



# Mobilizing against the odds. Solidarity in action in the platform economy

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**Abstract** The relationship between working conditions and the development of collective solidarity has been much debated in sociology over the past century. The article contributes to this debate by exploring two recent cases of worker mobilization in the context of the Italian platform economy, concerning Amazon delivery drivers and food delivery couriers. Both groups developed specific identity frames in the course of their mobilizations in four Italian cities between 2018 and 2019, which differed significantly. The article explains those differences through a theoretical framework that bridges social movement and labor studies. While Amazon delivery drivers adopted a mobilizing strategy aimed narrowly at improving their conditions as Amazon workers, food delivery couriers elaborated a broader identity framing as precarious platform workers. The difference can be connected to specific features of labor organization, in particular regarding the diverse conditions met by digital innovation in the two sectors: While Amazon drivers belong to a technologically advanced segment (e-commerce) of a traditional sector (logistics), food delivery couriers are part of a new, platform-based sector. The article shows how such sectoral variation affected ways of collectively organizing, forms of solidarity and identity framing.

**Keywords** Collective identity · Digital workers · Labor movement · Labor process · Platform economy

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## Mobilisierung trotz Widrigkeiten. Praktizierte Solidarität in der Plattformökonomie

**Zusammenfassung** Das Verhältnis zwischen Arbeitsbedingungen und der Entwicklung kollektiver Solidarität ist in der Soziologie des vergangenen Jahrhunderts viel diskutiert worden. Diese Debatte aufgreifend, widmet sich der Artikel zwei jüngeren Beispielen von Arbeiternehmer:innenmobilisierung im Kontext der italienischen Plattformökonomie, die einerseits Amazon-Lieferfahrer:innen, andererseits Kuriere von Essenslieferdiensten betreffen. Beide Gruppen entwickelten im Laufe ihrer Arbeitskämpfe, die von 2018 bis 2019 in italienischen Städten stattfanden, jeweils genuine Identitätsformate, die sich signifikant voneinander unterscheiden. Der Artikel erklärt diese Unterschiede aus einer theoretischen Perspektive, die sowohl durch die Soziologie sozialer Bewegungen als auch die Arbeitssoziologie informiert ist. Während Amazon-Lieferfahrer:innen eine Mobilisierungsstrategie wählten, die sich eng auf die Verbesserung ihrer eigenen Arbeitsbedingungen konzentrierte, entwickelten die Essenskuriere ein breit angelegtes Identitätsformat als prekäre Plattformarbeiter:innen. Dieser Unterschied verweist auf Eigenheiten der arbeitsteiligen Organisation, insbesondere mit Blick auf die Folgen digitaler Innovation in den jeweiligen Sektoren: Während Amazon-Lieferfahrer:innen einem technologisch fortschrittlichen Segment (e-commerce) des traditionellen Logistiksektors angehören, arbeiten Essenskuriere in einem neuen, plattformbasierten Sektor. Der Artikel zeigt auf, wie sich solche sektoralen Unterschiede auf die jeweilige Gestalt kollektiver Organisation, der Solidaritätsformen und der gewählten Identitätsformate auswirken.

**Schlüsselwörter** Kollektive Identität · Digitale Arbeit · Arbeiterbewegung · Arbeitsprozess · Plattformökonomie

## Mobiliser contre vents et marées. La solidarité en action dans l'économie des plateformes

**Résumé** La relation entre conditions de travail et développement des solidarités collectives a fait l'objet de nombreux débats en sociologie au cours du siècle dernier. L'article contribue à ce débat en explorant deux cas récents de mobilisation des travailleurs dans le contexte de l'économie de plate-forme italienne, concernant les chauffeurs-livreurs d'Amazon et les livreurs de nourriture. Les deux groupes ont développé des cadres identitaires spécifiques au cours de leurs mobilisations dans quatre villes italiennes entre 2018 et 2019, qui différaient considérablement. L'article explique ces différences à travers un cadre théorique qui relie le mouvement social et les études sur le travail. Alors que les chauffeurs-livreurs d'Amazon ont adopté une stratégie de mobilisation visant étroitement à améliorer leurs conditions en tant que travailleurs d'Amazon, les coursiers de livraison de nourriture ont élaboré un cadrage identitaire plus large en tant que travailleurs précaires des plateformes. La différence peut être liée à des spécificités d'organisation du travail, notamment au regard des conditions diverses rencontrées par l'innovation numérique dans les deux secteurs: Alors que les chauffeurs Amazon appartiennent à un segment technologiquement avancé (e-commerce) d'un secteur traditionnel (logisti-

que), les coursiers de livraison de nourriture font partie d'un nouveau secteur basé sur une plate-forme. L'article montre comment ces variations sectorielles affectent les modes d'organisation collective, les formes de solidarité et de cadrage identitaire.

**Mots-clés** Identité collective · Travailleurs du numérique · Mouvement ouvrier · Processus de travail · Économie de plateforme

## 1 Introduction

Whether class formation is determined to a greater extent by an actor's political consciousness or by their position in the social or productive structure has long been a disputed question in the social sciences (Vogt 2018). In recent times, several attempts have been made to combine the two perspectives by looking at the ways in which transformations in the production process and at the societal level have affected the rise of political consciousness among workers (Surrige 2007). In this article, we address this issue from the particular viewpoint of social movement studies (della Porta and Diani 2020), exploring two mobilization processes among workers within the Italian platform economy. We argue that identity and opposition frames provide important conditions for the development of consciousness as a class. Yet, while class consciousness is difficult to operationalize for empirical research (see Fantasia 1988), we resort to related concepts that serve to grasp specific symbolic boundaries among workers, such as collective solidarity and identity frames. In this sense, we address the central questions of this special issue without directly pronouncing on the existence or absence of class consciousness formation among the new "digital working-class." Rather, we look at how workers in the cases considered defined themselves while claiming their rights to be recognized as workers during specific mobilization processes and under specific contextual conditions.

The mobilizations of Amazon delivery drivers and food delivery couriers in the Italian context seem to be particularly puzzling given that the platform economy as a sector is marked by high levels of technological and organizational innovation that favor specific processes of labor fragmentation and individualization (Heiland 2020). These conditions would generally be considered particularly hostile to collective action (Thompson 2010), yet our study points to the capacity of Amazon drivers and food delivery couriers to mobilize despite such fragmentation and precarity, and, in doing so, to build specific collective identity framings. The differential development of identity framing has taken place through a process that we call "solidarity in action," namely the growth of a sense of solidarity during and as a result of their action. By identifying the differences between the places of the two groups of workers within processes of production, and linking them to both mobilization practices and the framing of their conditions, we illuminate the heterogeneity of identity formation processes within the platform economy.

We first develop our theoretical model (chapter 2), then go on to present our research design (chapter 3) and illuminate the obstacles characteristic of attempts at collective action in the platform economy (chapter 4). In the main chapters (chapter 5 and 6), we analyze the protest campaigns conducted by Italian food delivery

couriers and Amazon drivers, particularly with regard to the ways in which different structural conditions impacted on the mobilization processes and the entailing forms of solidarity. We show that different working conditions allowed Amazon drivers, who partly share a physical working space, to develop more traditional union strategies, whereas couriers had to rely on external support from local social movement organizations. The ensuing construction of social borders also differed, with Amazon drivers focusing on a more bounded form of solidarity, while couriers instead developed a broader—and, to a certain extent, more political—self-conceptualization. We conclude (chapter 7) by summarizing the empirical results in light of our theoretical model, suggesting some potential further developments for reflection and research on solidarity in action among workers in a digitalized environment.

