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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# LABOUR ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM IN THE GIG ECONOMY.

## Food delivery workers' struggles in Italy

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**ABSTRACT:** This article aims to explore the forms of collective actions that are emerging in new sectors of digital capitalism. In particular, it enquires into the mobilisation of food delivery workers that has been developing since 2016 in four Italian cities: Milan, Turin, Bologna and Florence. Despite the high level of precarisation and atomisation that characterise this subset of gig economy jobs, the so-called *riders* were able to organise into self-organised workers' collectives, which not only gave rise to many protest events, but also drew the attention of the institutions and the media. What are the conditions and the strategies that made this possible? And, more broadly, what does this case tell us about the possibility of labour activism in gig economy work? We argue that the high level of activation of food delivery workers is to be related to their capability to provide resources for reconstructing social ties among workers and, in turn, for translating them into political engagement and contentious action. This is realised through the combination of three factors that will be scrutinised in the paper. The analysis points out that although precarisation creates significant obstacles to organisation and mobilisation, collective action does actually take place also in the gig economy, in certain conditions.

**KEYWORDS:** food delivery workers, gig economy, labour activism, platform capitalism, social movement

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unionism

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## 1. Introduction

The social changes introduced by digital capitalism (Fuchs 2013) are affecting labour needs and forms of representation. This article aims to investigate the modes of collective actions that have been emerging in a specific sector of digital capitalism, the so-called “platform capitalism” (Srnicek 2017) In particular, it explores the cases of mobilisation of food delivery workers that have been developing in several Italian cities since 2016.

The so-called “gig economy” is a system in which working activities “imply completing a series of tasks through online platforms” (De Stefano 2016, 1) and workers carry out series of one-off jobs, without any involvement and corporate responsibility in providing welfare and services. In the last few years the introduction of online platforms has accelerated the process of labour precarisation in Western countries, with labour being reduced to an easily-accessed on-demand service. In this organisation of labour, “those who work in it carry out a series of ‘gigs’, i.e. one-off jobs, in order to create an income” and “they are to be paid for a particular task or tasks, rather than receive a guaranteed income” (Sargeant 2017). Labour becomes an on-demand service that can be easily accessed through an app. Thanks to digital technologies, platforms can function as databases that meet the supply of work with demand for it, while making a profit out of this process and exploiting the flexibility of a “pay-as-you-go” workforce. Work becomes less visible as such and risk is passed on from the company to the worker (De Stefano 2018; Crouch 2019).

Among these workers, food delivery couriers are the most visible. Young adults riding on bicycles or scooters while carrying big boxes marked by the logos of platform companies (mostly multinationals like Foodora, Deliveroo, Justeat, Glovo), have become a common sight in European cities. Customers order food from a restaurant of their choice through a website or an app, and riders deliver it as quickly as they can, regardless of the time and the weather. Their forms of employment and economic retribution differs per country and company. What they have in common in most cases is the fact that they are not considered to be regular employees of the food delivery platforms, but instead free-lance workers performing a series of “gigs”, thanks to the service provided by platforms. Each company in the gig economy “claims to be a database

via which supply and demand are matched. The companies argue that they do not have any control over workers, and therefore they are classified as self-employed” (Todolí-Signes 2017, 11). Thus, this type of labour relation “lacks heteronomous regulation and functions” (Donini *et al.* 2017). In most cases, riders do not have any insurance, any right to sickness leave or any help in the purchase and maintenance of the bicycle. What is more, every choice made by the platform, from the number of “gigs” to offer every rider to the management of shifts, is hidden behind “the algorithm”, making the power relations that structure wage labour invisible. This organisation of work pushes the known limits of precarisation, disarticulating not only employment regulations, physical compresence and access to welfare (Zamponi and Vogiatzoglou 2017), but work itself as the one identifiable source through which a person accesses the distribution of the socially produced wealth.

This model of labour organisation is not only negatively related to workers’ rights but it also negatively affects labour activism (Rogers 2017). Indeed, atomisation of tasks and the absence of a workplace are considered factors that inhibit interpersonal relations. The literature has pointed out that self-employment “seems to pose a serious challenge to the infrastructure of collective representation and to traditional players” (Borghi, Mori and Semenza 2018, 417). In Italy, in particular, “the collective representation of self-employed workers is particularly fragmented and often lacking”, and unions “have showed a certain degree of organisational inertia in reorienting their actions and strategies towards the self-employed segment of the labour market” (Borghi, Mori and Semenza 2018, 411). In general, precarious workers are often prevented by their circumstances “from developing membership of organisations that could grant them the power of collective bargaining”, meaning that “new forms of representation and voice must be developed according to the multiple and interacting employment models in contemporary organisations” (Pichault and Semenza 2019, 9). Nevertheless, precarity cannot be conceived as a factor that deterministically impedes any forms of labour activism. In particular, delivery workers have been described as the “exception to the weak structural power of on-demand workers”, due to their “disruptive capacity enhanced by the near-monopolistic tendencies of the platforms in local markets” (Vandaele 2018, 14).

