandena som ibland förmedlas från andra håll – men när det gäller frågan om lagstiftning

kring exempelvis arbetsmiljöansvar landar rapportförfattarna i att gigekonomin måste regleras ”med varsam hand” för att inte dämpa företagets innovationskraft.

Liknande argument framförs i en cirkulärledare från Liberala nyhetsbyrån som publicerades i en rad svenska morgontidningar under sommaren 2020. Kravet att matbud ska hålla sig med personlig tidbok, på samma sätt som alla andra förare inom transportsektorn, avfärdas som onödig byråkrati. Den som kör ordinarie taxi eller godstransport skulle alltså behöva fylla i sina vilotider i sin tidbok, medan den som kör taxi eller levererar mat på uppdrag av ett företag med en app skulle slippa det. Ätminstone är det den logiska konsekvensen av ledarskribentens argumentation.

Men såväl ledartexten som Ratios rapport lämnar de svåra frågorna obesvarade. Är det rimligt ur konkurrenssynpunkt att vissa företag kan kringgå regler som gäller för andra företag? Är det rimligt ur arbetsmiljösynpunkt att vissa arbetare omfattas av sämre skyddsregler än andra? Är verkligen en taxiresa något annat än just en taxiresa, och en matleverans något annat än just en matleverans, bara för att de förmedlas via en app?

Segern för ”Proposition 22” i det kaliforniska valet är en seger för gigekonomin företag i en tid då de annars mest mött motgångar. Så avgjorde till exempel den spanska Högsta domstolen i september att matbudet som arbetar för gigföretaget Glovo ska klassificeras som arbetstagar och inte som uppdragstagar. Liknande processer har förts i Frankrike och i Storbritannien, och nästan alltid med samma resultat: företagen kommer inte undan arbetstagarbegreppet. ”Regelarbiteret” håller inte för juridisk prövning.

Hur kommer det sig då att Sverige inte haft domstolstvister av samma karaktär som i Spanien, Storbritannien, Frankrike, med flera länder? Niklas Selberg, forskare i arbetsrätt vid Lunds universitet, frågade sig under ett seminarium anordnat av TCO nyligen om det saknas incitament att kringgå arbetstagarbegreppet i Sverige. Vår starka kollektivavtalsreglering innebär till exempel att det inte finns några lagstadgade minimilöner som gigföretagen behöver undvika. Inte heller uppställer vår arbetsrätt några större hinder för att stapla korta visstidsanställningar på varandra.

Det företag som vill låta människor arbeta med korta påhugg och till låg lön kan alltså göra det inom ramen för svensk lagstiftning, så länge det kan undvika att teckna ett kollektivavtal. Anledningen för att det inte lobbats för någon svensk ”Proposition 22” skulle helt enkelt vara att det inte behövs.

Det kan ligga något i detta. Gigföretagen har vuxit i den svenska modellens sprickor. Ett kollektivavtal mellan Foodora och Transport skulle också av just denna anledning kunna vara en viktig seger, som visar att den svenska modellen förmår att införliva även branscher som hittills levt på att exploatera gråzonerna.

A cycle of struggles in Copenhagen

An inquiry into food delivery platform work on Wolt

by Jack Campbell on Notesfrombelow.org, 20th November 2020

My background

In September 2018 I moved from Sheffield to study in Copenhagen. I decided on Denmark not because of the fad around 'hygge' or a love of bacon, but because there were no tuition fees. It was possible to get a Danish government funded grant, provided that I worked part-time alongside my studies. Given the overblown fees in the UK and many other countries, it seemed like a no brainer to move to Denmark where I could potentially have financial security while studying. I was also under a naive assumption that I would not experience the same exploitative working conditions which exist in the UK, due to the strength of the Danish labour movement and the still robust welfare state. This turned out to be a false assumption. Instead, I worked a job for pitiful wages and was sacked on spurious grounds. I've met many other people in Copenhagen who have faced similar experiences of exploitation in the workplace. They are almost entirely non-Danes who are unaware of their rights and feel that they are not in a position to stick up for themselves and their co-workers.

My experience of being sacked caused significant mental as well as financial strain - my lack of experience in trade union organising and the way I was personally singled out by the company meant my struggle was isolated and individualised. Thankfully I managed to get another job almost immediately after being sacked, but the thought of even bumping into anyone from my previous workplace still fills me with feelings of shame and dread. I heard that Wolt couriers were beginning to organise and, as I needed a little extra cash, I decided to become a Wolt courier myself and try to aid and develop their organising efforts. I also needed to write a thesis for my master's programme, so conducting a workers' inquiry into the realities of working as a Wolt courier and our attempts at forming collective resistance was fitting. Getting involved in an organising campaign of other precarious workers turned out to be the perfect antidote to the atomised feeling of exploitation that myself and many other non-Danes face when working in Copenhagen. This piece is a summary of my research which tried to provide not only my own perspective, but also that of some of the hundreds of couriers I met throughout the period.

Wolt

Wolt is a Finnish technology company, financially backed by venture-capital, which provides the logistics for food delivery in cities, very similar to other food-platforms such as Deliveroo and Uber Eats. Wolt has seen massive growth in the last 12 months, coming second in the Financial Times list of the top growing companies in Europe, and there are around 1500 active couriers in Copenhagen alone.¹ In Denmark, Wolt is by far the largest food-platform, operating in almost every Danish city. In cities such as Copenhagen they have a near monopoly on food delivery, with other companies such as Just Eat and Take Away only representing a small portion of food deliveries in comparison.

Technical Composition

The payment system of Wolt couriers requires some explanation. There is the possibility of getting shifts wherein you are guaranteed at least 120 kr (£14.50) per hour before tax, with the possibility to go over this threshold if you make enough deliveries in the hour. At a mandatory introduction meeting I attended we were led to believe that there were an abundance of shifts, which I later found out to be completely false. Wolt couriers also have the option of simply logging on and working without a shift, meaning that you make a minimum of 45 kr (£5.40) per delivery before tax.

As with other food-platforms, Wolt couriers are self-employed, meaning that they do not receive sick pay, holiday pay, and they work on a zero-hours contract. In addition to this, it is the responsibility of the couriers to provide the tools necessary to complete the work: a smartphone with a comprehensive data plan, a vehicle and its maintenance, as well as safety equipment.

I was surprised that before starting as a courier there was not even a cursory check of whether we had a functioning vehicle or safety equipment. I collected the gear from their Copenhagen office, which included the delivery bag, a winter coat and two t-shirts. We were told it was compulsory to wear wolt clothing when working, making us couriers a moving advertisement on shift. Once I'd got the gear I was allowed to start delivering.

When I started working as a courier, I was pleasantly surprised by how much it was possible to earn during peak hours. Compared with other service sector jobs open to non-Danes, such as bar and cafe work where you typically earn 110-120 kr an hour before tax, it was possible to earn upwards of 130 kr an hour working as a Wolt courier during peak hours. As a city famous for its cycling infrastructure and flat landscape, I imagine that it is easier and safer to work as a Wolt courier in Copenhagen by bike than, say, working as a Deliveroo courier in Sheffield. But unlike Sheffield the general cost of living in Copenhagen is one of the highest in the world, so it was not uncommon for couriers to work upwards of 50 hours a week in order to provide for themselves and their relatives.

The shifts were allocated twice per week and were all gone within about a 30 second period. The frequency of couriers trying to get a shift was too much for the app to handle, meaning that it crashed for many couriers. This meant a large number of us resorted to working without a shift and only being paid per delivery. During non-peak hours it was much harder to make decent money. The cohort most affected by this were the most precarious couriers, who needed to maximise their income by working throughout the day and night. However, extremely low wages were not exclusive to non-peak hours. On a Friday night during the summer, I worked without a shift for 4 hours and earned 200 kr - only 50 kr (£6) an hour before tax. The lowest rate of tax in Denmark is 38%, meaning that my evening's work barely afforded me two beers in a bar.

The relationships with the restaurants could be particularly frustrating for those working without a shift. Some restaurants only start preparing the food when the courier is nearby. Such delays during peak hours, with couriers waiting outside restaurants, can prevent couriers from recuperating the low income they may have had during the non-peak hours. In order to justify the work, a courier would want to be earning upwards of 140 kr an hour during peak hours to justify potentially only earning around 50 kr during non-peak hours, but earning this much is made impossible when there are delays from the restaurants.

Methods of Control: Algorithmic and Middle Management

Wolt's system of algorithmic management allocates tasks to couriers and it is not possible to reject them, whether the courier is working with a shift or not. The physical boss breathing down your neck is replaced by the black box and, as one courier explained to me, 'if you had a boss, maybe it would be easier to negotiate with them, to talk with them. Even if it doesn't amount to much, at least it doesn't pacify your struggle'. The functioning of Wolt's algorithmic management is unclear and whilst Wolt denies it, many couriers feel that the system gives preference to those working with a shift. There's also no information conveyed by Wolt to the couriers as to how performance is monitored.

Such uncertainty around the functioning of task allocation can create an 'assembly line in the head'² for some couriers wherein they feel that they could be being monitored at any given time. Therefore it becomes important to work as efficiently as possible so as to ensure that they receive enough tasks to sustain themselves. Despite the work being repetitive and monotonous, the uncertainties around the functioning of algorithmic management provides an effective tool for Wolt to intensify this often-tedious

work which couriers perform. The encouragement from the algorithmic management to work at an impossible efficiency leads to couriers driving and cycling recklessly. The police look out for Wolt couriers as they know that so many of us will break traffic laws, making us an easy target to get a pay bonus for issuing us with hefty fines.