## 2 Solidarity in action: A framework of analysis

Developing in a period of perceived decline of the labor movement, social movement studies have long paid only limited attention to conflicts arising from redistribution issues (della Porta 2015). While concerns with social discontent and collective mobilization related to labor have remained central in research on contentious politics in the Global South (Waterman 1991), mainstream social movement studies in the West have for a long time focused on so-called “new conflicts” in areas like gender rights or the environment (Calhoun 1993). Although these movements have often located their core issues within broader frames of “social justice,” social science analyses have mainly considered them as “new” (Melucci 1980) and contrasted them with the main characteristics of “old” labor movements (see Cini 2021). Research on trade unions and social movements in Western countries has remained all the more marginal since the assumed institutionalization of industrial conflicts and co-optation of the working class (Grote and Wagemann 2018). As Fantasia and Stepan-Norris (2004) noted, social movement studies have been structurally reluctant to study unions, which have been perceived rather as interest groups, recognized actors in industrial relations and, often, in three-party negotiations with governments.

Generally speaking, social movement research has long avoided considering the structural transformations of capitalism as a cause for the evolution of new fundamental conflicts (Caruso and Cini 2020). As Beverly Silver and Şahan Savaş Karataşlı (2016, p. 133) observed, “the mainstream of social movement literature since the 1990s has in large measure dismissed the concept of ‘capitalism’ from its toolkit for understanding social movements, while at the same time placing ‘labor movements’ outside its field of inquiry.” Paradoxically, the analysis of the political economy of contentious politics thus remained marginal even in the heyday of neoliberalism in the 1990s and 2000s, “during an era in which global capitalism became ever more powerful” (Hetland and Goodwin 2013, p. 90). In fact, most social movement literature still neither addresses the developments of the mode of production (Bieler 2017, p. 302) nor the rampant socio-economic inequalities that further exacerbate participatory inequalities (Schäfer and Schwander 2019). Only recently, prompted by the wave of anti-austerity protests, have social movement scholars in Western countries started to again pay due attention to the social conditions of con-

temporary protests and to focus on social struggles against inequality (see Cini et al. 2017; della Porta 2017; della Porta et al. 2017).

Though circumstances have changed, reviving labor movement studies are confronted with a long-established key question of the field: Does collective action in workplaces create a sense of social belonging among its participants and, if so, where might such a sense come from? The importance of struggle in the formation of class consciousness is a widely known but controversial concept for scholarship in the Marxist tradition and for critical strands of sociology in general (Bourdieu 1984).<sup>1</sup> In debates on the nature of class structure, class consciousness has been understood as resulting from the interplay of structural and subjective conditions, which, in turn, can be understood either structurally (in the sense of location within class structure) or as processual (as the outcome of interactions) (Dubois 1978; Dubois et al. 1978). A classical approach in the Marxist tradition stresses the structural and objective dimension of formation processes, identifying consciousness with the structural position “at the point of production”—namely, the workers’ place in the social hierarchy (Wright 1997). By contrast, authors stressing a cultural perspective, in line with the work of E. P. Thompson (1963) on how the working class “made itself,” underline the subjective and political features of the formation process (Savage 2000), pointing to the rise and proliferation of social uprisings as key evidence for the emergence of class consciousness and manifestation in history (Mann 1993).

While criticizing the understanding of consciousness as developing more or less automatically due to the hardening of exploitation for being overly mechanistic and economic, these interpretations tend to consider collective actors, such as trade unions or political parties, as key factors for politicizing the workforce and, therefore, for nurturing the formation of class consciousness (Przeworski 1985). Among such interpretations, the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg merit special mention, with *The Mass Strike* (1906) considered a landmark work in the development of an agential theory of the emergence of class consciousness. Analyzing the massive general strike undertaken in southern Russia in the summer of 1903, Luxemburg argued that class consciousness is never a mere correlate of an “objective” social position and can, rather, only be developed in the course of collective action. Collective action itself thus assumes a very important role in creating the conditions for an activation of class politics as political education, as class consciousness, and as organization of the proletariat. According to Luxemburg, collective consciousness and organization in action evolve simultaneously.

In recent research, scholars of industrial relations, such as Alberti and Però (2018; Però 2019), have addressed this question considering both workplace and contextual dynamics. In order to understand the formation of political identities among the most active segments of contemporary workers, so they argue, it is necessary to take into account the particular characteristics of the wider social context, rather than to focus exclusively on the workplace or on traditional trade unions. In this

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<sup>1</sup> In Crossley’s words, the original Marxian concept refers “to the awareness of itself as a class which the dominated class within capitalism, the proletariat, is predicted to arrive at.” Thus, “[w]hen the proletariat becomes aware of themselves as a class and of their collective strength [...] they will rise up in revolution and overthrow the bourgeois masters” (Crossley 2013, p. 203).

vein, Atzeni (2016) has distinguished two sets of factors relevant for labor mobilizations—first, work organization and, second, the socio-political context of workers' activity. While the first set of factors encompasses resources and opportunities deriving from the workplace, like technology, the means of production and the division of work, the second refers to resources and opportunities stemming from outside that domain, like the workforce's social composition or the local culture and worldviews. Although not directly linked to the workplace itself, the latter set of factors may nonetheless equally affect the formation of workers' political identity (see also Cini and Goldmann 2020).

While we do not attempt to address the broader puzzle of the formation of class consciousness, we do build on the approaches outlined above, focusing on the related but more concrete aspect of the framing of the self-as-worker. In order to understand this process of identity framing, we look at both workplace-related features *and* the social and political features of the broader social context, including the local context. These insights seem particularly relevant for the identity framing of platform workers, who normally work at home or in spatially fragmented workplaces, making an exclusive focus on the workplace and its organization inadequate for understanding how they develop a sense of commonality. While there can be no doubt that examining social and working conditions is crucial for gaining insight into how solidarity develops among workers, we contend that analyzing these conditions alone never suffices to explain such phenomena. Rather, it is mobilization by means of resources inside and outside the workplace that triggers such processes, influencing the ways in which identities are framed.

Building on the above assumptions, our analysis is informed by five analytic concepts. The first was developed by Alessandro Pizzorno in his analysis of *struggles for recognition*. In Pizzorno's view, for conflicts to occur, processes of group identification among workers need to develop during the daily interaction between workers (Pizzorno 1978, 1988, 1991, 1993a, b). By identifying *as a group*, the "members of a community" are able "to recognize themselves as such, with the ensuing possibility of mobilizing solidarities and collective action" (Pizzorno 1983, p. 175). Reciprocal recognition among the workforce is therefore *both* a precondition for a common engagement aimed at being recognized by employers *and* an outcome of collective action. A collective struggle for recognition therefore has to be considered as both a manifestation of and a catalyst for a process of identity formation, leading to the assumption that collective action with the purpose of gaining recognition as a group is dynamically connected to a rising sense of commonality on the inside. The concept of "recognition struggles" therefore facilitates an analysis of how collective action simultaneously challenges existing structures and habits, and may produce solidarity even among dispersed contemporary workers. As we will see, while both Amazon drivers and food delivery couriers struggled for recognition, the different forms of collective action seem to be related to diverse senses of shared community.

The second, closely connected idea is Rick Fantasia's (1988) concept of *cultures of solidarity*. Fantasia's concept addresses the ways in which collective action creates new solidary social relations by transforming workers' everyday experiences, disrupting old routines and fostering the development of new ones—both in the workplace and in the broader community. During collective action, workers expe-

rience different ways of interacting with colleagues, by coordinating action like picketing, marching or occupying, that trigger a common sense of unseen reciprocity. Cultures of solidarity are thus to be considered social constructs that come into existence during the course of workers' struggles. In our analysis, we examine how different forms of mobilization among two groups of workers have impacted on their own definition of solidarity.