Since 2016, several Italian cities have witnessed the emergence of “rider unions”, self-organised collectives of food delivery workers. The mobilisation has reached a large resonance and visibility in the media and has managed to draw the attention of the Italian Government. In June 2018, self-organised riders’ unions were invited to a bargaining table with the platforms by then-Minister of Labour Luigi Di Maio, although no significant outcome has been observed after one year of negotiations. Established

trade unions have participated in the negotiations, recognising the role of the self-organised workers' collectives, and in the last few months they have started investing in their own work of organisation of riders.

These riders' mobilisations represent counterpoints to the established idea that precarious workers are less prone than others to collective action. In this case, workers suffering conditions of intense precarity have been significantly active. How was this possible? And what can this tell us about the perspective of labour activism in the gig economy in general? This paper aims to address this puzzle. Most notably, considering that the food delivery riders are just a small part of the gig economy workers, how did they reach such public visibility? Given their highly fragmented and atomised working conditions, how did they manage to mobilise and organise collectively? In a nutshell, how was it possible to organise the unorganisable? The article aims to answer these questions and to discuss their implications, focusing on the Italian case for its undeniable significance, not only in terms of mobilisation but also for the resonance in the media and the political recognition it has achieved.

We argue that the high level of mobilisation of food delivery workers is to be related to three interconnected factors: the visibility of the riders in the urban space and the soft power they exercise on companies through the media, the mix of old and new repertoires of action made possible by information and communication technologies, and the mutualism built in self-organised places that allowed the construction of a social infrastructure for mobilisation. According to our analysis, the interconnection between these three factors provided the resources for reconstructing social ties between workers and, in turn, for translating them into political engagement and contentious action. This is at the base of a peculiar "social movement unionism" which penetrated this sector of platform capitalism (Vandenberg 2006).

In the next section we will present our analytical approach matching the literature on platform capitalism and social movement unionism with the literature on urban studies and direct social actions in the cityscape. In the third section, we will briefly summarise data and methods. In the fourth section we will illustrate the main characteristics of these platforms jobs as well as the social composition of the movements' participants. In the fifth section we will analyse the three factors that we identified as favouring the riders' collective action. The analysis of riders' unions active in four cities allows us to take into account the differences in mobilisations, ascribing them to the different balancing between the three factors. In the concluding section, we will summarise what has emerged from the analysis and propose further steps for research.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: social movement unionism, platform capitalism and the neoliberal city**

The wave of mobilisation regarding food delivery riders working for online platforms poses new questions concerning the forms of collective action of low wage workers. Arising in a sector characterised by several constraints – technological intermediation between management and workers, individualisation of tasks among others – the way a specific category of workers came to organise itself collectively calls for new discussions regarding social movement and union studies. While organising and unionising in the gig economy is commonly considered problematic, the recent mobilisations that have taken place in different Italian cities in the last few years allow us not only to reject clear-cut explanations regarding negative determinants for collective action, but also to provide new insights concerning traditional definitions of unionism. In particular, these mobilisations can be regarded as a particularly salient and innovative case of social movement unionism in the gig economy.

Social movement unionism is traditionally a category which may entail different traits and meanings depending on the context in which it is applied, both geographically and institutionally (Grote and Wagemann 2018). Researchers have used different labels for similar phenomena: social movement unionism (Vandenberg 2006), new social unionism (Ross 2007; Waterman 2001), radical political unionism (Connolly and Darlington 2012; Denis 2012; Gordon and Upchurch 2012). As Robinson (2000) explains, typologies of unions can be classified in four dimensions. Among these four dimensions, the rider unions can be defined as a *voluntary* (vs *involuntary*) association of individuals, *autonomous* (vs *subordinate*) from chief interlocutors in the political and economic power structure, *inclusive* (vs *exclusive*) to workers who are not members, *critical* (vs *uncritical*) to existing political and economic organising principles, institutions and élite. If after decades of neoliberal restructuring, unionism in Western countries is currently invested by deep changes concerning its mobilisation strategies, new repertoires of action and network of alliances have been trying to overcome the crisis of traditional unionism by building broader coalitions with other social forces and spheres of activism (Dorigatti 2015). As an example, the recent waves of mobilisation concerning low wage workers in the US and the “Fight for \$15” campaign regarding the increase of minimum wage standards suggest a shift from traditional forms of business unionism to social movement unionism.

These cases implicitly suggest the opportunity to investigate labour-related mobilisation with a processual approach which better gives the sense of their shifts toward different “modes of coordination” (Diani 2018). Our analysis is placed in this context,

and takes into account that, beyond its centrality in the gig economy as a whole (Gior-giantonio and Rizzica 2018), the food-delivery sector is a hostile environment to union-isation, given specific conditions like individualised job tasks, absence of a collective working space, volatility and individualization of the working time for an on-demand job (Caruso, Chesta and Cini, 2019; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017).