In addition to contending with algorithmic management, couriers have to deal with 'support workers' who contact couriers through a chat function in the Wolt Partner App. These support workers have employment contracts and are widely perceived as a kind of middle management, given that they act as our bosses. A courier told me that 'their job is to discipline us, they're like the whip'. The hierarchy in Wolt, with these support workers being in a closer proximity to the management than the couriers, means that if a disagreement occurs between a Wolt courier and a support worker, then the management will undoubtedly take the side of the support worker. Indeed, the support workers have the ability to issue warnings to couriers which can lead to suspensions or terminations. This warning system was not mentioned in the contract, at the introduction meeting or in any of the other information given to couriers. A courier expressed to me that 'there's not an equal playing field. They [support workers] work for the company so they can't just get the sack. If me and support had an argument, I could get dismissed just like that and I know they would take the support's side because they're an employee'.

Many couriers also noticed a hierarchy in terms of the social background of support workers compared with couriers. There was an impression amongst couriers that all of the support workers were native Danes and my interactions with support workers suggested that the vast majority were. This was in stark contrast to the couriers in Copenhagen, the vast majority of whom were non-Danes. This gave the condescending tone in which support workers sometimes wrote to couriers an additional layer of tension, as there was a feeling amongst some couriers that the way the support workers treat couriers is reflective of prejudice they have faced living in Denmark.

The support workers ultimately hold a great amount of control over the Wolt couriers. A courier contacted our organising group with screenshots of messages from support that they had received during the early stage of the lockdown from the coronavirus pandemic. The courier had signed up for a shift, but subsequently developed coronavirus symptoms so couldn't work. This courier had to cancel their shift, which caused them to receive a late cancellation warning. The courier then took a coronavirus test and as they were awaiting their results they signed up for another shift. They still had not received the results by the time that the shift was meant to take place, meaning that again they had to cancel their shift. This resulted in another late cancellation warning. Couriers in a situation such as this were in a bind: they were unable to work so received no income from Wolt but also couldn't preemptively sign up for shifts in case of receiving a warning from support. Some couriers in this situation may have decided to continue working despite having coronavirus symptoms due to their lack of financial security and the knowledge that, if they cancel too many shifts, then they might be suspended.

Safety

As I mentioned earlier, Copenhagen is a relatively safe place to work in a road vehicle compared with many other cities in the world. Nonetheless, accidents still occur regularly without any adequate protection from Wolt. Stories have circulated about the situations different couriers have found themselves in. An Argentinian courier allegedly started working as a courier and then subsequently got into a dangerous road traffic accident. Not only could they no longer work but they also didn't receive any sick pay. Due to the pandemic, flights to Argentina were rare and very expensive. They were therefore stuck in a situation where they couldn't afford a flight home nor could they work due to their injury. Many Copenhagen based couriers are in a similar position where they are a road accident away from severe financial insecurity to accompany a potentially crippling injury.

Wolt implemented a form of insurance which was meant to tackle this problem, but unfortunately for couriers it's not worth the paper it's written on. Couriers must lose a leg, become visually impaired,

paralysed, or die in order to claim the insurance.³ A lawyer within the trade union 3F stated that 'it is not technically possible as a private person to buy an accident insurance with a Danish insurance company that comes close to having the same poor coverage'.⁴ Wolt has also implemented a form of sick pay specifically for those with a positive coronavirus test result, but this only covers a very small portion of their salary.

Social Composition

The Demographics of the Couriers

Those working as Wolt couriers in Copenhagen are mostly male, non-Danes in their early to mid 20s, although anecdotally myself and other couriers have noticed more Danish and older couriers joining the workforce since the economic ramifications of the pandemic have started to hit the city. I spoke to a Danish courier in October who said that his dad in his 70s was going to start delivering food shortly. Many of those working come from Latin American countries, particularly Argentina and are often living in Copenhagen on a working holiday visa. Another large part of the workforce are students, many of whom come from other European countries. Many student couriers want employee status so that they can receive the Danish student grant, which you are not meant to receive as self-employed couriers. Some couriers do manage to receive this grant, but they are at risk of the state finding out that they shouldn't have got it as a Wolt courier. This has resulted in instances where couriers owe the state thousands of pounds in back payments, being unaware that they were not meant to be receiving the grant.

Many of the couriers I have spoken to have found themselves trapped in precarious work and, compared with employment they have had in the past, some of the couriers found Wolt to be preferable. One courier told me that they had 'always worked precariously...in my last job [in the UK] I was bogusly 'self-employed' as well'. Another told me that after moving to Denmark to study they found themselves in 'a precarious situation...Being Arab in Denmark is not exactly the best...it won't give you a lot of work opportunities. So Wolt was one of the easier jobs to get, they didn't need an interview, it was easy'.

However, it should be noted that for students who do receive the study grant through either another job (such as myself) or through being a Danish citizen (which means there are no work requirements to receiving the grant) the promise of flexibility in working as a courier for Wolt appeals as it provides them with a way to supplement their income. For people in this situation, Wolt provided a means to break even at the end of the month without having to plan around a more fixed schedule, as it is possible to try to plan your work around your life.

It's important to note though that this was a relatively privileged position which many students working as couriers in Copenhagen did not find themselves in. I met many who didn't manage to get another job which would enable them to receive the study grant which they expected to receive when studying in Copenhagen, leaving them in a highly precarious situation with some having to return to their home countries and forgo their life in Denmark. The highly saturated rental market in Copenhagen makes rent extortionate and means those living in Copenhagen are often at the whim of slum landlords. This, combined with the extortionate cost of living in Copenhagen, means that many are simply unable to only live off their fluctuating wages from Wolt and live in a city like Copenhagen.

Social Bonds amongst Couriers

Whilst there are certain 'hotspots' in the city where Wolt couriers are encouraged to congregate, in reality the work is much more dispersed, with couriers being pulled around in different directions. You're most likely to see other couriers when waiting outside a restaurant, but more than the exchange of a nod is rare. Many couriers work with headphones on so starting a conversation with another courier can mean awkwardly bothering them. If couriers do know one another it tends to be because of their already existing social bonds. Much of the Latin American workforce know one another, and many of them live together, sometimes sharing vehicles and taking turns to use them for work. However, aside from this

group it was hard to identify any other demographics in the workforce who had an extensive network within it. Many people had been working as couriers for a year or two but didn't know any other couriers.

The main social interactions between couriers take place on a Facebook group facilitated by Wolt management. This was a space through which Wolt couriers supported one another in working out the confusing Danish tax system, shared tips on how to deliver faster and posted memes about the work. However, because Wolt management tightly moderated this group, people rarely brought up negative experiences or difficulties. To me the Facebook group was akin to having lunch at work with a boss or supervisor in the conversation. You're not going to start agitating if you know that they're listening in.

Political Composition

How we started and our achievements so far

In mid-2018 some Wolt couriers separately contacted the trade union 3F, Denmark's largest trade union, for advice on how to organise. 3F linked these couriers with each other, and they started to agitate on the streets, handing out leaflets and organising meetings. These meetings grew to the point where they decided to be open about their activities and call themselves the Wolt Workers Group. They created a Facebook page and started agitating on the management moderated Facebook group as well as continuing their street level organising.

Once I joined we continued this strategy and grew with more and more couriers joining our meetings. We held meetings on topics which we knew would be useful to couriers such as advice on how to pay taxes and we had plans for a bike repair workshop and social events. We also had plans to write a petition with the input of as many couriers as possible and try to gather signatures, and stage an event where we hand the signed petition to Wolt management. We had momentum until the pandemic hit in early March. This stopped us in our tracks, as we could no longer have physical meetings, and there was also an understandable fear around continuing our face-to-face organising. We knew that we had to do something during this difficult period, so we decided to conduct interviews with some of the many media organisations who had contacted us. One of our key organisers and a founder of the Wolt Workers Group appeared on the Danish 9 O'Clock news talking about our organising and the conditions of couriers.⁵ Appearing on the prime time Danish news programme raised our profile in Danish society. Wolt management's media strategy up to that point was to say that couriers love the current contract they're working under. Having a courier state the complete opposite on prime time news undoubtedly scared them shitless. It no longer became feasible for management to ignore our concerns so Wolt and our union 3F entered into negotiations.

Having experienced the support of a mainstream trade union here, it's puzzling to me that mainstream unions in other countries have been reluctant to aid platform workers organising efforts. A little support can go a long way with platform workers as has been shown in the last few years with the upsurge in collective resistance by these workers. A lack of engagement from the more established unions with the struggle of workers in these rapidly growing sectors undermines their ability to protect and represent their existing base of more established workers.

Strategy

Throughout my time in the Wolt Workers Group we have noticed a big difference between having face-to-face organising conversations with couriers, and trying to have these conversations online. Whilst we found a lot of support on the management facilitated Facebook group, some couriers were skeptical of our demands for an employment contract, feeling that this would take away any flexibility which currently exists when working as a Wolt courier. This meant that the Facebook conversations could often turn into long back and forths between couriers and a competition for the most likes. Interacting with keyboard warriors was something which many of us found to be demoralising and counterintuitive to our aims of building solidarity. Our previous engagement in face-to-face conversations with couriers were far more

productive than these online spats, regardless of the couriers' preconceptions. We also found issues when trying to organise online zoom meetings. It was very challenging to keep the twenty or so people in the meeting who we had never met in real life on track and to strategise effectively. These factors all made organising during the height of the first wave of COVID-19 in Denmark particularly difficult.