A third analytic concept we draw on in addressing the organizational forms of recognition struggles is *eventful protests* (della Porta 2017). Protests can be considered as eventful when they successfully transform existing resources and opportunities (della Porta 2017). Complex relations of solidarity between different individuals and groups are established through intense mobilization, enabling new collective identities to take form. As Kelly (2018, p. 704) has argued, “[s]uch activity does not necessarily require a formal organization but it does entail a process of organizing.” As recent studies on gig economy workers have highlighted (Chesta et al. 2019; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Cini and Goldmann 2020), the support work of political activists and solidarity groups might play an important role for this kind of mobilization to occur in the absence of support from more traditional unions. This type of contextual resource appears to be particularly important for platform workers, for they rarely work within physically delimited spaces detached from outside social influence. Focusing on the mobilization processes of Amazon drivers and food delivery couriers, we were able to observe how different self-definitions developed through different forms of eventful protests.

While relevant for the broader debate on class consciousness and identity, our analysis focuses upon two more concrete elements: *frames* and *boundaries*. A frame is a specific concept developed in social movement research to address the symbolic construction of an external reality. Frames can be defined as dominant worldviews guiding the behavior of social movement groups. They are very often produced by the organizational leadership, which provides the necessary ideological background within which individual activists locate their actions. Examining the organizational (meso) level, some scholars have considered the instrumental dimension of the symbolic construction of reality by collective entrepreneurs (Snow and Benford 1988). Frame analysis focuses on the process of attribution of meaning that lies behind any conflict. As we will see in our empirical analysis, identity framing varied between Amazon drivers and courier workers, with the former being more restrictively focused than the latter.

Identity framing is a form of *boundary making*. In the Neo-Bourdieuian approach, symbolic boundaries are a special form of classification used by individuals to locate themselves and, often, their group by defining what belongs to a social category and what does not (Lamont 2002; Lamont and Molnár 2002). As Bourdieu noted, “social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 479). Influenced by a self's definitions of others, boundary making happens in a contested field of interactions “in which each pursues not only the imposition of an advantageous representation of himself or herself, [...] but also the power to impose as legitimate the principles of construction of social reality most favorable to his or her social being (individual and collective, [through], for example, struggles over the bound-

aries of groups)” (Bourdieu 2000, p. 187). Boundaries define a vertical demarcation between dominant and dominated groups, but also horizontal demarcations between groups with different lifestyles, patterns of consumption and mentalities—what has at times been defined as “cultural milieu”. We assume that the boundary making of the two categories of workers examined here varies as it is influenced by the groups’ struggles for recognition.

In sum, by focusing on a processual understanding of how social movements emerge, we suggest that a dynamic approach to struggles for recognition, understood as building solidarities through eventful protests, permits identifying the effects of specific constraints and resources in identity framing as it is performed through the development of symbolic boundaries.

### 3 Case selection and methodology

Our empirical research was conducted following a comparative qualitative methodology (Yin 2013; Lijphart 1975) that examines similarities and differences in two different expressions of labor mobilization processes which occurred in sectors with shared experiences of the effects of digital innovation (platformization and algorithmic management). Our study contributes to both social movement studies and labor studies by providing new, fine-grained empirical data on contemporary cases of labor mobilization and by advancing a novel theoretical framework that bridges the two bodies of literature.

In both of the cases considered here, mobilizations developed through a mechanism of organizational appropriation, as workers exploited existing organizations for their common purpose. In the case of Amazon drivers, this meant making use of traditional resources from established trade unions; in the case of food delivery couriers, it meant resorting to the unconventional resources of urban movement organizations. Although both Amazon drivers and food delivery couriers alike can be considered as part of the platform economy, they work in two distinct sectors, which have been impacted by digital innovation to a very unequal degree and in diverse forms. Amazon drivers are part of the logistics sector, which has undergone a vast technological metamorphosis since the entry of the controversial Seattle corporation into the marketplace in 2011. With its e-commerce infrastructure, Amazon has imposed a radical and disruptive transformation on the existing system of delivery and distribution, foremost by introducing digital technological devices into the labor process (Delfanti 2021). By contrast, food delivery couriers are part of the new digital sector of last mile urban delivery services that has emerged *ex novo* over the last decade through the advent of digital platforms such as Deliveroo, Foodora and Glovo (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Heiland 2020). In both cases, workers have had to engage in a struggle for recognition of their own identity as workers and for their own rights.

In this article, we argue that the sectoral differences in the labor process had a profound impact on the type of resources and opportunities that workers were able to create and appropriate during the eventful protests which fuelled the development of cultures of solidarity. More specifically, such differences enabled two distinct



organized actors to play a key role in framing workers' identity during eventful protests: traditional trade unions in the case of Amazon drivers, and social centres and political collectives in the case of food delivery couriers. While established Italian unions have been organizing logistics workers for a long time through specific organizational branches like the FILT-CGIL,<sup>2</sup> no traditional union made a similar effort to organize food delivery workers in the early phases of their protests. As a consequence, workers in the two sectors were confronted with very different conditions for mobilization: Whereas Amazon drivers could rely on logistics unions equipped with a vast technical and political expertise, food delivery couriers took action autonomously, disconnected from existing unions. The absence of expertise and tradition may have led couriers to show mistrust vis-à-vis established unions, motivating them to self-organize and/or to ally with activists from social centers and political collectives (see Cini et al. 2021). In the following analysis, we will show how these dynamics unfolded in the two mobilization processes.

While the two cases of worker mobilization are characterized by similar structural conditions of labor fragmentation, their respective identity framings differ significantly. In social movement studies, variation in the mobilization capacity of different actors is linked to their capacity to “appropriate” different organizational resources (McAdam et al. 2008). In order to identify these connections, we use a process tracing method (Bennett 2004). As Pascal Vennesson (2008, p. 224) has outlined, the term refers to a research procedure “designed to identify processes linking a set of initial conditions to a particular outcome.” It enables an identification of the “chains of interaction that filter structural conditions and produce effects” (della Porta 2013, p. 24). Following this approach, we have traced the organizational processes leading workers who shared similar constraints in terms of working conditions—like fragmentation and individualization of the working task, algorithmic management and the absence of a shared physical workplace—but had access to quite different resources and opportunities—e.g. regarding individuals with previous experience of organizational leadership and worker power—, towards different forms of mobilization and identity framings in each respective case.

In our empirical research, we have employed and triangulated a range of qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observation and document analysis. We utilized these methods during our fieldwork undertaken between February 2018 and September 2019 in four Italian cities and their suburban areas. We studied instances of the struggles of food delivery workers in Turin, Milan, Bologna, and Florence, which we chose as representative sites of labor contention in the sector, and interviewed 13 respondents employed by Glovo, Deliveroo, Foodora and JustEat. With respect to Amazon drivers, we documented the emergence of strikes in the most conflictive Amazon stations in Milan and the surrounding areas, conducting 10 in-depth interviews. In both cases, we interviewed workers, union representatives and activists with the aim of collecting data on three topics relevant for our interest

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<sup>2</sup> The “Federazione Italiana Lavoratori Trasporti” (FILT) is the biggest union of transport workers in Italy. It was founded in 1980 as a federation of six craft unions under the guidance of the “Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro” (CGIL). It remains the most influential union for railway and aviation employees in the country.

in identity framing: first, the working conditions addressed in our interviews with workers; second, processes of technological and organizational innovation affecting the labor process addressed in our interviews with workers and union representatives; and third, forms of collective organization and links with a broader political frame addressed in our interviews with workers, union representatives and activists.

After transcribing and analyzing all 23 interviews, we triangulated the data with field notes from our participant observation of political meetings and workers assemblies, demonstrations and strikes in order to compare respondents' interpretations with our observations. In short, this triangulation allowed us to cross-reference the majority of the information gleaned from respondents, increasing our confidence in the validity of our results. Before moving on to our empirical analysis of the two mobilization processes, we will briefly discuss some specific obstacles to mobilization imposed by fragmentation in platform labor.