This form of gig economy is inherently typical of the urban space, and is strongly related to the transformations in the cityscape, that go hand in hand with the transformations of the modes of production and the work organisation (Harvey 1978). Urban studies explored extensively how changes in the industrialization dynamics and capital transformation affect social and political relations within the cities, shedding light on the relationship between urban organisation and spaces of production and consumption. In particular, starting from the 1990s, many scholars analysed urban paradigms in relation to the passage from the industrial to the post-industrial society (Brenner and Theodore 2002). Indeed, while in the industrial model of society social and political activism mainly occurred within the workplaces, in the post-industrial scenario, work has ended up lacking a place of reference. In the gig economy, workers meet only in brief moments (for example, in the case of food delivery, in the moments related to the pick-up of orders at restaurants). No specific place allows any reciprocal recognition of common problems or the organisation of collective claims.

For this reason, in times of platform capitalism the urban landscape assumes a renewed, crucial role. Public spaces like streets and squares function as the place in which riders work and also get in touch with one another. While new jobs are hidden, private and atomised, the city dimension is what makes it evident that the virtual (on-line) relations of production are still relations of capitalistic production and accumulation (Fuchs, 2013; Cherry 2016). Thus, urban space gives people the occasion and the physical place to activate new forms of unionism. Being displaced in urban settings, claims on labour issues are enmeshed with issues concerning urban life, organisation and access to spaces. Thus, it is not possible to understand peculiarities of labour mobilisations without accounting for broader urban movements. In this context, we witness the re-emergence of “direct social actions” (Bosi and Zamponi 2015, 2019), namely, forms of action that do not primarily focus upon claiming something from the state or other power holders but which instead focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself. In particular, the spaces within cities in which direct social actions are carried out have multiplied in the context of the crisis. These spaces have been largely interpreted as “urban commons” (Federici 2010; Huron 2015), that means spaces collectively organised outside the capitalistic logic and with a horizontal use (Nonini 2007). Urban commons are conceived both as a social

process (Linebaugh 2008) and as a physical space, nurturing relations in opposition to the profit-oriented construction of the city, spaces in which solidarity ties and mutualism are reconstructed (Caciagli 2019; Mudu and Aureli 2016). In this sense, by providing space for a community, they insert the recomposed community in political processes, as in the case of social movement unionism.

The goal of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of gig economy workers' struggles by bridging the study of platform capitalism with research on social movement unionism and urban studies, through the analysis of the peculiar case of food delivery riders.

### **3. Data and methods**

The findings presented in this paper come from a qualitative research conducted between late 2017 and early 2019. It is based on three main sources for gathering data: document and media analysis, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. In particular, we have analysed self-produced documents, articles published in local and national newspapers, as well as reports of the different collectives circulated through mailing lists or directly furnished by riders playing a key role in the mobilisation processes. We conducted fifteen in-depth interviews with food-delivery couriers, key actors and participants involved in the mobilisations. Specifically, twelve interviews were conducted with riders of different platforms involved at different levels in the protests, two with activists who supported the struggles and one with one of the lawyers who followed the legal aspects of a few controversies regarding mobilisation. The interviews give a homogeneous representation of the cities involved in the protests and regard both the national and the local dimension of the activism (Bologna, Florence, Milan, Turin). Interviewees were selected partially by making use of the existing networks among the population studied (Salganik and Heckathorn 2004), and partially through the suggestions of privileged witnesses. In addition, we conducted interviews with key informants and also participated in many local and national assemblies as well as in many crucial protest events.

### **4. Food delivery work and labour struggles in Italy**

The mobilisation of gig economy workers in general, and specifically of the employees of food delivery platform companies, has been significantly spreading across Eu-

rope over the last three years (Cant 2017; 2018). Protest events have taken place in several European countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain and United Kingdom), with a rather broad range of tactics (from refusing to take to the streets in the case of bad weather conditions to marching with activists in solidarity, and so on) and the clear centrality of grass-roots collectives of riders, such as the *Collectif Livreurs Autonomes de Paris* or *Riders Union Bologna* (Zamponi 2018).

In Italy, the first episode of protest took place in Turin in October 2016, when a group of riders employed by the food delivery company Foodora went on strike to reject the transition from an hourly pay system to a payment-by-delivery system. The example was followed by a group of Deliveroo employees in Milan, who in July 2017 organised a “strike mass”, merging the concepts of strike and critical mass, to claim better working conditions and attract public attention to the peculiar nature of their status in the labour market. A few months later, on November 13<sup>th</sup>, an unforeseen snowfall in Bologna provided the chance for a day of complete blocking of deliveries, with workers, organised under the label *Riders Union Bologna*, refusing to risk their health riding on the icy streets. This brought the self-organised collectives *Deliveroo Strike Raiders*, *Riders Union Bologna*, and *Deliverance Milano* to sign a common list of demands to Deliveroo, that included the application of the national bargaining agreement on transportation, the introduction of a real employment contract, the renewal of all contracts that were about to expire, a minimum hourly wage of 7,50 Euros, the guarantee of at least 20 hours a week, a 30% rise in case of rain or snow, a 50% rise in case of deliveries that go beyond the planned shift, a 30% rise as compensation for exposure to smog, insurance coverage, the reimbursement of maintenance expenses for bicycle and phone, a safety kit with a helmet. Since then, the movement has developed through a series of national assemblies, common actions on May Day and in other occasions. As far as outcomes are concerned, they are still mixed, on several fronts. On the judicial level, the lawsuit started by some riders against Foodora in Turin to be recognised as employees under the national bargaining agreement of the logistic sector was defeated at first, but the appeal was partially successful. On the political front, in April 2018, in Bologna, *Riders Union Bologna*, official trade unions and the municipality signed a “Charter of rights”, although only a local platform agreed to apply it, and between the summer of 2018 and the spring of 2019, the Ministry of Labour hosted a national negotiation between riders’ self-organised collectives, official trade unions and platforms; the latter refused any significant concession, and the government announced that, without an agreement, it would regulate the issue with a decree, which never saw the light of day. Finally, on the mobilisation front, the activity of the riders’ collectives of Turin, Milan and Bologna triggered the formation of self-organised collectives in other