Despite having problems with adapting to online organising, there were numerous advantages to our online presence. As our Facebook page grew, more Danish activist groups and trade unionists became aware of our fight. Not only this, but other groups of couriers organising such as the Justice for Couriers Campaign in Finland who organise with Foodora and Wolt couriers got in touch and we have spoken with them to share tactics and knowledge about how Wolt operates and the demands from Wolt couriers in their country. In addition to this Wolt couriers throughout the world have contacted us, from Israel to Slovenia, who are inspired by what we're doing and are looking to start something similar in their country.

Because of our restrictions with the pandemic, the organising of the Wolt Workers Group fell on the shoulders of fewer and fewer couriers, and with a number of key organisers leaving the country over the summer we were in a tricky position. The fallout from the pandemic left so many 3F workers laid off, and some companies have used the pandemic and the coming recession to roll back on the contracts which workers have fought for in Denmark. As well as this, our union represents many frontline workers. Because of the unprecedented situation of the pandemic, the union staff we engage with have been run off their feet so haven't had the same capacity to support us in developing our strategy. Alongside our regular meetings with 3F we turned elsewhere to improve our skills and strategise, and a few of us took part in the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung's Strike School alongside activists from SUF, the radical youth wing of the Danish leftist party Enhedslisten who have supported us in our organising and fundraising. Whilst a worker organising strategy with the aim of launching 100% all-out strikes might not be possible in a workforce like that of Wolt couriers, where there is a mass turnover of couriers and thousands of couriers dispersed throughout the city, there are still so many vital lessons that we learned from this organising training. We're now far more confident in having effective organising conversations and we understand how we could use 'structure tests' such as petitions to hopefully generate small victories which build our collective muscles.

The Future

Because of our organising efforts (although Wolt management would never admit it) certain aspects of the work have improved markedly. Support workers seemingly treat couriers with much more respect, which makes Wolt couriers lives a hell of a lot easier. Shifts are currently far easier to acquire, although this might change as Wolt are in the process of trying to recruit an extra thousand couriers in Copenhagen alone. Nonetheless, the fact that it's easier for couriers to acquire more shifts for the time being does give more financial security for couriers, even if it may be temporary.

Over the last month we have been having organising conversations with other couriers outside restaurants in Copenhagen and getting the contact details of those most interested in getting involved in the Wolt Workers Group. Our plan is to consistently do this and identify leaders, before then deciding on our future direction and how to leverage our power with a larger and more representative group of couriers. We understand the importance in applying pressure on management to sign a contract with our union, and the best way to do that is to have as many couriers as possible organised and empowered to demand change.

Regardless of whether the negotiations between Wolt and 3F are fruitful we will continue our campaign to empower ourselves and our colleagues. Ideally we will also work with and reach out to couriers for other companies such as Just Eat. Denmark's system of sectoral collective bargaining means that we can build solidarity across workplaces and push for good working conditions across the board. We hope that the work we've done so far will pave the way for a more empowered migrant workforce in Copenhagen.

What we learned from over a decade of tech activism

Nataliya Nedzhvetskaya and JS Tan

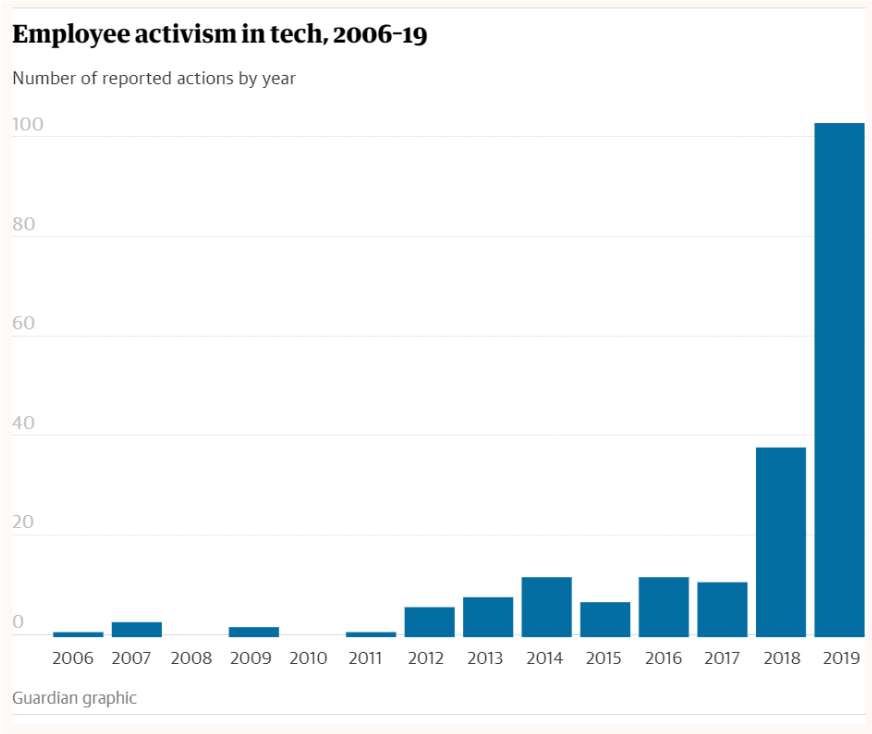
The Guardian, 23e December 2019

In the past year, tech worker mobilization has reached unprecedented levels. Kickstarter employees sought union recognition from their company. Amazon workers led a cross tech-industry walkout to support the global climate strike. Googlers grappled with unionization, fought against increasing corporate hostility, and challenged their company’s unethical partnerships. Even Chinese tech workers have joined in, with the viral 996.icu campaign that demanded more reasonable working hours.

We documented all the collective actions in the tech industry in a publicly accessible online database and analyzed the results. What we learned challenges many mainstream media narratives about the tech workers’ movement. Here are our eight most important insights.

1. Tech worker actions are growing exponentially

There were more than a hundred publicly reported actions in 2019, some involving thousands of people. This is almost triple the number of actions we saw in 2018 and nine times the number in 2017.

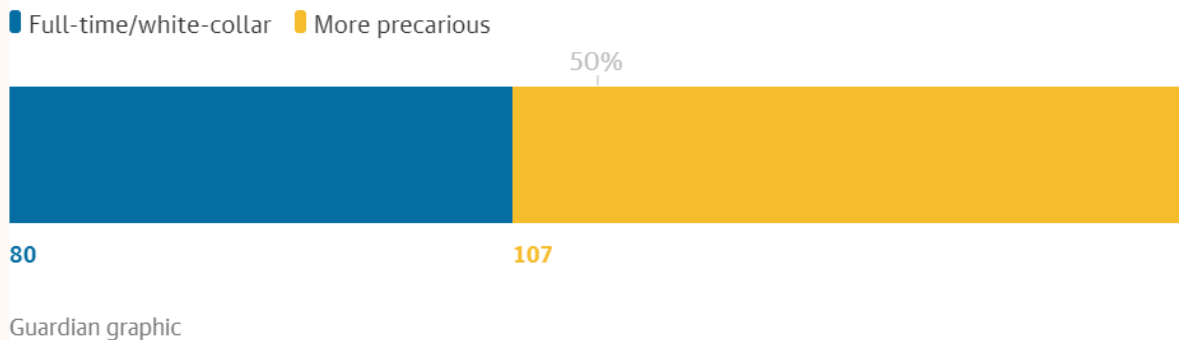


2. Precarious workers are leading the fight ...

Mainstream media coverage of the tech workers’ movement has often focused on white-collar professionals – software engineers, data scientists, designers, program managers and other workers with high-paying desk jobs – such as the “Thanksgiving Four”, who were allegedly fired by Google as retaliation for their organizing efforts.

In reality, however, the majority of tech worker actions – many only reported by local news outlets – are led by less privileged tech workers, such as warehouse pickers, rideshare drivers, and service employees. From 2006 to 2019, our database shows, 57% of actions reported in the press were led by this group.

Share of actions by worker type, 2006-19



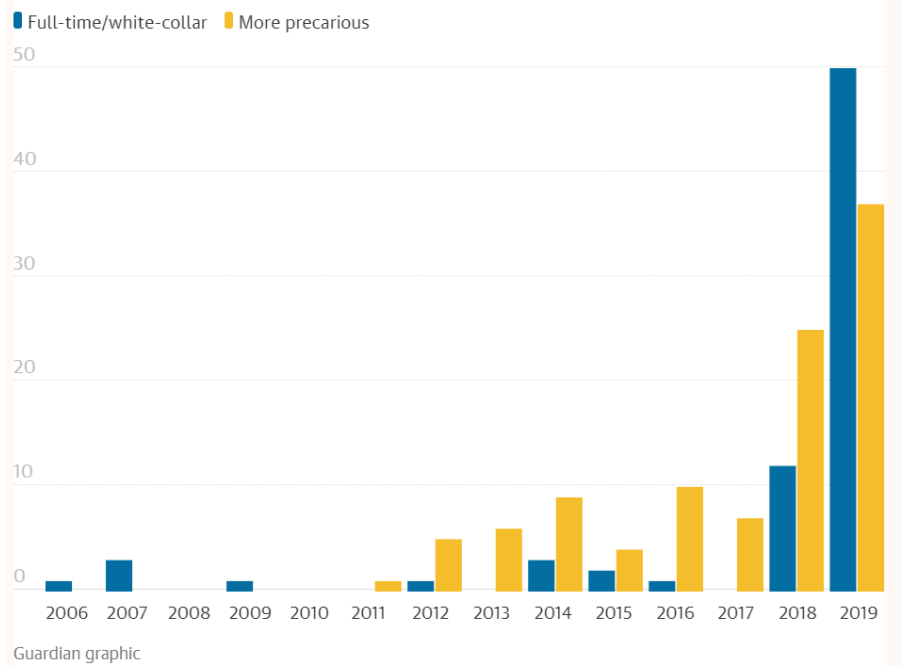
This year, Amazon warehouse workers in Sacramento circulated a petition to reinstate two fired workers – and succeeded. Whole Foods workers denounced their parent company’s ties to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice). A protest caravan of rideshare employees drove roughly 600 miles across California to drum up support for the AB5 bill, which entitles gig workers to greater employee benefits.