#### **4 The obstacles to collective action in platform labor: Five dimensions of fragmentation**

Most of the obstacles inhibiting workers from organizing collectively in the platform economy derive from the particularities of labor fragmentation provoked either directly or indirectly by the digital intermediation of platforms. In this context, fragmentation is understood as an active politics of isolation designed to prevent the collective organization of workers (Huws 2014). Sociologists have identified five dimensions of fragmentation in platform labor: legal, technological, organizational, spatial, and social (Heiland 2020). Both Amazon drivers and food delivery couriers faced obstacles in their working situation which can be attributed to at least one of these five dimensions.

**Legal fragmentation** Legal fragmentation refers to the individualization of the contractual relation between the digital worker, the intermediary employer and the platform. Most of the workers have a non-standard position with few or no labor rights. Given their “innovative” digital status, platforms operating in a yet unregulated sector have disrupted employment relationships and successfully bypassed collective bargaining. Being self-employed or an independent contractor is therefore the most typical legal condition of platform workers. Food delivery couriers are not employees but collaborators who, from the official perspective of the platform-company, simply enjoy riding a bike and agree to carry out “small tasks” (or “gigs”) like food delivery for an extra fee while pursuing their hobby. For the couriers, this results in a peculiar situation of self-employment to the extent that they are forced to work with their private bikes, use their private smartphones, buy their private helmets, and resolve any problem related to the job at their private expense. In many cases the drivers providing Amazon deliveries have no official nor personal connection with members of the platform company at all, but are employed by sub-contractors or service providers working for the head of the supply chain—in our second case: Amazon logistics.

**Technological fragmentation** The process of technological fragmentation goes hand in hand with this arrangement of legal isolation. Strictly speaking, the concept means the individualization of working tasks as both a result of and a presupposition for the adoption of digital technologies in the labor process. These fragmented technologies allow for new modes of standardization, decomposition, quantification, and surveillance of labor, often realized through forms of (semi-)automated management, cooperation and control (Cherry 2016). Among such forms of control, the most ground breaking is the algorithm, whose adoption has significantly transformed both the form of managerial control and the work organization. Algorithms have in fact absorbed many organizational functions traditionally performed by managers, such as, among other things, assigning tasks to workers, speeding up work processes, determining the timing and length of breaks and monitoring quality. In short, platform workers have to follow the imperatives programmed into the algorithms. Couriers directly experience the governing power of algorithms as their smartphones guide them to pick up delivery orders at restaurants and deliver food to clients throughout the city. In the case of Amazon drivers, algorithms establish routes autonomously and calculate time schedules per delivery stop, while controlling and measuring the workers performance through an app on their phone.

**Organizational fragmentation** Platform workers are not only physically or virtually separated *from* each other in the labor process but also forced to compete directly *with* each other. The concept of organizational fragmentation denotes that workers' performances are intentionally individualized, as the platforms evaluate them publicly in order to subject them to a disciplining mechanism aimed at increasing labor productivity. Food delivery couriers are judged according to a ranking mechanism imposed by the platform app, which directly influences their chances of being awarded a remunerative job. The larger the number of deliveries completed, the higher the score a courier gets, the more competitive she or he is for everyone to see. Meanwhile, drivers have to carry out deliveries fixed in advance by the subcontracting company that takes its orders exclusively from Amazon. This fragmentation due to the proliferation of different subcontractors produces a whole range of sanction-incentive regimes mediated by the dispatcher.

**Spatial fragmentation** Closely associated with, but not identical to this new organizational order is the phenomenon of spatial fragmentation—that is: the geographical dispersion of workers made possible by the introduction of digital technologies. Platform labor is delocalized in the sense that the unified working space is broken up and multiplied according to the number of workers. As a result, there are now as many individual and fragmented working spaces as there are workers active on the platforms (Huws 2014). Such “dispersed geography is used against workers, which makes it hard to both organize place-based struggles for worker rights (e.g., picket lines) and enact solidarity with fellow workers on the other side of the planet” (Graham et al. 2017, p. 153). The workplaces of drivers and couriers generally overlap with the urban space of a city, which can be considered as their working environment, with the result that workers are dispersed throughout the urban space while performing their tasks.

**Social fragmentation** Finally, social fragmentation refers to the class backgrounds and racial make-up of the platform workforce. The digital organization of labor “allows for the inclusion of a very heterogeneous workforce in very diverse situations, social constellations and locations.” (Altenried 2020, p. 152) Workers in equal job positions may have different ethnic, social or educational backgrounds. It is nonetheless quite usual to find a common social composition in specific working tasks or contractual frameworks—for example, a part-time workforce normally differs from that of a full-time workforce. Part-time couriers in Italy are predominantly students, who work no more than three evenings a week to help cover their university expenses. By contrast, the full-time workforce of the food delivery sector is mostly made up of migrants, for whom delivery work is the main source of income (Caruso et al. 2019). Accordingly, the food delivery workforce is ethnically heterogeneous. Amazon drivers, by contrast, are more homogeneous in these terms, since their employment stems from contractual standards of the long-established Italian logistics sector (Table 1).

## 5 Food delivery couriers in action

Deliveroo, Foodora and Glovo are delivery platforms offering last mile urban delivery services for food products. They use algorithms to control and organize a precarious and heterogeneous workforce with high turnover rates. More specifically, these platforms operate as urban coordinating networks, which rely upon seemingly contrary logics of decentralization and recentralization: Exploiting the labor of a decentralized workforce, they facilitate economic transactions between restaurants and customers in a highly centralized organizational structure via their platform interface. Their organizational principle is based on the projection of real-time measures of delivery routes (Richardson 2020): Every choice made by such a platform, from the assignment of “gigs” to the management of shifts, is therefore designed to optimize the time and resources required for a delivery. To achieve this, algorithmic control is organized in a vertical and centralized manner.

Nonetheless, this form of control has also been a visible target of contestation, and has even proven to favor solidarity among workers (Lei 2021). It is not by chance that couriers began to mobilize for improved professional conditions since the early days of food delivery platforms. Italy, along with the UK, was one of the first hotspots for such mobilizations, which have taken place since 2016 in

**Table 1** Five dimensions of fragmentation

	<b>Drivers</b>	<b>Couriers</b>
Legal fragmentation	Subordinated work for service providers	Self-employment
Technological fragmentation	Algorithmic control	Algorithmic control
Organizational fragmentation	Workloads (stops) defined by the dispatcher	Piece-rate work
Spatial fragmentation	Urban dispersion	Urban dispersion
Social fragmentation	Low ethnic heterogeneity	High ethnic heterogeneity

the northern cities of Turin, Milan and Bologna (see Cini et al. 2021). In October 2016, the German food delivery multinational Foodora became the object of a first protest, staged by a group of 50 couriers in Turin and triggered by a change from an hourly rate to a payment-by-delivery system (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). The mobilizations soon spread to other cities, such as Milan and Bologna, and also extended to other food delivery platforms, including Deliveroo, Glovo and JustEat along with local platforms (Chesta et al. 2019). Although there were some local specificities to the protests, all couriers shared three demands in that first wave of mobilizations: first, a higher hourly rate with an end to piecework payment; second, a change in contractual terms and to be recognized as employees; and, third, an end to victimization practices against perceived “troublemakers” (see Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020).