cities, in particular Rome and Florence, and the interest of mainstream trade unions, that not only sided with the self-organised collectives in the governmental negotiation, but also started experimenting with the organisation of riders in a few cities (in particular Verona and Florence).

The comparative inquiry conducted in the cities of Bologna, Milan, Turin and Florence confirms what the descriptive quantitative data already show regarding the social composition of food delivery riders. A relatively young, well-educated, male workforce is indeed dominating (Farrell and Greig 2016), and this is particularly true for the ones involved the most in the mobilisations. However, looking at the urban level, important differences emerge. Data gathered through qualitative interviews confirm – both in the interviewees profile and in their perception – the higher presence of young Italian students or individuals with university degrees in a city like Bologna, which can be considered the epicentre of the Italian riders' movement. On the contrary, in Milan a survey on 218 riders suggested a different social composition with a higher presence of male migrants (Fasano and Natale 2019).

The social composition of the activists is indeed characterised by young individuals with relatively high educational credentials and multiple associational memberships. The working experience with online platforms is for all the main core members of the riders' unions relatively brief, ranging from a few months to two years, although they all have previous experience in precarious jobs in different service sectors. Therefore, the data available in Bologna show in all the individuals interviewed, previous work experience in multiple precarious jobs that has probably contributed to creating awareness about precarity. The variation in the social composition in cities like Milan and Bologna can help to explain the different organisational forms that the mobilisation assumes. The high presence of students with previous experiences of student activism or membership in counter-cultural associations and social centres provides the political experience and a set of resources like networks, spaces and support which give the opportunity for a new collective to autonomously take shape. This is evident in Bologna, the most successful and visible case of mobilisation – in terms of participants, numbers of protest events and impact – which found support from youth associations and social centres like Ritmo Lento, L'Altra Babele or Làbas. This is however confirmed also in Turin, where the rider mobilisation found support in the Cavallerizza assembly and in Milan where activists from SanPrecario networks had a decisive role.

I got involved in the mobilisation through A., who heard about these Whatsapp chats among workers and from which these moments of sociability took place. Then, when the forms of piecework became predominant at Deliveroo and the old contracts were available only for the firstcomers.

In that moment, protest became necessary. Information about the riders' conditions emerged thanks to people who were part of a larger network of collectives, who occupied spaces, or frequented popular gyms. We got in touch with the riders which composition was heterogeneous: from the migrant, the second generation migrant to the 50-year-old guy or the student. The majority of them didn't have any experience of strikes or mobilisations. To strike in the gig economy is difficult also because you're considered an autonomous worker (I10)

Acting as an informal social movement organisation (Mccarthy and Zald 1977), this group of activists not only realised the existence of new problems emerging in this specific sector of the gig workers, but they also provided the motivational resources to activate new groups of workers and the organisational resources to give rise to a mobilisation process.

We were a group which wanted to investigate this issue because it was one of the main questions regarding new forms of exploitation, because nobody was intervening but it seemed to be crucial for the dynamics regarding the change of work. It happened: we started canvassing. We said: let's go and see if we can alphabetize some workers. We discovered that some comrades were working in the sector and somebody joined the group. He was working for necessity, not for any political project. There were the first mobilisations in France and England and the sentence regarding Uber. Just to say that we decided to go forward: we studied, we collected contracts and we built dossiers to summarize and map the different situations regarding different platforms, to map different restaurants, meeting points and places...we mixed with a group of workers which wanted to demonstrate but they didn't know how to do it. They organised some drinks after work and so we met them. They wanted to strike but they didn't know how to go about it. (I13)

Since the rider sector in Milan is mainly composed of migrants (Fasano and Natale 2019), external support from movement activists was necessary to develop specific claims and to open up the opportunity for collective action on specific issues. Notwithstanding this, beyond the local differences, it is important to underline how Italian riders have since the beginning been part of transnational networks of rider activism which allowed to share tactics and strategies of collective action (Zamponi 2018).

## **5. Factors favouring riders' mobilisation**

The heterogeneous composition of riders, as well as the high turn-over that characterises these jobs, are features that contribute to the complexity of mobilisations. At the same time, this heterogeneity has turned out to be an added value for combining three factors that are at the base of mobilisation dynamics. The three factors are: the visibility of the riders in the urban landscape and the soft power they exercise on companies through the media; the mix of old and new repertoires of action made possible by information and communication technologies; and the mutualism built in self-organised places that allowed the construction of a social infrastructure for mobilisation. These factors are not just at the base of the riders' re-composition and mobilisation, but they are also at the base, because of the differences in balancing them, of the trajectories that these mobilisations draw in different cities.