Thousands of Instacart workers in the US went on strike to protest reduced earnings. Delivery workers across the Atlantic, including Deliveroo workers in the UK and Foodora workers in Norway, found creative ways to make their voices heard. Uber Eats delivery staff even managed to unionize in Japan.

3. ... but full-time and white-collar tech workers are becoming more active

Before 2019, our data shows, the number of actions led by either blue-collar or contract workers was 74%. The past year saw something new, however: the number of actions from full-time/white-collar workers overtook the number of actions from less privileged tech workers.

Number of actions by worker type, 2006-19



4. Full-time/white-collar workers and more precarious workers are fighting for different things ...

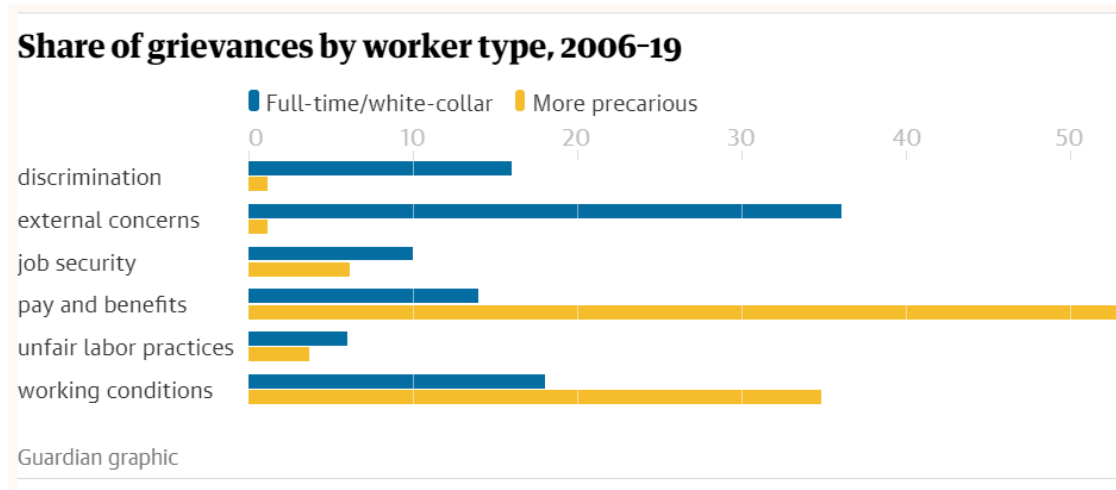
It’s been argued that the tech worker movement has been fueled by employee concern for moral or ethical issues as opposed to more “traditional” organizing concerns, such as higher wages and improved

working conditions. But this characterization of the movement is a result of focusing on only the most privileged group. The data for less privileged tech workers tells a different story.

The largest number of actions organized by full-time/white-collar workers (36%) were related to what we call “external concerns” – in other words, issues not directly applicable to a worker’s ability to earn a livelihood. This category includes actions against climate change, partnerships with Ice and other

controversial government agencies, and policies towards political advertising. Working conditions (18%) and discrimination (16%) came in a distant second and third.

Blue-collar and contract workers, on the other hand, overwhelmingly organized around issues related to pay and benefits (53%) and working conditions (35%).



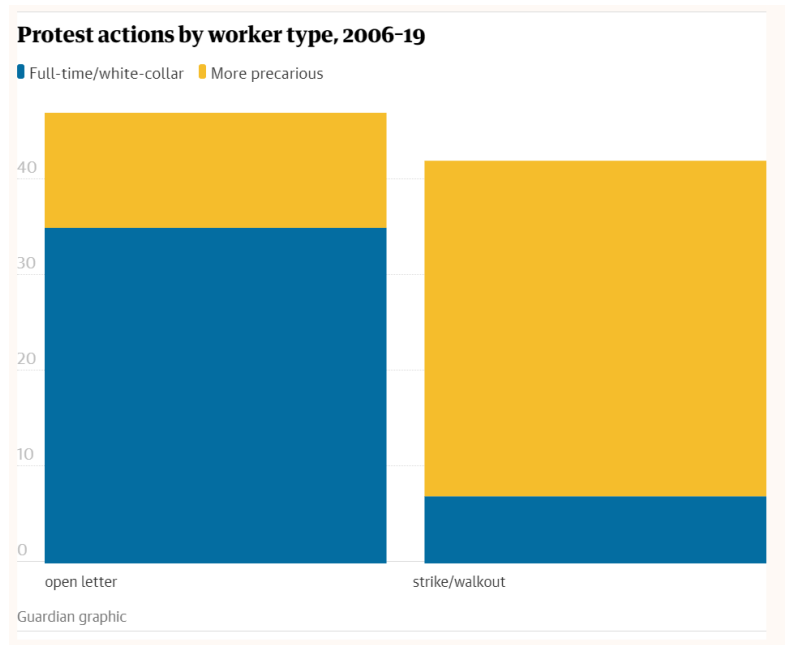
5. ... and are fighting in different ways ...

The methods of protest used by the two groups also differed. Full-time/white-collar workers sent open letters to management as their core strategy, while more precarious groups went on strike or walked off the job.

6. ... but their struggles are connected

Ultimately, concerns about exploitation of vulnerable populations underlie actions by both groups. In the case of many less privileged tech workers, whether they are blue-collar or contract workers, they happen to be the subject of this exploitation. Movements such as the Fight for 15 have argued that the struggle for living wages, decent working conditions, and basic benefits such as health insurance is an ethical dilemma for our society.

Contractors have faced similar challenges within companies. When Google contract workers in Pittsburgh voted to unionize this year, they drew attention to the inequalities that exist even within white-collar roles.

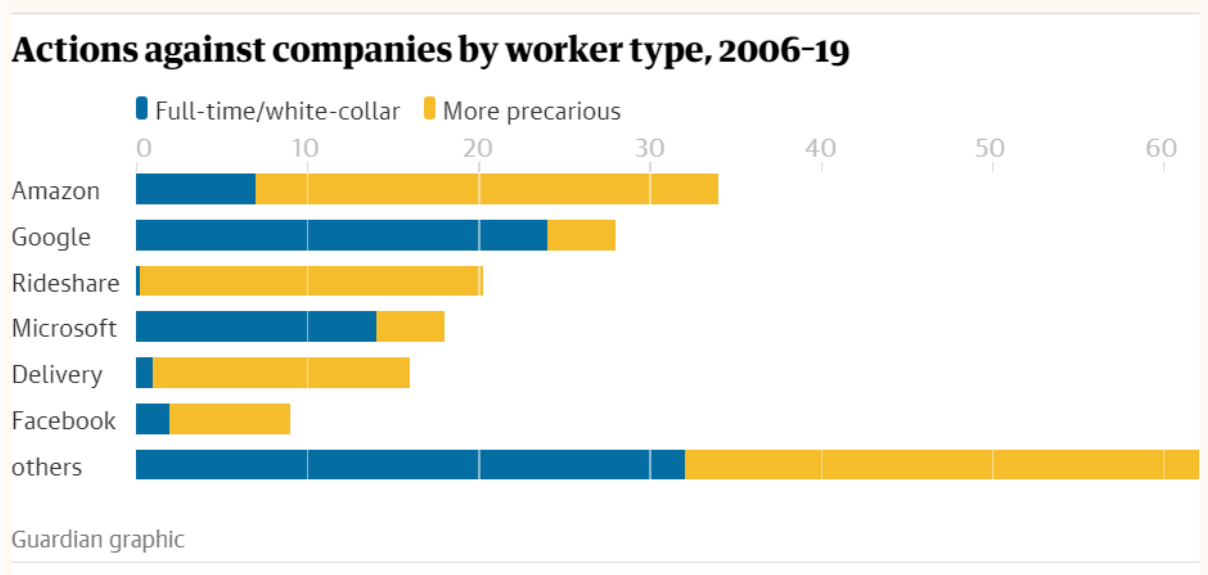


Failing to include gig workers, such as rideshare workers, delivery workers, or contract workers, as part of the tech worker movement reinforces stereotypes of who counts as an employee and undermines the potential for worker solidarity across the industry.

7. Amazon and Google are the main targets of tech activism

The companies with the greatest number of reported actions from 2006 to 2019 were Amazon and Google. When grouped together, the rideshare companies Uber, Lyft, and Bolt followed, with 20 actions total.

Whereas Amazon and the rideshare companies were mainly targets of actions by less privileged workers, Google and Microsoft were targeted by full-time/white-collar employees.