The workers involved in the protests consistently chose to mobilize through self-organized collectives, which they called “informal unions”, such as “Deliverance” in Milan, “Deliverance Project” in Turin and “Riders Union” in Bologna (Cini et al. 2021). In contrast, established trade unions played a very limited role in these processes of organization. Instead, small groups of couriers with prior political experience in various movements and in rank-and-file organizations, such as student, housing and urban collectives, played the key role in their place as they used their experience to organize their colleagues and promote collective action (Chesta et al. 2019). While established unions such as UIL-TuCS in Milan and FILT-CGIL in Bologna or rank-and-file unions such as ADL-COBAS in Bologna and SI-COBAS in Turin offered some practical help, they did not succeed in prompting the unionization of couriers in any observable way (see Cini et al. 2021).<sup>3</sup>

## 5.1 Urban space and the role of social centers

The success of Italian couriers’ mobilizations has been attributed in part to their capacity to occupy and appropriate public squares, where they wait for client orders, but which also provide opportunities for person-to-person encounters. Hence, public squares have been considered a core condition for the development of collective solidarity and identification framing among couriers. And indeed: The workforce being present in these spaces facilitated the organizing work of the most politically committed couriers, who were able to meet and get to know new colleagues and to promote their agenda of political involvement and socialization. Simply by socializing and sharing drinks and meals in the squares, the workforce developed a common sense of belonging along the way—a crucial precondition for organizing no matter which kind of political action. As the testimonies of interviewees show,

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<sup>3</sup> UIL (Unione Italiana Lavoratori) was originally a socialist confederation. TuCS (Turismo Commercio Servizi) was created in 1950 and is the branch of UIL that organizes services, trade and tourism workers. ADL-COBAS (Associazione Diritti Lavoratori–Confederazione di Base) is a rank-and-file union created in the 1990s by a network of political activists situated in Northern Italy (especially Veneto) to organize precarious workers in the public service sector in opposition to trade union confederations. SI-COBAS stands for “Sindacato Intercategoriale Confederazione di Base” and is another rank-and-file union formed in 2010 which has a similarly radical political orientation, but, unlike ADL, engages especially in the organization of migrant workforces in the logistics sector.

accumulated situations like these engendered the nucleus of a culture of solidarity and of the parallel development of identity framing.

Such dynamics were observable in all of the cities we investigated. In Turin, for instance, one interviewee remarked how “since my first working days, we have always met in Piazza Castello with other colleagues. It was in these moments that we started to get to know each other” (IC1). An interviewee from Milan told us that “we had several meeting points in the beginning. This was how we started to get to know each other. These were the spaces where we used to wait for the clients’ orders and where we used to start and end our shifts” (IC2). A rider from Bologna pointed out that by lacking a closed, collective working space, couriers were forced to establish situations of interaction all by themselves. According to him, they developed a capacity to create and develop spaces of encounter and association around their working time by habit:

There are no places [meeting spaces, t. a.] outside those we create ourselves. The same holds for the other cities. Before and after the working shift, we established where to meet. Here [in Bologna, t. a.] we have Piazza Maggiore, Piazzetta delle Mercanzie and the university area of Zamboni Road. (IC3)

Additionally, squares and urban streets also provided couriers with public and media visibility, which contributed to being recognized by the platform customers. As Chesta et al. (2019, p. 830) point out, “instead of being protests of unknown workers, that people cannot see and meet in their daily life, the riders’ protests have been recognized by city inhabitants and users thanks to their presence in urban space and the identity given by the platform logos.” It is not by chance that several couriers recalled incidents of solidarity bonding with customers after a strike, as did this Bologna-based courier:

Yes, many customers told us that they were not aware of what was underneath, they only saw you riding. Then, they get closer and even give you a little extra tip. They are more sympathetic. If it rains or snows, they tell you: “You know, I’m worried about you, next time I’ll avoid [ordering, t. a.]” Even during the strike, many stopped and took our flyers. In short, they know us, now. (IC4)

Processes of solidarity creation thus went beyond workers themselves and included a wider, almost participant public. In all four of the cities we investigated, the development of an identity framing was influenced by the political tradition of precarious workers’ self-organization, favoring the emergence of informal collectives as the privileged organizational form among food delivery couriers (Cini et al. 2021). As we found out, the persistence of this practice was key for the process of identity framing, along with the related presence of experienced political activists helping the most committed couriers to organize their colleagues. Such a framing strategy indicated the development of a very political identity among couriers, designed to present such workers as part of a broader class of the exploited: “we, the couriers” as opposed to “them, the capitalist platforms.” In Turin, Milan and Bologna, the support of various squats and the political activists involved in them was pivotal in the adoption of these very political identity framings. In Turin, the workers were able to use the squatted building “Cavallerizza Reale” to hold meetings, promote

fundraising activities and establish a bike clinic. In Milan, self-organized couriers received the support of the “San Precario” activist network and used the infrastructure provided by the “Piano Terra”-squat to organize their activities. Similarly, in Bologna the couriers found support from cultural associations or squatted places such as “Ritmo Lento,” “L’Altra Babele” and “Làbas” to host meetings and organize collective activities like bike repair workshops (Caruso et al. 2019).

Overall, connections to such activist settings were crucial for assisting the couriers in developing a shared identity framing, as the settings provided them with both practical assistance and a script for a politicized identity. The interaction with experienced activists helped them overcome the professional fragmentation imposed by their contracts and build a shared identity transcending their mere sectoral conditions (Cini and Goldmann 2020). With the support of long-time activists, these workers were able to trigger a broader process of “politicization,” in the sense of transforming an individual, “bread-and-butter” issue into one of public interest, worthy of broad discussion and mobilization (see Erne 2015).

## 5.2 Brand shaming strategy

From the outset, the couriers’ main goal was to elaborate new tactics and strategies in order to improve the working conditions and the workers’ rights in their sector. To achieve this, they intentionally mixed old and new action repertoires, the latter taking place above all in the digital sphere, reflecting the fact that the use of social media and other tools of communication has facilitated the organization of grassroots collective action and protest events in recent years. An innovative form of protest especially crucial for the couriers in this context was the “digital strike,” which involved couriers logging out *en masse* from the applications used by the companies to allocate work shifts and deliveries. At the same time, they carried out mass pickets on the streets and an online campaign on social media simultaneously (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). By combining online and offline actions, they aimed at damaging not only the companies’ profits, but also—and more importantly—their public reputation.

Aware of their limited bargaining power at the workplace (Silver 2003) and their consequent inability to successfully block the delivery service circuit, couriers carried out disruptive action aimed at hurting the firm at the “point of realization”—in other words: the relationship between the delivery platforms and their client base. To do this, couriers consciously adopted a strategy of “brand shaming,” attacking the public image of the company with the aim of mobilizing public opinion in support of workers and, thus, indirectly inflicting harm on its business. Hereby, they took advantage of the strong symbolic component of the food delivery business model and its exclusive dependency on a positive online image, making the companies involved particularly sensitive to such challenges by the couriers, who are the only employees associated with the company with whom the customers experience direct, face-to-face contact. Indeed, food delivery companies seek to profit from the projection of an image of fresh, “nice” and “environmentally friendly” business practices, thanks to the fact that their workers operate on bikes. That image, however, becomes less

resonant when a number of couriers collectively decide to challenge its credibility. This was highlighted by several couriers, such as this interviewee from Bologna:

Utilizing social media is the first step to gaining visibility and applying pressure [...]. To shed light on our conditions, we must be visible: even [the television programs, t. a.] *Report* and *Presa Diretta* discussed us. We use social media to show the platform's hypocrisy. They must realize who we are and what we are able to do. Public opinion knows us and now is aware [of the platform's hypocrisy, t. a.]. For us, this is very important, as it's also a form of interlocution with the media. (IC5)

The ability of couriers to unmask the company image through disruptive communication strategies thus makes the companies much more vulnerable, both in economic and in political terms. Furthermore, by inviting clients and restaurants to boycott the platform in solidarity, the striking workers brought to light the tacit involvement of consumers in this form of exploitation. In Turin, Foodora couriers consciously planned their actions in order to raise awareness and build public support among customers of the platforms: they protested in the city center, wore their uniforms to subvert the company's branding, disrupted headquarters with noisy pickets, and distributed flyers to clients and restaurants that use the platform. Just like their Deliveroo and UberEats counterparts in Milan and Bologna, they did so in order to fight the company by challenging its public reputation. By hijacking a hashtag used by the company for self-promotion on social media, food delivery couriers have attracted a high level of public attention that otherwise would have been unthinkable. As reported by another courier in Bologna: "The way we used our media visibility hurts the company, as there is a significant public attention around us. In Italy as well as in Europe" (IC6). In this sense, leveraging an attack on a seemingly "symbolic" business component, like the platform's public image, seems to be a novel strategy of action effectively deployed by these platform workers to damage their own employers.