### ***5.1 Visibility in the urban landscape as catalyser of solidarity***

As a type of digital work, food delivery through platforms is based on the interiorisation of the system of control, which is called by Aneesh "algocratic mode of organisation" (2009). This system allows to coordinate people even if they are globally displaced. Indeed, as pointed out by a rider "despite what you might think, our means of work is not the bicycle but the telephone, through which we can access the app and pick up orders" (I11). Nevertheless – and unlike other types of high skills gig jobs - even if organised online, food delivery is still an "off-line" job that needs a physical space in which to be concretized. Although only in an ephemeral way, riders have the occasion to meet each other in the streets, waiting in front of a restaurant or in a square. This presence in a public space and the visibility is what makes this unusual, new job familiar to people and also attractive for workers. As this rider in Florence pointed out:

I was working in a restaurant and I was seeing these coloured boys and girls and I started to think "maybe this is a nice job". I was looking for a new job and I was wondering why not? So I started to collect information on the Internet about how to apply in these platforms. (I12).

Along these lines, urban spaces have been indicated by many interviewees as catalysers of the first form of cohesion. This excerpt of interview is paradigmatic:

At the beginning we had to wait for the call all together in a place in the city centre. Later on, the platform decided that we could start the shift

in any point of the city. Nevertheless, most of us decided to converge in this square. So we started to talk and exchange our impressions on the job. (I11)

The urban spaces also furnish the concrete opportunity to inform and involve non-politicised riders in mobilisations:

When I meet other riders I try to talk with them, I ask them what they think about this job, if the wage is satisfying for them and so on. I also invite them to reach out for an assembly or go to the social centre for a beer after work [...] I always take advantage of waiting times: I ask for information, I speak with the other riders waiting next to me... (I12)

In a nutshell, what emerges is that despite many differences among riders (age, gender, nationality, background) and their atomised work, they seem to recognize themselves in a common condition (people riding in the city, with similar bikes, clothes, platform logs and delivering food). In this sense, in the mobilisation process, the urban setting could have the same function as the workplace to trigger the creation of a collective identity. This is perceived by riders too:

Historically the city has been the dimension of social reproduction. Now the city is also the warehouse; I mean, streets and squares are the workplaces for riders. The city is where riders work, so it is the place where struggles can develop. (I14)

The visibility of riders in urban spaces is crucial for nurturing cohesion and mobilisation but it also draws the attention of other urban dwellers and, in turn, their solidarity once the protests take place. 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. This leads to new forms of empathy and solidarity: indeed, as some riders pointed out, after urban protests the tips given by customers can increase.

The creation of solidarity with other subjects composing the urban arena is also a conscious strategy enacted by riders in different cities. In Florence, for example, the first actions made by riders once grouped together in unions (namely, Riders Union Florence) included distributing flyers in customers' lunch boxes. Also in the other cities, riders refer to the contacts with urban dwellers as a crucial part of their struggle. For example, they recognize restaurant owners as possible allies, or at least, actors sub-

jected to the mechanisms of the platform:

For restaurants I think it is not so convenient to work on a platform because if people order food at home this means that they are not sitting in the restaurant, that in turn means that they are not paying the cover charges and the cover charges pay the waiters and so on. Moreover, the percentage they have to pay to the platform is high. The only actor who really gains in this mechanism is the platform. (I3)

As has been pointed out in reference to the 2016 Foodora strike in Turin, riders' protests have been met with unusually extensive and sympathetic media coverage (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017). This is partly due, as we will see later, to the movement-like strategy employed by workers, taking to the streets and directly engaging with the public, given the lack of physical workplaces. But there has also been the capacity of the workers' collectives to exploit the fact that the whole city is their workplace, and this makes them extremely visible and recognisable.

Communication and narrative are a core element of the business model of gig economy companies in general and for food delivery platforms in particular. Riders know it and exploit it. The figure of the rider as a young adult on a bicycle that delivers a meal ordered online carries heavy connotations in terms of the reproduction of an idea of smartness, coolness and modernity, spiced with techno-enthusiasm and environmental sensitivity. This is very clear to the riders themselves:

They try to give the customer the good-looking, young Italian boy [...]. We have to "pamper" customers in every possible way. [...] Some platforms keep only the young ones, the students, because [food delivery] is a trendy concept: the bicycle in the case of Bologna is really the quickest means of transport, but they choose it to boast of using an environment-friendly tool, for a specific reason of aesthetics and visibility. We are like sandwich men roaming the city with the menu of a restaurant, we carry around the company brand. [...] When people see us around they cheer for us: "You're the one who brings me food every night, you're great!". Someone said that the heroes of the millennium are the riders who bring food to your home in all weathers. Everybody likes us, but nobody knows what's behind it. (I15)

If the visibility of a brand and, in general, the symbolic component of a business, become core components of the value chain, workers who are in charge of this component achieve a significant bargaining power with companies. Riders are very aware of

this power, of this capacity of “annoying” platforms through the media, as a Bologna-based rider well summarised:

Demonstrating to the company that there is discontent and that the discontent is starting to get organised is already a form of struggle. All the media visibility annoys the company. Not only us, but also the Milanese with Deliverance Project. The Turinese too... there is some media attention. (I2)

This visibility-based strategy is strictly connected with the strong identification with the cityscape that we pointed out earlier: riders can weaponise the urban landscape in their action, in terms of networks, relationship, knowledge that large multinational companies do not have and they do, as another Bologna-based worker pointed out:

We know that even if many people don't care, our impact hurts them. Through the media you get to people you wouldn't have reached otherwise. [...] Just Eat, Food Pony, what do they know about Bologna? They don't even know who the mayor is. (I3)

This use of the riders' visibility in the cityscape is central to the construction of solidarity. It helps to construct solidarity with customers and to bridge the divide between workers and consumers that is typical of neo-liberalism. Riders tend to recall similar stories of their first shifts after a strike. They are stories of solidarity, as in the case of this Bologna-based rider:

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]”. Even during the strike, many stopped and took our flyers. In short, they know us, now. (I9)

This solidarity does not involve only customers as consumers, but other people as workers. Riders serve as metonymies of precarious workers in general, as the visible vanguard of the invisible precariat. As a rider in Milan told us, in times in which labour is invisible, riders make it visible, creating the conditions for empathy, recognition, identification:

This work creates a lot of empathy. Here it seems that labour is nowhere to be seen. People see riders, they go around with coloured jackets and cubes, they create a lot of empathy. They are quite visible, so the possibility of having goodwill on your side gives you some political legitimacy. (110)

The peculiar conditions of visibility and recognisability of riders and their integration in the cityscape have allowed them to become the symbol of the gig economy mechanisms that affect also other workers and urban dwellers, creating a widespread feeling of solidarity that partially compensates the structural weakness of precarious workers in terms of organisation and mobilisation.

### **5.2 Repertoires of action: between online and offline**

Since the beginning, the goals of the rider unions have been directed toward the elaboration of new tactics and strategies to improve working conditions and workers' rights in this sector of the gig economy. These actions mix old and new repertoires, invading communication technologies and using collective informal chats which overcome the strict memberships usually linked to the work in a platform. Social media and other most recent communication tools tend indeed to facilitate the launch of quick and spontaneous forms of collective action and protest events. But the newness of the communication technology resides not only in making organised dissent more spontaneous and less time-consuming. At the same time, since work is mediated by a system of enrolment through the app of a specific platform, an individual or coordinated "log-off" becomes a tool to with which to strike. Several events reported in the media show the dynamics of this interrelation between old and new repertoires used by the riders.

Already back in 2016 in Turin a few riders working for Foodora organised a street protest against the lack of health insurance, the fact that work instruments are paid for by the workers (bikes, smartphone and telephone card) and no recognition from the platform of the risks due to environmental conditions (La Stampa, 9/10/16). After this protest, two riders got fired by the platform and a civil action was brought against Foodora "for their participation in the organisation of the protest" (La Stampa, 10/10/2016). On July 2017 the Deliverance group in Milan organised a critical mass that ended outside the office of Foodora (La Repubblica, 15/07/17). A few months later, in Bologna, on November 2017 a relevant number of riders went on strike on a snowy day, denouncing the impossibility to work due to environmental risks, with the slogan "a pizza is not worth the risk" (Corriere di Bologna, 15/11/17). The event catalysed the attention of the media and favoured the growth of a workers' collective that

organised other strikes during Black Friday a few weeks later and a critical mass in the following February 2018, a day characterised by severe environmental conditions. The demonstrations were protest events which tried to gain the attention of the public – through collective critical masses by bikes partially slowing the traffic – or strikes which made the service of delivery more difficult through a collective log-off during particularly salient events– like the previously cited Black Friday and some matches of the World Cup – which usually register high demands. In this case, communication technologies became tools integrating traditional forms of demonstration – the strikes, the critical mass – and allowed to reach a huge amount of individuals and to connect them with low costs of recruitment.

The “snow strike” happened almost by accident. One day it was snowing, platforms didn’t show up and among workers we started sending messages to each other. It started with Deliveroo, then Just Eat, Sgnam which closed the service. Everything started at that moment, spontaneously. Because it was risky to work that day. It was the workers that said: ok, together we decide not to work, as if it was a strike. We therefore give a signal. It was the first thing done not as individuals but all together [...] We mobilised differently depending on the platform. With Deliveroo the workers did not log on, or accept any orders. Deliveroo was waiting... For their part, JustEat workers decided all together not to give any availability to work. Having announced 10 days in advance, we announced the strike as JustEat couriers. In the morning they closed the service (12)

Also in this case, online communication reduces the costs of coordination among platform workers who are usually dispersed in the urban environment. Chats and social media are highly accessible and cheap tools that allow the socialization of problems as well as the organisation of meetings, and the coordination of collective strategies and actions.

The newness of these tools can easily intersect and revitalize traditional forms of mobilisation as strikes which take different forms. They can be either collective log-offs, or collective decisions taken by workers to explicitly demonstrate dissatisfaction regarding specific working issues, or even an explicit and announced decision to not be available for work at a certain moment.