8. Solidarity among different groups of tech workers is crucial for the movement

It’s a common tactic for bosses to pit workers against each other in order to maintain control. Privileged tech workers must help to dismantle such divisions. Tech workers across the industry must learn to recognize the precariousness of contractors compared with full-time company employees, blue-collar compared with white-collar workers, and undocumented workers and visa holders compared with citizens.

We began to see solidarity among different types of tech workers this year. In July, engineers from Amazon HQ flew out to Shakopee, Minnesota, to support their warehouse co-workers on their Prime Day strike. Earlier in the year, nearly a thousand Google workers signed a letter objecting to the tech company’s treatment of temporary contractors, in what organizers are calling a “historical coalition” between the company’s full-time employees and temps, vendors and contractors.

Unions and activist networks such as Tech Workers Coalition and Silicon Valley Rising have helped lead the charge in bringing some of these groups together. Other actions have simply been the result of individuals looking critically at the working conditions of those employed in the same workspace.

When we expand our definition of who counts as a tech worker, we get a true sense of the scale of this movement and its potential to incite real change – if tech workers can band together.

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Ledare: Tips om att våga säga nej och ta pauser gäller inte anställda i gig-ekonomin

DN 14/2 2021. Om gig-företagen vill vara en del av framtidens arbetsmarknad måste de städa bland barnsjukdomarna, följa vanliga spelregler och teckna kollektivavtal.

Förra året arbetade Sydsvenskans journalist Dan Ivarsson en månad som cykelbud för en matleverantör. Efteråt beskrev han en bransch med hårda villkor och ständig press. Arbetsgivaren ser exakt hur matbuden rör sig, kan utan att fråga plötsligt förlänga ett arbetspass och skickar varje vecka ett betyg på prestationen som bevakas via en app i mobilen.

Den som tappar sin telefon eller får punktering på cykeln tvingas bryta arbetspasset, förlora inkomst och betala reparationen själv. Anställningskontrakten gäller för en eller tre månader, så arbetsgivaren kan välja vilka som får vara kvar, vilket är en stor del av pressen eftersom den som cyklar för långsamt, bryter arbetspass eller tackar nej till en beställning ligger sämst till.

En av Ivarssons budkollegor menar att situationen är jämförbar med slaveri. En annan har fått meddelande från gruppchefen om att han "måste tillhöra topp 50 procent. Annars får du sluta."

Det är uppenbart att pigga checklistor om hur man bäst undviker skadlig stress på jobbet inte gäller dem som levererar snacks och snabbmat till medelklassens dörrar. Dessa brukar innehålla tips som att ta pauser, prata med chefen och våga säga nej.

Därmed inte sagt att såväl råden som regelverken inte borde inkludera dem som kallas för gig-jobbare, som utför tjänster som förmedlas via mobilappar. Att använda digitala plattformar för att skapa ingångsjobb för människor som har svårt att få in en fot är bra. Däremot kan det inte ske på bekostnad av de anställdas trygghet och arbetsmiljö, som arbetsmarknadsminister Eva Nordmark (S) uttryckte saken tidigare i veckan (Studio Ett 11/2).

Långsiktigt betyder det sannolikt att "fri frakt" kommer att vara ett minne blott och att den som vill ha restaurangmat levererad till hemadressen får betala mer.

När arbetsmarknaden utvecklas måste lagstiftningen följa med och i dag är det otydligt vem som har arbetsmiljöansvar för gig-jobbarna. Som det står i en rapport från Ratio befinner sig branschen "i stor utsträckning i ett ingenmansland gällande socialförsäkring, anställningsvillkor och arbetsmiljöreglering", vilket är ohållbart. Framför allt för en växande bransch.

Därför är det rätt att regeringen, som en del av den nya arbetsmiljöstrategin som presenterades i torsdags, tillsätter en utredning där villkoren ska analyseras, vilket bör välkomnas av gig-företagen. Om de vill etablera sig som en allt större del av framtidens arbetsmarknad måste de städa bland barnsjukdomarna och börja följa de vanliga spelreglerna. Det handlar exempelvis om ett erbjudande normala anställningskontrakt, stå för de anställdas arbetsredskap som cykel och mobiltelefon, samt teckna kollektivavtal.

Det senare verkade vara på gång i slutet av januari för ett av företagen, men förra veckan kom beskedet att överenskommelsen dröjer, eftersom parterna fortfarande står en bit ifrån varandra. Förhoppningsvis kan förhandlingarna så småningom ändå mynna ut i ett avtal som garanterar skäliga villkor, för de så kallade enkla jobben får inte utföras till vilket pris som helst.

Långsiktigt betyder det sannolikt att "fri frakt" kommer att vara ett minne blott och att den som vill ha restaurangmat levererad till hemadressen får betala mer, vilket är ett pris väl värt att betala. Gig-jobben finns. Nu måste de bli en del av den svenska modellen.

DNs Ledarredaktion

Två röster om organisering

<https://onezero.medium.com/how-to-start-a-gig-worker-rebellion-544b004b4427>

<http://www.unique-online.de/%E2%80%9Estop-accepting-the-shit%E2%80%9C/10990/>

Callum Cant, from How to start a gig worker rebellion (utdrag):

Cant also takes the term “gig economy” to task throughout the book, instead relying on the phrase “platform capitalism,” coined by theorist Nick Srnicek. Srnicek argues that rather than viewing companies like Deliveroo or Uber as special tech companies with the characteristics of startups, we should simply view them instead as capitalist companies, particularly in the case of Deliveroo (where workers provide the bikes, the bike lights, the mobile phones needed for the app, etc.). These companies — and how they are reshaping the economy — are just another way of rearranging the deck chairs of capitalism, not making any fundamental difference. In *Riding for Deliveroo*, Cant also draws links between previous developments on factory floors — such as the pressure to automate parts of the weapons manufacturing process in World War II to reduce human error — to the pressures facing workers today.

The difference, as he puts it, is around the context and composition of exploitation today. Arguably, the relations are the same — a boss is exploiting their workers, whether the boss is a person behind a desk or an app with no human face.

“Those historical examples demonstrate a certain kind of continuity; you have to understand these current forms of exploitation historically too,” says Cant. “You can see that workers during the dock strikes in East London were really struggling. Unions don’t begin when people are fine; they begin when people are screwed over, exploited, in bad conditions.”

But Deliveroo couriers are one part of a much wider global shift within the tech industry, something that Cant is keen to emphasize. “If you organize around a common interest and link up across different parts of the chain, the whole thing becomes much more powerful,” says Cant. “There’s a point in the history of the British labor movement called the Triple Alliance — transport workers, dockers, and miners formed this industrial alliance, saying that if one group strikes, the others would too. It was broken very quickly, but that kind of alliance is very powerful.”

In the last two years, workplace organizing has become a flash point within Silicon Valley, particularly among white-collar workers who may never have been part of a union before. (Tech companies like IBM are notoriously hard places to unionize, and there’s evidence to suggest that this is still the case.) The state of the tech industry requires organizers to try out new approaches to old workforces and take on workplaces that are difficult to organize.

“We know that Deliveroo workers in the head office are overworked, and the strongest possible connection is between workers on the street and workers in the office. We can reach over that black box,” says Cant. “So these stories and these examples are a way of reaching out and saying, ‘It’s happened before and it’ll happen again.’ You cannot kill off the capacity of workers to organize and fight for a better society.”

Daria Bogdanska from Stop accepting the shit (utdrag):

How do you explain the “take it or leave it” approach that you describe for many of your peers struggling with bad payment and shitty jobs?

The thing is that many young people grew up in this system, late capitalism, so we don’t remember that it could be different. The bosses have total power now and are used to that. So when things at work are not

the way we would like it, we more often choose an individual approach than try to fix problems collectively, or we change the job.

My case here is: If we keep on quitting shitty jobs without trying to collectively fix the problems we who work there have, just hoping the next job will be better, there will be no better jobs soon. All will be shit.

Maybe we are already there even now, as our rights as workers have been drastically diminished during the last decade and unions were getting weaker and weaker. I think it is time to start thinking about those issues, stop accepting the shit and start to organise. To do that, we need structures – unions are one of them. They might be out of touch with reality and seem square, but that doesn't mean that we cannot change them and use them as a tool for making our lives and futures better.

The First Meeting

The new year came and went. On New Year's Eve, a friend had said to me that she was afraid of how 2017 would go. The general mood was pretty bleak. It felt like everyone was being stalked by the black dog. For Deliveroo workers, the major problem was that wages had fallen dramatically. It was now not uncommon to do one delivery an hour, even during peak evening periods. A couple of months back, you could make £12 an hour from 5.30 p.m. to 10 p.m. Now the average was more like £6 to £8 an hour. The discussions at the zone centre got more bitter, more purposeful, and angrier. We set about organizing our first meeting. We booked a room in a community centre for the end of January, asked an IWGB representative to come down from London, and started to spread the details online and in person. I got a lot of workers say that they'd be there, but I'd organized campaign meetings before. I knew that 'I'll be there' only really meant 'there's a 30

per cent chance I'll be there'. On the morning of the meeting, I told myself I'd be happy with over five people turning up.