### 5.3 "Non per noi ma per tutti" (Not for us, but for all)

Apart from damaging a platform's public reputation, there was also a second—and equally important—goal pursued in the mobilizations. As highlighted by several studies on labor conflicts in the food delivery platform sector (Cant 2019; Chesta et al. 2019; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Quondamatteo 2019), these protest forms reveal the invisible and precarious conditions of workers in this field. In this sense, engaging with the public is aimed not only at attracting the sympathies of customers, but also at catalyzing the mobilization of other workers outside of their immediate sector, especially those in other precarious gig economy categories. As food courier labor mostly remains concealed from the public eye, collective mobilizing made it visible and created the conditions for solidary recognition and identification by other workers. As a courier in Milan stated:

This work creates a lot of empathy. Here it seems that labor is nowhere to be seen. People see couriers going around with colored jackets and cubes; this



creates a lot of empathy. They are quite visible, so the possibility of having goodwill on your side gives you some political legitimacy. (IC7)

Likewise, several of our respondents spoke overtly about the political intent of their mobilizations in providing a kind of “universalizing” image of their working conditions (IC1, IC8 and IC9). The peculiar conditions of the couriers’ visibility, recognizability, and integration in the urban space thus allowed them to become a symbol of gig economy mechanisms that also affect other workers and urban residents, creating a widespread feeling of solidarity and identification (Chesta et al. 2019). In other words, a principal political goal of the mobilizations was to show that “they were not only acting for themselves, but for all” (Quondamatteo 2019)—with “all” referring particularly to the current generation of precarious workers.

Although their mobilizations involved a very limited number of workers, the couriers’ political and symbolic significance was perceived, and continues to be perceived, as much wider compared to other professions (Chesta et al. 2019; Quondamatteo 2019; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). As several scholars have highlighted, the high visibility and recognizability of couriers seem to have encouraged various categories of precarious and exploited workers to identify and share solidarity with them (Wood et al. 2021; Woodcock 2021). As a result, couriers not only themselves believe but *are also believed by others* to be fighting for the dignity of all categories of unprotected workers rather than merely themselves. Presenting themselves as the visible vanguard of the invisible precariat, food couriers aim to epitomize the figure of the precarious worker in the early 21st century economy (Tirapani and Willmott 2021). To what extent their universalizing orientation will endure and inspire the mobilization of other precarious workers is a compelling question, both politically and for scholarship. In this regard, it will be important to further investigate whether couriers are able to effectively forge a common and relatively cohesive collective identity, and whether this challenge will enter into a state of tension with their more universalizing appeal to a wider “constituency.”

## 6 Amazon drivers in action

Amazon logistics is a key site for anyone investigating the rise of economic digitization, its implications for working conditions and the collective action of workers. The second case in our analysis is the first cycle of contention at Amazon in the Milan area, one of the most important e-commerce centers in Italy. From 2015, the launch of new stations attracted a new workforce with no previous experience with the “Amazon model” of work organization based on digital monitoring through algorithms (Delfanti 2021). The years that followed saw these workers rapidly unionizing and organizing, a process that remains ongoing. The first cycle of strikes, which emerged in May 2017 in Milan, triggered the unionization of around one third of the Milanese drivers. These protests helped to establish several mechanisms of collective negotiation on various levels, bringing about a number of important improvements in working conditions, such as improved contracts, slower paces of work and more sustainable working schedules. Above all, though, this first

cycle of contention produced a shift in the way these workers are recognized as a collective actor. Rather than being seen as a fragmented workforce employed by several subcontractors that work for Amazon—the “head” of the supply chain of last-mile urban deliveries—they gained recognition as logistics workers, with a specific national contractual framework (CCNL)<sup>4</sup> and the right to participate in collective negotiations with employers.

In our investigation of the 2017 opening cycle of strikes in the Milan area, we looked at the workers’ resources, repertoire of action and claims in order to identify the characteristics of their identity framing in a key sector of the platform economy. In contrast to our case of food couriers, the identity framing of these workers remained confined to the workplace level and lacked any sign of broader politicization.

### 6.1 Struggles for recognition at Amazon

The first cycle of contention at Amazon logistics took place between 2017 and 2019. Although it was launched by a group of workers devoid of any previous experience with trade unionism, it was subsequently supported by traditional trade unions. In particular, the FILT-CGIL provided organizational, legal and technical support from early on, playing a major role in the strikes and the organization of the first worker assemblies and negotiations. Accordingly, the drivers’ first actions reflected the traditional repertoire of worker movements, mainly consisting of strikes and rallies outside warehouses, with picket lines blocking the deliveries. These actions prompted the emergence of latent grievances among workers who, being dependent contractors, were employed by different subcontractors (from the agri-food to postal sectors) with very different contracts and varied income levels. The first strikes performed by the drivers consisted in blocking deliveries and attracting the attention of the mainstream media, thereby forcing the small subcontractor service providers to open up a space of negotiation, which had the potential to involve also the key player, Amazon.

Strikes at Amazon logistics in the Milanese area began in May 2017, with a rally of workers in front of the warehouse in Origgio, a strategic site where packages are concentrated and prepared for distribution to many of the storage sites all around the country. Workers denounced the “exhausting time schedules and illegal work” (de Vito 2017), declaring that the company imposed unsustainable workloads. They complained about semi-illegal and illegal working times of up to 14 or 15 hours a day to attain shifts, an unsustainable burden for service providers and workers. They denounced the subcontractor system of illegal companies and bogus cooperatives established by Amazon, a familiar phenomenon in complex logistics supply chains more generally (Bologna and Curi 2019). The workers criticized the methods of the expanding Amazon empire, which repeatedly introduces new, experimental programs and services (such as Amazon Prime Now, the one- to two-hour delivery service), to push service providers to work off the books and to use mystifying

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<sup>4</sup> “Contratto Collettivo Nazionale della Logistica” (“National Collective Logistics Contract”).

rhetoric regarding employment relations. As one of the core participants in the driver strikes declared:

[The service provider firms, t. a.] tell us: “We are a start-up, we are new, let’s help each other.” They keep telling us that we’re a start-up. Still now, after two and a half years, they keep saying this. The route is paid about 200, 210 euro. The service provider pays the worker, the van, the gasoline, and then it keeps the rest. This system is still in operation, they [the service provider, t. a.] can’t really fit into it with that kind of payment. [...] So, they use these magic tricks to survive. (ID3)

The 70 workers who spontaneously began to strike in 2017 did so in order to achieve a “first agreement in the belly of the giant” (Zanella 2017). As in other protest events—like that of 27 June 2017 at the warehouses in Affori and Origgio—the drivers criticized the new contractual framework that treated them as postal workers, thereby misrecognizing their skills and under-paying their work (*ibid.*). Around the same time, protest spread to other Amazon locations in Italy. These protests included strikes during “Black Friday” at the warehouse in Castel San Giovanni near Piacenza in November 2017 and further strikes in the Milanese area in Origgio, Affori and the new Amazon station in Buccinasco in September 2018 (La Repubblica 2019b). As time passed, these dynamics of diffusion (Soule 2004; Givan et al., 2010) triggered a wave of strikes that grew consistently, with respect to both the number of participants and the universality of the claims articulated. The initial claims had concerned problems related to specific locations and subcontractors, primarily aiming at generating solidarity at the regional level. However, the increasing growth and empowerment of the movement spurred participants to address the broader “Amazon model” and to aim at a national and international audience. As a participant in an assembly in the Amazon station in Buccinasco discussed:

In this arm-wrestling that Amazon wants to do with us, imposing its system, we’ll say that their system is possible only under our conditions: those of workers in these countries, in Italy and Europe, who want a say in a company that doesn’t pay taxes, tries to exploit you, that opens an investigation every time there is a complaint, that tries to commodify labor or eliminate labor [...]. [I]n five or six years, we’ll have an enormous problem. Amazon is becoming the first national operator and, here, we are in a small place in Buccinasco, but we have a magnifying glass that nobody else has in the whole country. (FN)

The entanglement between local grievances and the international nature of the Amazon model is also evident in the words of one the main leaders of the protesting drivers:

Desperation can push you to do huge things. When you arrive at a saturation level, at that point, we don’t care about anything. We can go to Piacenza [the largest Amazon distribution center in Italy, t. a.], to Brussels, or even [Amazon headquarters in, t. a.] Seattle. (ID5)

The cycle of protest symbolically peaked on 24 February 2019 with the declaration of the first regional general strike of Amazon workers in Lombardy, where

Maurizio Landini, the recently elected general secretary of Italy's largest Italian trade union, the CGIL, gave a public show of support to the workers that was widely reported on (La Repubblica 2019a).

During the mobilization, the workers organized collectively, calling on Amazon and its subcontractors to recognize them as logistics workers with specific skills and the accordant contractual standards. At the same time, they pushed the unions—at this stage, principally the FILT-CGIL—to increasingly adopt social movement tactics with high public resonance, like pickets outside Amazon stations and blockages of deliveries. The first cycle of strikes thus marked the emergence of a new collective actor claiming not only certain rights but also a new form of solidarity at the level of the workplace. As a collective actor, Amazon delivery drivers displayed an identity framing based on their demand for recognition of their skills as qualified workers, on the importance of their work for the labor process, and on resisting the regime of algorithmic management.

## 6.2 Unions without politics?

Comparing the specific practices of the drivers to those employed by the couriers, the emerging forms of solidarity among the former did not involve strategic innovations in their repertoire of action. The struggles were largely traditional with respect to the strategy employed: a cycle of strikes initiated around what still resembled a traditional workplace (the Amazon station), revitalizing an established union, which was pushed toward more conflictual tactics such as blocking deliveries or picketing outside Amazon stations. The innovative character of the protests is rather to be found in their targeting of new forms of managerial control shaped by algorithmic technologies. Collective framing addressed specific working conditions—with protesters targeting failures to recognize skill, levels of employer control, pace of work and low wages—but also identity issues, which were linked to the very recognition of the status of drivers as specialized workers. Indeed, the discourse of activists directly tied the strategic misrecognition of their worker status to the introduction of algorithms in a highly fragmented system of employment relations. It criticized corporate strategic discourse not only for its symbolic aspects but also for supporting cost-saving strategies disadvantageous for drivers. The drivers complained about Amazon denying them the status of specialized logistics workers, thus lowering their salaries, reducing their rights, bypassing limits on workload and working time, and avoiding insurance against work-related risks. The protesters presented algorithms as oriented not only at controlling working operations and reducing delivery times, but foremost at lowering the professional status of workers who, when asked to adapt to what was codified by algorithmic prescriptions, were declassified as mere executioners. The deskilling of workers' status provoked by algorithms thus constituted a core target during the strikes. One interviewee explained this at length:

The reason why we are strong here is the professional skill of the workers. There are workers who are strongly aware of their know-how, an identity element that existed before the union and that they ask the union to represent. This is the point of the dispute opened with the Amazon algorithm. The point is that

the workers' know-how faces an algorithm which, in the best case scenario, tells them what to do and, in the worst case scenario, steals their job. Because in the best case scenario the algorithm doesn't know the territory—whether there's a porter in a building who facilitates the delivery process, if there's an old lady who can or cannot open the door, and so on—that is the human component which the worker is able to read. This relation with the territory and with the customers is not taken into consideration by the algorithm. This worsens the quality of the work and of the service. In the worst case scenario, the algorithm steals the job because it incorporates a series of data while the workers is following a new route—a quicker one—because it is linked to his direct experience. Therefore, the worker is giving information and data to the algorithm, which is recording them. In this way, while processing this information, the algorithm not only appropriates the knowledge of the worker, but it also makes him replaceable because he can be substituted in the future, maybe by a robot or simply by another worker. This is all professional skill, which is not paid. (ID1)

The Milanese drivers are aware that their knowledge of the urban space and, consequently, of delivery routes is a key aspect of their “working knowledge” that algorithmic systems of control can monitor and eventually incorporate (Kusterer 1978; Edwards and Ramirez 2016). The technological standardization introduced by algorithms is thus not only a source of increased workload accelerating the pace of work and producing new work-related risks, but above all a driver for the expropriation of skills and knowledge produced and owned by the workers. Therefore, protesters targeted the specific design of Amazon's algorithms, for in their view it contributes to the further fragmentation of labor and causes a failure to recognize the appropriate status of workers, along with concomitant rights and compensation. In the words of one worker:

Since the algorithm decides the route and timeline, it is incompatible with our trade. They [Amazon, t. a.] think that algorithm moves us, but for me, it's just a tool: I am a master of my trade, and it's the algorithm that should ultimately help me. I am not the instrument of the algorithm, it's the opposite. But for them [Amazon, t. a.], I am the instrument. (ID3)

Individualization at work, contractual fragmentation and the diverse backgrounds of the drivers acted as constraints, inhibiting the development of a shared set of grievances and the elaboration of collective action. At the same time, the power of workers flowing from their specific skills, along with their capacity to attract the support of traditional unions, contributed to the rise of mobilization. These conditions produced a twofold dynamic: They attracted new workers to unionism while, at the same time, pushing unions toward more conflictual repertoires, such as strikes at principal Amazon stations that involved pickets and blockages of delivery. Though aggregation involved a preliminary recognition of a specific working identity, it developed around specific and pragmatically defined goals related to working conditions, contractual rights and remuneration. In sum, the encounters with traditional unions in the logistics sector happened on a very pragmatic basis. As a driver who

became a union representative at his subcontracted employer's explained, the first contact with the trade unions was based on loose contacts:

Before, I was working for a delivery company, then I worked as a food delivery courier for a platform, but it didn't work well. I addressed the unions with my concerns to solve these problems, and then I met an old colleague with whom I had worked for the first delivery company. He sent me to a union representative of the CGIL, who told me he needed a representative in a station, and I accepted. (ID2)

In a manner very different from the case of the food delivery riders, who stressed their political role, the framing of the tasks of the mobilization is depoliticized. As another driver, who also became a union representative in the company subcontracted by Amazon that he worked for, recalled:

I entered for the first time in the FILT-CGIL because before I hadn't trusted unions that much. I'd even say, quite the contrary. Today I think that the unions don't have the reputation they deserve. They are perceived as a political party, which is not right if you have to protect a worker. It is right that you have your ideas, but out in the schools, in the park, in shopping centres, when you talk about the unions, people relate to them as a political party. They don't relate to them as an institution of the worker. (ID5)

In the same driver's words, it is through the focus on the workspace that unions can be empowered:

I think about what my grandpa did, the war, the partisans of the Italian resistance. They fought; they were part of the "iron age" with the Magneti Marelli.<sup>5</sup> There you really had the unions—something that should come back today, above all to govern these multinationals, which think only and exclusively of their profit. (ID5)

These testimonies indicate that, in the case of Amazon drivers, the revitalization of unionism is dependent on their capacity to provide direct answers to practical needs and specific problems. This pragmatic approach, linked to an explicitly depoliticized idea of the role of unions, also appeared in other interviews. As the following two excerpts show, for some workers politics is either too distant from the direct experience of workers or a source of potential divisions:

I am in the union, but I do not belong to the Left. When we debate about politics, I try to keep my thoughts for myself because I am here for my colleagues, for the job, to defend workers! Political positions are not my area of competence and, in my opinion, it's too big: I don't even want to join these discussions! (ID4)

<sup>5</sup> The Magneti Marelli is an Italian multinational corporation specialized in high-tech products and services for the automobile industry. Originally principally located in the province of Milan, it was owned by the Italian multinational Fiat—nowadays Stellantis—before being purchased by the Japanese company CK Holdings in 2019. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was a workplace with a strongly unionized workforce and acquired an important symbolic meaning for the Italian labor movement.

