

EDITORIAL

Platforms in the city and cities at the service of platforms: An urban perspective on the platform economy and workers' responses¹

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Abstract

The social and economic impacts of the emerging platform economy are most obvious in urban settings, where platforms are giving rise to unfamiliar dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, cooperation and division, as well as social and political integration and fragmentation. Platform urbanisation has created a new and unprecedented kind of politics. It has given rise to new political spaces and new subjectivities, resulting in a permanent reorganisation of 'historical' assemblages of territory, authority and rights. Drawing on the results of the European-based PLUS Project (Platform Labour in Urban Spaces: Fairness, Welfare, Development), this themed collection offers a fresh perspective on the platform economy by analysing it in terms of the relationship between urban contexts and the ongoing platformisation process, with an emphasis on how this relationship is reshaping (platform) labour and reconfiguring (or even reinvigorating) social action. Along the way, the articles in this issue consider whether platforms are useful for the development of urban environments and labour markets, or whether urban environments and labour markets are useful for the development of platforms. Likewise, they seek to identify the conditions under which relevant actors can mobilise and build alliances to ensure that such forms of development can be made to benefit not only workers but also (urban) citizens and the (urban) environment in general.

Keywords: algorithmic management; gig economy; labour activism; platform capitalism; worker power; working conditions in platform work

In recent years, a growing body of research has focused on how digital platforms have reconfigured markets and transformed working conditions amid the rise of what has been variously termed the 'platform economy' (Kenney and Zysman 2016), the 'sharing economy' (Ravenelle 2017; Schor and Attwood-Charles 2017; Schor and Vallas 2020), the 'gig economy' (Todolí-Signes 2017; Vallas and Schor 2020), and 'platform capitalism' (Srnicsek 2017; Vallas 2019). While promoting new economic and work relations based on 'sharing' and 'community' (Kirchner and Schüssler 2019; Ravenelle 2017), the companies that own platforms obscure how the latter are more than simply digital tools for professional activities or market intermediaries between supply and demand. In fact,

platforms have fostered the emergence of ‘a new category of immaterial and impalpable employers’ (Aloisi 2016; Friedman 2014) that oversee atypical forms of labour. Meanwhile, associated market power and information asymmetries raise questions about how to regulate the working conditions that platforms impose (Fabo *et al* 2017; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017; Todolí-Signes 2017).

Digital platforms are more than market participants. Nor are they simply tools, employers, or technological devices. They are also market makers insofar as they marketise ‘idle resources’ into maximally productive assets and unlock the value of latent space in existing homes (Sadowski 2020). And although they are invariably private holdings, often owned by a handful of shareholders, platform companies use a mix of public and private material and immaterial spaces as a profit terrain. For instance, they often operate forms of infrastructure (enabling services, trading, etc.) to generate private profits. Furthermore, they offer services to public bodies (municipalities, public service providers, government agencies, etc.) while generating, harvesting, and processing data for their own use. As a result, digital platforms have produced a completely novel techno-political situation (Calzada 2021) that is not only deeply unbalanced but that also undermines urban citizenship. On the one hand, control rests in the hands of a small number of actors, mostly big-tech companies that rely on highly restricted technological know-how. On the other hand, platform users – would-be digital citizens – often misunderstand the rationales behind the emerging techno-political situation, not to mention the platforms in which everyone has become voluntarily or involuntarily immersed and entangled. Beyond simply disrupting conventional politics, platform urbanisation has created a new and, from all indications, unprecedented kind of politics. It has given rise to new political spaces and subjectivities, thereby driving the ongoing reorganisation of ‘historical’ assemblages of territory, authority and rights (Sassen 2014).

Different research projects have sought to document this reorganisation with an eye to fostering opportunities for collective action. The European-based PLUS Project (Platform Labour in Urban Spaces: Fairness, Welfare, Development²) is one such initiative. Through their contributions to this special issue, affiliated researchers explore the impact of four digital platforms (Airbnb, Deliveroo, Helpling, and Uber) on platform work, social reproduction, skills development, and urban citizenship across seven European cities (Barcelona, Berlin, Bologna, Lisbon, London, Paris, and Tallinn). The articles that follow are intended to offer a fresh perspective on the platform economy by analysing it in terms of the relationship between urban contexts and the ongoing platformisation process, with an emphasis on how this relationship is reshaping (platform) labour and reconfiguring (or even reinvigorating) social action. Along the way, the authors consider whether platforms are useful for the development of urban environments and labour markets, or whether urban environments and labour markets are useful for the development of platforms. Likewise, they seek to identify the conditions under which relevant actors can mobilise and build alliances to ensure that such forms of development can be made to benefit not only workers but also (urban) citizens and the (urban) environment in general.