When I opened the door, a couple of minutes early, I was surprised. Some riders were already there, setting the chairs out. There were five of us, and it wasn't even meant to start yet. More and more workers kept walking in the door, until there were twenty couriers and a couple of supporters in the room. We'd mostly met before, at the zone centre or in sweaty restaurant kitchens whilst waiting for food – but this was the first time I'd ever seen any of them outside of work. We were almost all cyclists, with only a couple of moped riders. The atmosphere in the room was strange. Everyone knew this could be the start of something. Together we talked about our problems with the job, and a flood of ideas for demands emerged. Everyone had something specific they wanted changed: from the amount of time you wasted 'on hold' to the call centre when a delivery went wrong, to the state of the kit, to the triple orders which were bad for the customer, to the lack of discounts at local bike shops, to the rates of pay. The demands to solve those problems varied wildly. Some workers wanted a wearable video camera to be a standard part of the kit so that if an accident took place we'd all have a record of it; others wanted insurance deals, an £8 guarantee for the first hour you logged on, a £12 guarantee for all the time you were logged on, more call centre staff, and on and on. The attitudes towards management were all over the place. A few workers

thought that Deliveroo would voluntarily recognize a union branch if we set one up; others thought they'd fight us tooth and nail. We worked out that we were paying about £2 an hour in costs just to be at work, which made the wages look even worse.

Slowly, the room agreed to form a union branch and establish some concrete demands. Migrant workers with some prior experience of corrupt unions wanted guarantees that their subs wouldn't be wasted, that the union wasn't secretly connected to the bosses. The IWGB representative was Max Dewhurst, the same rep who'd seen Dan Warne humiliated by a crowd of workers in London six months ago. They told us that we'd have to do a hell of a lot of hard work to get a branch organized – but, pending some changes to the union constitution to allow us to form a branch outside of London, we could join. When the meeting heard about the victories the IWGB had won for outsourced cleaners in London, it became clear that it was the kind of union we wanted to be part of: active, militant, and direct. I told the meeting that the Rebel Roo was now in touch with fifteen cities where some kind of organizing effort was ongoing, be it an isolated person distributing the bulletin or a fully established union branch. Deliveroo only operated in about sixty cities in the UK at the time.

Everyone started wrapping their heads around the fact that, because we weren't technically employees, Deliveroo had no

legal requirement to recognize our union. But, at the same time, all legal restrictions on strike action no longer applied. Yes, we had no access to sick pay or holiday pay or formal employment rights – but we also had no obligation to give employers notice that we were going on strike, or to conduct a postal ballot. We could use workplace democracy in its most immediate form to decide our course of action. This wasn't as confusing as it could have been, given that very few people in the meeting had ever been members of a trade union before. We didn't know what the formal processes were, so totally ignoring them and going by common sense instead wasn't a problem for us. Suddenly, we began to understand how precarious conditions could be a source of strength. We had almost no experience of organizing a workplace, let alone being on strike – but that didn't matter.

All the laws that had been passed over decades and decades to restrict the rights of workers to organize and take action in the workplace were based on the idea that they were regulating the employment relationship. But the employment relationship was precisely what Deliveroo had undermined. The 2016 Trade Union Act – a piece of legislation so draconian that Oxford law professors called it 'authoritarian'² – was out the window. It would be a straight fight: bosses vs workers.

A Second Strike

But, however well the election had gone, the situation in the workplace was still tough. Over the summer, our campaign collapsed.

Strangely, the collapse happened when we won an unofficial hiring freeze right around the time of our Mayday demonstration. That might sound counterintuitive, but the slowdown in recruitment led to an increase in orders per hour. That partially resolved the wages issue, which demotivated riders from keeping on fighting. At the same time, we became

busier, which meant we spent less time at the zone centre, which took away one key opportunity to talk. A lot of student workers who we'd organized alongside went home or graduated. The union branch became non-functional, and constant rapid turnover meant a load of the original strikers left the job. When the hiring freeze ended a couple of months later, a load of new, non-unionized riders began to work, diluting the organization of the workforce.

In an attempt to solve the labour oversupply problem and the antagonism it caused, Deliveroo began to change the way the 'black box' of the app worked. In early 2017, a 'pulse' system started to be trialled amongst riders. This pulse was meant to indicate demand by showing order volume on a scale from low to very high. Essentially, it took a function of the already-existing WhatsApp chats, and integrated it into the app itself. But this time, rather than other workers answering the question, it would be the bosses. Workers didn't trust it from the start. When we met at the zone centre, we would compare what our pulses were saying. I could have very high, and other workers could have low. We were in the same zone, standing next to each other, but apparently demand was totally different. Comparison proved that we weren't being provided with unfiltered data about demand, but actually there was some element of hidden labour management built into the pulse. But, as time went on, an increasing proportion of riders were accepting it as gospel. It began to dictate their work

schedules, and as it was tweaked and improved over time even the sceptical riders began to rely on it.

The culture of cyclists meeting at the zone centre was in sharp decline. The chain sushi restaurant took away the Roo bench we had used to sit on. Evidently, they didn't like us cluttering up their shop front. They still needed us to do deliveries, though.

The zone centre was never totally created by the demands and organization of the labour process. You needed to be in the city centre, sure, but that was much bigger than Jubilee Square. There were some restaurants in Hove which were miles away from the zone centre, and if you wanted to deliver from them it made sense to wait somewhere else. The app instructed you to go to Jubilee Square, but you could always ignore the app. I started to see more workers waiting on their own. Most of the time, this meant they just locked up by the side of the road near the centre of town and went on their phone. The zone centre, in retrospect, had actually been part of our workplace culture. We all met there because we chose to meet there.

It was quite possible to work for Deliveroo and steer clear of all your co-workers. Robbie Warin, a researcher who interviewed Deliveroo riders in Brighton whilst I was working, found some workers who took this approach back in January/February of 2017, just as the union was starting.³ But,

in the months since, an increasing section of the workforce seemed to decide to steer clear. There seemed, at a distance, to be a few reasons behind it. Either they'd just started, and the collective workplace culture was so broken down that they didn't even know that it had existed, or else they had grown tired of developing rapport with co-workers only for turnover to get rid of everyone they knew within a month. I'm sure some preferred to work in isolation, just them and their phone, because that's what suited their personality. Any way you looked at it, though, this acceptance of individualization broke down the solidarity essential for an effective strike.

Cyclists' earnings had fluctuated since the first strike; when the hiring freeze ended, they definitively declined. Workers speculated that the algorithm was allocating more deliveries to moped riders and de-prioritizing cyclists. Because of the piece wage system, this meant that mopeds were raking it in whilst cyclists couldn't get orders. There were a few possible incentives for Deliveroo to push this change in the labour process. Despite having to pay a petrol bonus, mopeds were generally quicker, especially in a city as hilly as Brighton. They also worked more consistent hours so could be more reliable. It could even have been an automatic function of an inbuilt machine learning process, which deprioritized slower workers in favour of faster ones – thereby systematically favouring mopeds.

However, it didn't escape our attention that our union branch had been made up primarily of cyclists. Participation in the strikes had been much more even, but the IWGB organizing group in Brighton was almost all cyclists. The perception amongst the veterans was that cyclists had begun a fight against low pay, and, as a result, our part of the workforce was being forced out. That kind of mass victimization of an entire segment of the workforce – whether real or perceived – was a powerful disincentive for organizing. The situation was analogous to a mass redundancy for a well-organized car plant, but with none of the transparency. The workforce was divided into two by this change, and the distinctions in the social composition of the workforce along lines of education and migration status exacerbated the division. Because we had no idea what went on inside the app, there was no definitive way of responding to this theory: we couldn't just assume it was true and begin campaigning on that basis, but we also couldn't absolutely say that nothing had changed. The black box left us in the dark.

A lot of key unionized workers began to drift away. Those who remained bought mopeds. I started a Ph.D. and began teaching seminars shortly after. I didn't have as much time to work anymore, and, anyway, it seemed like the whole organizing drive had gone belly up. There was no point working anymore with the cyclist pay as bad as it was. The moped riders decided to use two new informal zone centres in

better locations: one nearer to Burger King and KFC on Western Road, and one outside the McDonald's on London Road. When I walked past Jubilee Square, I rarely saw anyone there. Sometimes I'd bump into a worker I knew and chat, but the time of mass meetings had passed. People stopped using the old WhatsApp groups. It seemed like things were going quiet. Maybe the struggle had been a one-off.

In July, the government-commissioned Taylor Review on Modern Employment Practices reported back.⁴ It had been told to look at the development of the gig economy and the way it challenged conventional employment practices. Unsurprisingly, given that a quarter of the review panel were Deliveroo investors, it made a load of recommendations that added up to a sum total of nothing. The IWGB's response to the report was titled 'Dead on arrival'. It was a 64-page demolition.

The union's analysis of the panel conducting the review claimed that: 'your panel members were biased and/or unethically conflicted, your panel had no worker or trade union representation, you refused to meet with the IWGB despite our direct stake and experience in the issue at hand, you incorrectly portrayed the current law, and you often ran the employers' preferred narratives'. The union ridiculed Taylor's writing style, did everything short of accusing him of being a Tory stooge, and rubbished the vast majority of the review's proposals:

out of the Review's 52 proposals [sic], we choose not to comment on 15 as we lack the relevant expertise or direct experience of the issues they seek to address, 17 are so bland or devoid of substance or teeth we feel we cannot really assess their supposed value, 12 would probably do no harm but also won't achieve a whole lot, 4 are a mixed bag – containing both good and bad elements, 2 are bad, 2 have potential to be good but are so devoid of detail the likely impact is difficult to assess, and 1 recommendation we can wholeheartedly endorse in its current form.