We, the company level union representatives, we have no color. We are all colleagues. I have no party-affiliation. I have a political idea, but here, among us, CISL, UIL or CGIL [...], for us it is a guarantee to have a union that can defend us. Among RSA [Rappresentanze Sindacali Aziendali = work councils, t. a.], we are united, there's cohesion. Now we all see the same problems and are all together. (ID3)

As these two interviews with workers' leaders show, one outcome of the mobilization was the emergence of a very specific collective solidarity among workers, who became aware of common working conditions. With calls for recognition as specialized logistics workers, the identity framing remained focused upon the workplace. The pragmatic orientation of the mobilization facilitated an identity framing of workers sharing grievances and struggling for the recognition of their rights. During the protests, the initially small web of activists expanded through the utilization of resources from traditional unionism. These initial mobilization processes triggered the recognition of a new category of logistics workers at Amazon while, at the same time, building the foundations for a bargaining system in a sector that has been deeply affected by digitization. Unlike in the case of food delivery couriers, the collective identity developed by the drivers remained limited to union activity at the workplace, shying away from more political claims. While the first phase of mobilization contributed to reducing the individualization and fragmentation of the workforce, it nonetheless still faced the resistance of Amazon logistics, the "head" of the supply chain—and thus its positive outcomes did not transcend the very specific constituency of workers employed by subcontracted companies. This limit notwithstanding, the introduction of collective bargaining to the sector opens up the possibility of further transformation for labor organizing ambitions.

## 7 Concluding remarks

In this article, we have shown how and to what extent food delivery couriers and Amazon drivers have been able to collectively organize and build specific identities despite difficult conditions characteristic of processes of labor fragmentation associated with the platform economy. In our two cases, workers did so by mobilizing different organizational resources particular to their professional context. They associated with two different collective actors, whose presence was crucial to explaining the specificities of the respective identity framing and the way these framings contributed, in different ways, to a redefinition and recomposition of labor as a collective actor in each case.

We have explained this observation through the different working conditions characteristic of each case, and their effect on the mobilization process. These conditions were consequential for both of the groups' diverging ways to organize collectively, and for the related processes of identity framing. While the mobilization of delivery drivers was supported by traditional trade unions—in particular: the FILT-CGIL—, the couriers' mobilization was backed by a more informal coalition of actors from a left-wing social movement milieu—especially squatted social centers. The support

of the FILT-CGIL led Amazon drivers to focus largely on improving their workplace and sectoral conditions, which resulted in a “sectoral” and “economistic” identity framing. Based upon the specific conditions they experienced as specialized logistics workers, this framing was comparatively focused and narrow. Meanwhile, the alliance with political activists pushed food delivery couriers to seek to involve subjects beyond their immediate professional context, including customers. They generated a rather broad frame of self-identification that also addressed precarious platform workers in other sectors. As we have seen, they explicitly aimed at speaking not only for themselves, but on behalf of an entire new generation of precarious workers sharing the working conditions they experienced. The social context of squats and social centers facilitated the development of a politicized and universalizing identity framing among mobilized couriers. To put it succinctly: While Amazon drivers built upon a *specific* identity framing, couriers attempted to construct a *universalizing* one by appealing not only to all platform workers, but to *all* precarious workers as part of a common struggle. Thus, while Amazon drivers developed a more sectoral and workplace-based identity framing, food delivery couriers proposed a “hegemonic” and political one (Kelly 1988).

We have seen how both drivers and couriers successfully overcame dimensions of fragmentation characteristic of the digital economy, which are usually thought to impede collective action. Yet, we argue that the respective sectoral structure in which a workplace is embedded in vastly affects both the means and resources available for mobilization strategies, and the ways in which workers self-identify. Therefore, we can trace back both the different paths of mobilizations and the identity frames emerging from them to the diverse conditions met by processes of digital innovation in both economic sectors. While Amazon drivers belong to the technologically advanced e-commerce segment located within the broader logistics sector, in which Italian labor unions have long been and have remained an established key actor to this day, food delivery couriers are part of a completely new platform-based sector, a “tabula rasa” of organized labor, in which traditional Italian unions had shown at best minor interest until the mobilizations considered above. Overall, our findings show that different conditions of “platformization” affect workers and their organizing practices quite differently. Our processual perspective on how different identity framings emerged in each case, so we hope, may help not only to make sense of specific dynamics of labor mobilization in highly fragmented sectors, but also to illuminate which conditions allow for which capabilities to trigger processes of political recognition and recomposition.

Lastly, beyond giving insight into our specific empirical cases, our findings on the connections between working conditions, mobilization processes and identity framing may also contribute to reviving the debate on the emergence of class consciousness in mobilization processes (Crouch and Pizzorno 1978; Fantasia 1988). In examining emerging conflicts for recognition in the platform economy, we have built upon the specific perspective of social movement studies (della Porta and Diani 2020). In particular, we have addressed the question of how solidarity was created in action as different forms of protest connected with different definitions of symbolic boundaries—in our cases either a specific category of logistics workers or the broader “precarious generation.” As we have shown, it is crucial to look at the



contextual conditions both inside and outside of the working space in order to understand how collective mobilization results in such vastly different collective identity framings. For, while self-definitions may vary between two types of collective action, workers generally elaborate conceptions of “the self” and “the other” not only with a view towards their position in the production process, but also their position in society as a whole. Only future studies will answer whether such processes as the ones considered above will eventually lead to the formation of something worthy of the name “class consciousness” amongst a heterogeneous platform workforce.

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## Interviews and field notes – Couriers

- IC1: Interview with food delivery courier, Turin, 16 June 2018  
 IC2: Interview with food delivery courier, Milan, 5 July 2018  
 IC3: Interview with food delivery courier, Bologna, 17 September 2018  
 IC4: Interview with food delivery courier, Bologna, 18 September 2018  
 IC5: Interview with food delivery courier, Bologna, 18 September 2018  
 IC6: Interview with food delivery courier, Bologna, 18 September 2018  
 IC7: Interview with food delivery courier, Milan, 6 July 2018  
 IC8: Interview with food delivery courier, Turin, 16 June 2018  
 IC9: Interview with food delivery courier, Milan, 6 July 2018

## Interviews and field notes – Drivers

- ID1: Interview with regional secretary of FILT-CGIL Lombardia, Milan, 13 March 2019  
 ID2: Interview with Amazon driver, Milan, 18 March 2019  
 ID3: Interview with Amazon driver, Milan, 18 March 2019  
 ID4: Interview with Amazon driver, Milan, 18 March 2019  
 ID5: Interview with Amazon driver, Milan, 18 March 2019  
 FN: Field notes from participant observation at the worker assembly Buccinasco, Milan, 10 April 2019

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