But in both cases, the strike would be something that while targeting the platform, remains “within the virtual walls”. To be visible in a broader public sphere, these actions still require a physical concentration of workers – the traditional street demonstration - which gives visibility to the claims, therefore also reaching potential custom-



ers.

Furthermore, public protests have the effect not only of raising public awareness among a broader number of workers that do not belong to the core component of the activists. Public protests negatively affect the public reputation of the platform – an element that has also an economic effect– and it contributes to raising public awareness among consumers and customers.

These processes entail public recognition (and possibly, identification) of active members which can expose them to sanctions from the platforms involved. As one of the activists describes:

Yes, they [the platform representatives] know me personally. Every time there's an article in the newspaper they show it to me directly on the group [the platform chat] and they ask: "Why are you denigrating us?". The company has my name, my face, they hate me. I am the most loved and hated at the same time. The only reason they don't fire me is because on the job I set an example and I can earn up to 15 euros per hour with my speed (13).

This statement calls to mind also another aspect concerning the interrelation between old and new repertoires. Allowing the spread of informal forms of communication, tools like collective chats and social media make mobilisation processes easier, although it is still those who dispose of more resources in terms of skills, social and cultural capital who are more likely to participate in the mobilisation processes and to play a prominent role in them, facing the highest risks of their actions. In this sense, socialization to activism matters also in the adopting of new repertoires of action that the digital sphere makes available.

### ***5.3 Social-political spaces and direct social action as infrastructures for mobilisation***

Urban space plays a crucial role also in organising mobilisation. Indeed, the absence of a physical workplace pushes some workers to look for alternative spaces in which to meet, gather collectively, exchange resources and build solidarity. In this sense, the associational density of a student city like Bologna offers particularly positive conditions for overcoming the negative aspects of a typically loose and individualized job:

Before the aggregate forms that we created, we established a group of friends. The Riders Union was born spontaneously from friendship rela-

tions that started socializing concerns. What made the Riders Union possible was the fact of meeting as a “multiplatform” entity. Our discussion made us aware of all the problems and nuances...who was advantaged and who not [...] There were already a few groups with a good structure in JustEat and Deliveroo, which are quite widespread here in Bologna. Then we met at the social club. It’s true that there have been some associations which approached us giving us support to make us more united. I came from associational experiences, [...], it was easy to get in touch with me and with other guys already politically engaged. (13)

This statement underlines the importance of community resources in providing the social infrastructure for the development of a new collective actor. The development of social movement unionism is the outcome of those areas of social capital density such as student associations, social centres and clubs. They all create the spaces of support, the common areas, useful for overcoming individualism and collectively organising (assemblies, collective claims and action strategies). The role of urban social capital and the presence of associational youth clubs can be considered a key infrastructure for the birth of an autonomous riders’ unionism, a condition which can be considered similar to a phenomenon like the *community unions* which in the US emerge among low wage workers as a response to the absence of traditional forms of unionism (Fine 2005). The idea of “social unionism” (*sindacalismo sociale*) as expressed in the Riders Union assemblies to define their attempts to organise collectively all the food-delivery riders (Martelloni 2018), is indeed a variant of a social movement unionism which enlarges the spectrum to the whole urban space.

Service provision by infrastructures such as ARCI clubs and social centres have proven central to the construction of riders’ unions. A young activist from a student-led ARCI club in Bologna tells how the club functioned as an incubator, through the provision of the competences of its activists and the material resources to repair bicycles, for the birth of Riders Union Bologna:

Thanks to some guys who frequented the club informally, it emerged that there was discontent among the workers of Deliveroo: the first requirement was the need for security [...]. We basically as a group of social activists of the club, made ourselves available and said “Since you are still few and we have the skills, organisational skills and political support, let’s try to connect” [...] We asked ourselves: what can we do? [...] The first thing we did was try to set up one bicycle repair shop, so we took the material that was given to us from another ARCI club and we got together two spare bicycles for the riders, because if the chain breaks or whatever

and they have no time to fix it because they have to make deliveries, they come in the evening, take the keys and the day after they bring the bike back. Thanks to this, we basically managed to make the club into a sort of after-work place of that category of workers. [...] This club has become [...] a sort of underground chamber of labour, which overcomes the rigidly sectorialised conception of traditional unions. We are experimenting with a kind of Italian “community organising” (115)

Over time, Riders Union Bologna has set up a network of bicycle shops in many Bolognese social spaces, including the social centre Låbas. The mutualistic origin of the workers’ organisation is then rediscovered, through the sharing of needs and spaces to build solidary bonds. The shared space, be it within a social centre or an ARCI club, becomes also a space of identity recomposition. In times of individualisation and multi-membership, none of the identities of an individual is totalising enough to determine a choice of collective belonging and participation. Building space for sharing, taking advantage of the various shreds of identity that everyone is willing to share with others in a collective space, means recreating places for sharing that working life no longer makes available, in a process that, in the activists’ view, should lead to re-politicisation:

In this way, service provision through direct social action becomes the necessary infrastructure for building solidarity in the cityscape, The thing that can detract from this conservatism, from these individualistic attitudes, is precisely to act on human weaknesses, in the sense that we are a generation of lonely people, that when I finish education, we gradually restrict the fields of friendships to chase the work goals, to navigate in precarity, and as a result there is the need for contact between people, developing organisational arrangements much more based on shared aperitifs, on music nights, events in which to make people talk without the claim to have an immediate political translation. It is a much longer process, but it is necessary, since the traditional spaces of collective organisation, which were the factory, the school, the university, are more and more places of passage.. There is a need to invent new places, to aggregate by addressing one by one the different pieces of the identity of each person, because the social identities are now more and more varied: one feels he is a musician but he is also a food delivery rider, maybe half of the day you involve him as a musician and the other half as a rider. [...] Today the social organisations unfortunately are in an irreversible crisis, so we must reinvent the form, the real challenge is to discuss the method, form and style of the things you do rather than of the contents [...]. If we do not do this, resentment will make fascism win, this is the point. (115)

among workers who do not share a workplace, but who find a shared setting in clubs and social centres. Direct social action aims first of all to rebuild social ties, contrasting the individualistic logic of the gig economy. In this way, the social infrastructures created from below work as pre-political actions breaking isolation and framing conditions of exploitation as something collective (Bosi and Zamponi 2019). Indeed, introducing a paradigm of cooperation to the one of competition, mutualism is not just answering from below to a social need, it is also a triggering factor showing alternative models of city construction and production. In times of depoliticisation and weakness of established organisations and identities, concrete experiences of self-help become crucial in building solidarity and a sense of common belonging.

## **6. Concluding remarks**

The paper has explored the protests enacted by food delivery workers from 2016 in four Italian cities: Milan, Turin, Bologna and Florence. These mobilisations demonstrate that labour activism is possible even in a highly fragmented, atomised scenario. Indeed, thanks to the combination of three factors (the visibility of the riders in the urban landscape and the soft power they exercise on companies through the media, the mix of old and new repertoires of action made possible by the new information and communication technologies and the availability of a social infrastructure through social-political spaces and direct social action), riders have been able to organise relevant episodes of protest and to reach a significant level of visibility, attracting public attention to the dynamics of the gig economy. Even if the three factors are balanced differently according to the specificities of the urban spaces in which mobilisations develop, some distinguishing, common features can be retraced.

First of all, the mobilisations tend to be heterogeneous, involving riders as well as activists of the urban spaces. Secondly, given the delay with which established unions entered the field, a social movement type of unionism has emerged, mobilising resources from urban youth associations and spaces which has been able to build on existing infrastructure and trajectories of activism to create basic forms of workers' solidarity.

The analysis shows that it is possible to "organise the unorganised" and that experiences of social movement unionism of food delivery workers have brought public attention and institutional recognition to the dynamics of the gig economy.

Nevertheless, we should be careful to avoid any definitive interpretations. Indeed, riders' mobilisations are still ongoing processes. Protests are still at an early stage and many issues regarding the internal organisation and the coordination of different collectives at the national level have not yet been solved. In addition, the bargaining process lead by the Ministry of Labour has not yet produced any significant improvement in working conditions. In this regard, this case seems to confirm what has already been observed on the strengths and shortcomings of social movement unionism: while institutional trade unions have not been able to radically renovate their repertoire of action and organisational formats in order to address challenges of precarity, the more innovative efforts undertaken by emerging entities lack the necessary influence and critical mass required to have a broader societal impact (Zamponi and Vogiatzoglou 2017). On this aspect, the response by established trade unions to the innovations proposed by social movement unionism, further research is needed, as well as on the role played by international, national and local institutions in these mobilisations, whether and how they intervene between workers and platforms and what normative frame is put in place.

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### **Interviews**

- I1. Interview with a rider involved in Riders Union Bologna, Bologna, March 12, 2018.
- I2. Interview with a rider involved in Riders Union Bologna, Bologna, March 12, 2018.
- I3. Interview with a rider involved in Riders Union Bologna, Bologna, March 12, 2018.
- I4. Interview with a rider involved in Riders Union Bologna, Bologna, March 12, 2018.
- I5. Interview with a rider involved in Riders Union Bologna, Bologna, March 12, 2018.
- I6. Interview with a rider involved in self-organised action, Turin, May 21, 2018.
- I7. Interview with a lawyer involved in Deliverance Project, Turin, May 24, 2018.
- I8. Interview with a rider involved in self-organised action, Turin, July 4, 2018.
- I9. Interview with a rider involved in Riders Union Bologna, Bologna, March 12, 2018.
- I10. Interview with a rider involved in Deliveroo Strike Riders an, Milan, June 4, 2018.
- I11. Interview with a rider involved in Riders Union Firenze, Florence, January 18, 2019.



- I12. Interview with a rider involved in Riders Union Firenze, Florence, January 24, 2019.
- I13. Interview with an activist involved in Deliverance Milano, Milan, November 10, 2017.
- I14. Interview with an activist involved in Riders Union Bologna, Bologna, February 20, 2018.
- I15. Interview with a rider involved in Riders Union Bologna, Bologna, November 18, 2017.

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