That one endorsed recommendation? That the government should 'build on and improve clarity, certainty and understanding of all working people by extending the right to a written statement to "dependent contractors" as well as employees'. In practice, it meant Deliveroo workers should be able to ask for a paper copy of their contract in the same way as employees can.⁵ It was hardly transformative.

October came around and thirty workers in Bristol struck over unpaid wages, and won almost immediately. They weren't connected to the IWW branch there, but it was nice to see that workers hadn't given up. I didn't think there was any chance of something like that happening in Brighton, though.

Then, in November, the IWGB lost in court. The union had taken a case forward demanding the right to represent riders

in the Camden and Kentish Town zone, as 'limb b workers' (a specific sub-category of self-employment). The Central Arbitration Committee decided that they could not do so because, whilst they met all the other standards necessary to force Deliveroo to accept trade union representation, the right to 'substitute' meant that Deliveroo workers were classified as independent contractors, not self-employed workers. Because they could theoretically allow someone else to use their phone to do orders, they weren't legally entitled to have a trade union represent them. Dan Warne's response was that: 'riders enjoy being their own boss'. Of course, that was easy to say, when he was their actual boss. Not only had our organizing drive gone to pieces, so had the latest stage of the legal campaign.

But then, a few days later, the old WhatsApp groups had their first messages in months. When I started getting notifications, I had a look to see what was going on. A strike had been called. Just like last time, it was an initiative that started with the migrant moped workers. Pay had fallen again, for everyone, and they were fuming. At 6 p.m. on 25 November 2017, a second strike would take place. The remains of the IWGB branch rushed to do what we could to help prepare. We drafted a petition to Deliveroo management that could be signed on the day, and decided to join the picket.

Just after 6 p.m., fifty workers met on the Old Steine. Any Deliveroo riders going past were flagged down and convinced

to join the strike. I pulled over a teenager who was working with Deliveroo whilst at college. I knew him from our first organizing drive, and he'd always been supportive. I told him it was a strike, and he wavered. I could see in his head that he was debating carrying on working. He told me he needed the money this month – Deliveroo wasn't paying as well as usual. 'That's why there's a strike', I said. He nodded, locked up his bike, and joined the picket. The crowd grew, bit by bit. The few workers who decided to scab were chased for the 10 metres to the junction. One furious picket had a favourite heckle he used every time a driver ignored us: 'Don't you get how this works?'

Deliveroo opened up an 'Editions' kitchen just before I started my Ph.D. An Editions kitchen, more accurately known as a dark kitchen, was basically a site owned by Deliveroo and hired out to busy restaurants so that they could run a second, delivery-only operation and increase their sales. It was situated in Hove and was very small compared to the size of the dark kitchens in London.⁶ As soon as the strike began, the workers sent pickets to stop it working. These pickets did their job well, and within minutes the shutters were pulled down and the kitchen was closed. The chefs had walked off the job, either in solidarity with us or because they realized the pickets would make deliveries from that kitchen impossible. It didn't really matter either way. The workers knew, from their experience of the job, where they needed to put the pressure on.

Just as it had done during the first strike, the app stuttered and then collapsed. ‘Not seeing your favourites?’ it asked customers; ‘We’re very busy in your area right now.’ Deliveroo was telling the restaurants that riders were 5 minutes away. They kept on promising that a rider was assigned and would arrive eventually, even though the strike meant that there was no one to deliver the orders. As a result, chefs kept on making and remaking the same orders over and over again, only for the food to go to waste. Kitchens across the city were in chaos. Standing just behind the picket line, chatting and joking, was a small group of us who’d been IWGB reps the first time round.

This second strike proved something: even if the union branch falls apart because the activists get other jobs, and it starts to look like we only won some small temporary concessions, that doesn’t mean everything is over. Organically, out of the networks of workers and the experience of the job, resistance emerges again. The class composition of Deliveroo means that workers can’t put their feet up. Unmediated struggle between workers and bosses has to continue, or else the situation gets worse. Without the stability ensured by a contract, the terms of work are constantly up for renegotiation. The bosses are always hungry for more profit. As one Financial Times commentator put it: ‘not offering employment benefits such as sick pay and paid leave reduces labour costs by an estimated 20 to 30 per cent, but the industry remains ripe for cost-cutting and rationalisation’. The reality of that cost-

cutting, on the front line, is a constant class struggle.⁷ Will workers get paid enough to pay rent and eat? The determining factor is the strength of their constantly renewed self-organization. As a worker on the picket line in November put it: ‘We have to fight or else they fuck us – there is no other option.’

These fights didn’t just kick off in the UK. The strikes which began in London in 2016 spread across Europe and farther afield. The first city to react was Turin, where workers responded to the London strikes by calling their own, in a fight over wages. Then it went quiet. From the vantage point of the winter of 2016, the action looked like a blip. But as I realized whilst I was on the job, these strikes had deep roots. The second wave of UK mobilizations in Leeds and Brighton began in February. At almost the same time, French workers mobilized on a large scale in Marseilles and Paris. This time the action spread even farther. Workers in Germany had their first mobilization in Berlin; Spain saw a first national coordinated strike across three cities: Barcelona, Valencia, Madrid, and things kicked off in France again: Paris, Bordeaux, Lyon. Then came the third wave. Mobilizations took place in Brighton, Amsterdam, Brussels, Bologna, Turin, and Berlin all in the same month, November 2017. The struggle continued into the new year. Mobilizations also took place in Hong Kong and Australia, and French workers went on strike during the 2018

World Cup final. Their slogan? ‘We will fight like Mbappé’, France’s top-scoring 19-year-old winger.

In China, the first half of 2017 saw militant action being taken by food-platform couriers. Meituan, one of the world’s ten largest start-ups, is a food-delivery platform similar to Deliveroo but at much larger scale. Whereas Deliveroo is valued at \$2 billion, Meituan is valued at \$53 billion.⁸ Its workers make a colossal 13 million deliveries a day. They were also responsible for 11 per cent of total strike action in the service sector in China over the first half of 2017.⁹ The average Meituan courier is a middle-aged ex-factory-worker, ejected from the shrinking industrial sector of the Pearl River Delta and forced into the expanding urban surplus population which relies upon hyper-precarious gig work to survive.¹⁰ They rush across cities like Shenzhen at dangerous speed to deliver food to the new white-collar tech workforce employed at companies like Tencent. These platform workers, often veterans of fights in their factory jobs, end up grappling with the familiar problems of work intensification, safety issues, and low wages in a new context. The resulting strikes are often nationally coordinated across platforms, and sometimes result in violent confrontations with the police.¹¹ Across the world, the expansion of food-platform work has led to the expansion of food-platform worker resistance. The fundamental dynamics we experienced in Brighton were the same as those experienced by workers in the Pearl River Delta.

Invisible Organization

Romano Alquati – an Italian workerist and sociologist – developed the concept of ‘invisible organization’ to suggest that the ‘spontaneous’ emergence of strikes at FIAT manufacturing plants near Turin in the 1960s were actually not very spontaneous at all. Instead, he proposed that the strikes were the result of a non-union form of self-organization which was invisible to external observers, including the union itself.¹² The same concept applies almost exactly at Deliveroo. Our invisible organization had two channels: the WhatsApp groups, and the zone centres. I’ve already described how both of these worked in practice, but now it’s possible to reflect on their operation in the abstract.

The possibility for worker self-organization via invisible channels enabled by mobile technology hasn’t been lost on union-busting bosses. Alfred DeMaria ‘specialises in combating union organisational campaigns and in developing programs to keep companies operating in a union-free environment’.¹³ He is, in short, a leading scab lawyer. DeMaria has written in a union-busting journal that: ‘Employer awareness of how employees can use new media tools, including social media and dedicated apps, to interact among themselves and with union organizers is absolutely necessary for maintaining nonunion status. Employers who ignore this potential stealth activity risk their union free status’ [emphasis mine].¹⁴

Alquati's concept of invisible organization has a parallel in the bosses' own literature.

The 2018 Brazilian truck strike was one of the strongest examples of this phenomenon so far. The deregulation of diesel prices by the neoliberal government of Michel Temer, which came to power after leading a congressional coup against the leftist Dilma Rousseff, led to a 38.4 per cent increase in prices and the subsequent explosion of a huge national strike. The drivers who operate Brazil's fleet of 1.6 million trucks set up 600 strategic blockades on major highways. Shutting down logistics strikes at the heart of modern capitalist societies. Trucks move 60 per cent of the goods transported around Brazil, and, as soon as they stopped running, shortages ensued. Supermarkets ran out of eggs, potatoes, and tomatoes, and petrol stations ran out of fuel. Airports were closed, and bus services cancelled. The whole strike was coordinated via WhatsApp groups, with official unions entirely side-lined.¹⁵ The highly porous nature of these channels creates the possibility for organization to increase in scale at incredible speeds, but also confuses processes of political representation: parts of the movement were calling for a military coup, whilst others were socialists. That diversity of views is perhaps an inevitable part of a strike movement with such a fluid organizational form. Importantly, many Brazilian migrant workers who took part in invisibly organized food-platform strikes in the UK saw a parallel organizational

form being used to huge effect back home. Evidently, the examples of invisible organization at Deliveroo have not even approached the most incendiary potentials of the form. Fragile logistical systems plus rapidly scaling invisible organization results in a flammable mixture.

The other channel of invisible organization was altogether more old-fashioned. A repeating dynamic of piece work in a workplace with elastic demand for labour was that it required a pool of unemployed labour on standby. That labour needs to be concentrated in a specific place, so that it can be easily called upon. However, the workers waiting there earn nothing and are unsupervised. As a result, these labour reserves become central points of organization. Minneapolis logistics workers in the 1930s, who organized with the Teamsters union, waited in 'the doghouse'. In the London docks, it was 'on the stones'. For Deliveroo riders, it was the zone centres.

In July 2018, a strike broke out in Southampton. Thirty Romanian UberEats riders drove to the Southampton office to hold a demonstration during a strike over low wages. Without a boost they were being paid as little as £2.80 a delivery with no hourly rate. They'd been promised four drops an hour when they joined; the reality was nothing like it. They wanted a guaranteed hourly rate, a decent boost, and bonuses for working in extreme weather. They wanted their demands to be met within a week, or they'd strike again the next Saturday.

It was an impressive-sized strike in a smaller city. There was just one thing. The cyclists had been organizing too. Without any idea that the mopeds were angry or talking about taking action, the cyclists had spent the last month trying to form a union branch. The invisible organization could be so invisible that two parts of the same workforce could be oblivious to parallel organizing efforts. The social and technical divisions within the workforce hadn't prevented the emergence of collective action, but they had limited it. As soon as the fight was in the open, the different groups linked up and began to cooperate. It wasn't just the bosses who could be confused.

Politics

Mobilizing for strikes and protests led to us developing some basic common political ground as a workforce. We agreed that workers had more in common with each other than with bosses, and that we would only improve our situation by putting pressure on them. But this common sense didn't really translate into formal politics.

The key organizers within the cyclist workforce often had some kind of experience in the social movements that emerged after 2010. This was where I fitted in. The student and anti-austerity movements had given us a common set of ideas and tactics. In the realm of 'big P' politics, we were all socialists of one kind or another. Within the moped workforce, key organizers had more complicated backgrounds – often involving trade unions

in their home countries that none of the rest of us had ever heard of.

When the Brazilian presidential elections were going on in 2018, Brazilian workers from London who had been on strike a few weeks before began sharing supportive videos of the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro into organizing WhatsApp chats. In the UK, they were illegal migrants involved in wildcat strikes. The far right here would, if it got its way, deport them and suppress their movement with extreme violence. But they didn't make that calculation. The contradiction between their situation in the UK and the candidate they supported in Brazil was profound.

But this kind of contradiction was precisely what we struggled to develop beyond. Because we never formed long-term organizations, we never had a chance to get everyone on the same page. There were no branch meetings to have discussions in; we rarely ended up socializing together; and our chances to chat at work varied hugely day by day. The zone centres and WhatsApp chats did a job in keeping us all in touch, but they were a very limited form of communication. The Rebel Roo did something to promote a common position, but it never really got the chance to go beyond arguing for strike action. Even though John McDonnell, the shadow chancellor, wrote to Deliveroo to support our demands, we had no clear relationship to the Labour party beyond their ordinary members turning up to support us at every

opportunity. We were missing the chance to have deeper conversations, which would have been necessary to overcome contradictions and establish a collective political stance.

However, we did have absolute unity in action. Whenever we took to the streets, we were all part of the workers' movement on which the socialist movement relies. In the end, that practical politics outweighed whatever ideas workers might express in conversation.

UberEats

After I'd stopped working regularly for Deliveroo, UberEats started operating in the city. Their big thing was that they had an exclusive delivery agreement with McDonald's, and I saw a lot of workers with UberEats branded bags about. It seemed like it might be busy and decent money, so I gave it a go. Signing up was easy enough. They actually had a bricks-and-mortar office in Brighton which I had to go to, rather than just a storage locker. The payment structure was confusing, including a significant Uber 'fee' to be deducted for allowing you to use their platform, a boost system to increase pay at peak times, and a distance multiplier. They split the city into two zones east/west, and I lived in the east.

At first, that meant that whenever I started a shift, I got dragged much farther east, out to the Marina McDonald's. The Marina was at sea level, and every order was up into an area

called Whitehawk. You had to take a narrow flyover road up and over a literal cliff to get out of the Marina, before cycling farther uphill to make the delivery. Every delivery was about a mile in total distance, but included 100 metres of vertical elevation gain. Uber's complex payment structure included increased payments for distance, but nothing for elevation, meaning that orders that took way longer were paid at a ridiculously low rate, and you were trapped into slogging your guts over a cliff for as little as £3.40 per delivery. I made £28 over 5 hours: £5.60 an hour – before costs – for totally exhausting work. The only good thing about it was the speed you picked up rolling back to the Marina to do it all again.

However, a few months later, UberEats had grown substantially. That meant there were more orders where I lived. I also realized that, if you were a bit smarter, you could strategically decline orders to avoid getting dragged away eastwards. I started working around the central McDonald's, mostly delivering from there to streets around the Level and Preston Park. The main difference between working for UberEats and working for Deliveroo was the role of McDonald's. It's no lie to say that when you're logged into UberEats you do over 50 per cent of your orders from one single restaurant. The queue to collect deliveries ended up playing the same role as the zone centre. It became an informal mass meeting point, where the design of the work process threw us together with nothing to do but talk. The

other big difference was that the app allowed you to 'chain' orders, meaning that you could accept the next one before you'd delivered the one you were on. This meant that you could go drop-to-drop much more efficiently. You just kept cycling and kept swiping until you'd look up, 3 hours later, and the rush was over.

Being that close to a McDonald's kitchen for an extended period of time was interesting. A few UberEats riders were rude to the workers preparing orders for delivery on the other side of the counter. But, more often than not, we just felt sorry for them. You could see these despot managers giving people an earful for all sorts of menial stuff. I once saw a manager becoming increasingly incensed by the fact that a worker's sock was visible through the side of his worn-out shoe. The worker protested that he couldn't afford to buy a new pair of shoes, and, if the manager wanted him to buy some, the company should pay better wages. I thought he had a point, but the manager just kept going on and on. The pace of work in there looked frantic. The delivery counter was right in front of the station where they salted and portioned up the chips, and there was always one person whose sole job was to keep the holding rails filled with little red boxes. They'd just be standing there, taking chips out the fryer, pouring them into the big basin, covering them with salt, then using the dustpanlooking thing to fill the boxes. You'd go away and do a delivery and come back 20 minutes later, and it'd be the same

person stood there, still filling boxes with chips. We cracked jokes with McDonald's workers whenever they had a moment, but that wasn't very often. I think every rider felt lucky not to be the other side of the counter.

Things worked best for everyone when the riders stuck to a strict queueing system, and the McDonalds workers just sorted things out as quickly as they could. When they were understaffed and there were loads of orders, we had to wait for a long time. That had a direct negative impact on our wages, but most riders knew whose fault it was. If McDonald's just hired enough staff to make sure there were always enough people bagging up delivery orders, then we would have been fine, but instead they often left one poor harassed person to do the work of two.

Most workers, in an attempt to get more orders at quiet times, downloaded both apps. The two companies mostly shared a workforce, and workers would swap between the two depending on which was paying better at a particular time. The two had practically identical models, with the major difference being the variable piece rate at UberEats. But, after the summer of 2018, Deliveroo introduced their own variable piece rate across the UK, which introduced the possibility that the minimum rate per drop could, on average, fall substantially below £4. Double orders were also paid at a lower rate, down from £8 to around £6. After that, the two were pretty much identical. This workforce overlap meant that for most

Deliveroo/UberEats workers, the two began to seem like variants of the same boss. On any given day, you could work for one or the other. In the queue at the McDonald's delivery counter, you'd see people swapping between the two apps, being managed by two black boxes at once. That meant that, if and when future collective action occurred, it might target predominantly one platform, but both would be impacted.

By late 2017, UberEats was profitable in 27 of the 108 cities it operated in. In some places, it even significantly outperformed Uber's taxi business.¹⁶ Dara Khosrowshahi, Uber's CEO as of 2017, has consistently increased focus on UberEats as a part of the company with the potential to deliver further growth – particularly ahead of the first public offering of Uber shares in 2019.¹⁷ It is in this context that rumours hit the financial press in September 2018 that Uber was in talks to buy up Deliveroo's European operation.¹⁸ Initial speculation on price estimated that Deliveroo was worth somewhere between 2 and 4 billion dollars.¹⁹ By buying out their biggest competitor, UberEats would become the dominant food platform in the UK and Europe. On announcement of the news, JustEat, the other big UK competitor, saw their shares fall by 7% per cent.²⁰

Capitalism has, inbuilt into its mechanism, a trend towards monopolization. Big companies nearly always out-compete small companies. It's easy to assume that the centralization of economic power in the hands of a smaller and smaller group

of ruling-class bosses means that workers become more and more disempowered. Historically, however, the consolidation of capital in one industry can actually increase worker leverage. The US car industry, for example, saw its largest wave of unionization immediately after a series of mergers created giants like General Motors.²¹ The consolidation of the entire food-platform workforce under the management of Uber has the potential to exaggerate the already-explosive dynamic of worker resistance in the sector. It would allow one united front to be formed between tens of thousands of workers across Europe and farther afield, against one exploitative company.

This is only a speculative future, but it is towards such speculations that this book will now turn. What is going to happen to food platforms over the coming years? What is their game plan, what is the reform agenda, and what are workers going to do about it?

Notes

21. [1.](#) M. Tronti (2013) *Operai e capitale*. DeriveApprodi, p. 37.
22. [2.](#) A. Bogg (2016) *Beyond neo-liberalism: the trade union act 2016 and the authoritarian state*. *Industrial Law Journal* 45.