The urban dimension of platformisation

The social and economic impacts of the emerging platform economy are most obvious in urban settings, where platforms are giving rise to unfamiliar dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, cooperation and division, as well as social and political integration and fragmentation. New categories of actors, restructured relationships, and novel forms of negotiation are fundamentally reconfiguring the urban labour market. Key platform-based services – including home meal delivery (e.g., Deliveroo, UberEats, and Foodora), ride-hailing (e.g., Uber), and short-term apartment rentals (e.g., Airbnb) – focus on urban markets. The same has been true of the first grassroots initiatives aimed at enhancing

working conditions for platform workers. Related achievements include the Charter of Fundamental Rights of Digital Labour in the Urban Context, signed in Bologna on 31 May 2018. As for regulatory efforts, they have tended to focus on short-term rentals in urban areas (Aguilera et al 2021; Serrano et al 2020). For instance, in response to over-tourism, Florence and Venice recently issued a *decalogo* (a list of 10 principles) in support of their calls for Italian national authorities to regulate such accommodations.

In urban contexts, digital platforms have given rise to new stakeholders, governance models, data-driven business strategies, and modes of everyday interaction (Barns 2020). Driven by financial and ideological interest in the growing value of data accumulation, this ongoing process of ‘platform urbanisation’ has redrawn the landscape of urban citizenship (Hanakata and Bignami 2021, 2023). On a global scale, it has redefined labour through the reconfiguration of actors, relationships, and bargaining strategies (or the emergence of new ones). The process was laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated change, intensified debate, and gave new urgency to existing efforts for addressing underlying issues (Pirone et al 2020). In urban areas especially, the pandemic highlighted the precarious and vulnerable position in which platform workers find themselves (Rani and Dhir 2020; Valencia Castro et al 2020). The ways in which platforms repurpose and create spaces where citizens are compelled to interact either virtually (online) or physically (offline) has produced a techno-political and spatial environment specific to each city (Braun et al 2022). But beyond citizen interactions, urban infrastructure development as well as the availability of services and planning strategies that are algorithm-based and platform-driven have also reconfigured the political-material reality and use of urban structures and spaces.

Because platform urbanisation is more than just a technical process – because it is also an ongoing political process that is reshaping platform workers’ capacity for action in platform-mediated spaces and across the urban landscape as a whole – it calls into question what Isin and Ruppert (2020) refer to as ‘digital citizenship’. Nevertheless, the platform economy provides spaces for reflecting on the meaning of ‘skills’ and experimenting with how to apply the concept in a politically and socially useful manner. After all, the skills applied by most platform workers are not defined, formalised, or recognised, let alone subject to training or certification. Accordingly, the contributors to this special issue pay special attention to the technical and political aspects of how the platform economy alters ties between individuals and communities at an urban scale.

Platforms for urban development or ‘the urban’ as a platform for development?

The concept of platformisation is closely associated with moments of turbulence (Srnicsek 2017). Although its roots can be traced back to the 1990s, it truly came to the fore in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007–2008. The low-interest environment fostered by central banks facilitated massive venture capital investments in high-risk assets, including digital platforms. The smartness mandate (Halpern et al 2017) is another idea closely associated with financial, environmental, and security crises. Proponents of smartness advocate for the decentralisation of agency and intelligence across objects, networks, and living entities. They see environmentally extended smartness as having the potential to replace deliberative planning while fostering resilience in a constantly evolving world. Much like shock doctrine, the smartness mandate emphasises core components of platformisation: instability, risk, and continuous change. Meanwhile, by accelerating the platformisation process, the COVID-19 pandemic has made turbulence the new norm, with platforms shaping and rationalising our existence.

The broader smart cities movement aims to make physical and algorithmic interconnectedness and standardisation the foundation of urban development.

Proponents pursue the creation of smart spaces through projects driven by abstraction and geographical distancing and governed by special legal protocols. Such projects also have an important temporal dimension, whereby uncertainty about the future is managed by continuously referring to the present as a ‘demo’ or ‘prototype’ stage of what lies ahead. Political and social debates traditionally associated with urban life are dismissed as vestiges of the past. Instead, infrastructure, big data, and analytics are treated as the primary drivers of development. However, such an approach lacks any clearly defined objectives. Instead, it reflects the software development process, which is characterised by demos, beta versions, tests, updates, and perpetual experimentation. Accordingly, urban ‘technicians’ incessantly strive to produce new but never final versions of cities and spaces around the globe.

So-called smart policy emphasises the importance of digitally and computationally managed systems. The latter are portrayed as being endowed with the ability to continually optimise themselves, thereby eliminating any need for ‘external’ political or social intervention. In essence, smart policy is a modern iteration of 20th-century planning concepts that shaped contemporary global urbanisation in diverse parts of the world and in various socio-political contexts. The smart city movement also appeals to the long-standing belief – which has survived from the late 19th century through Le Corbusier and into the present – that technology can bring order to the complexity and chaos of urban life (Cuppini 2020). Its insistence on algorithmic solutions to urban challenges reflects a view of the city as a unified entity that can be administered and managed. Today, cybernetic techno-solutionism is advocated by tech giants like Amazon and IBM (Cuppini *et al.* 2023). The ideal of the regulatory-smart city and high-tech urban projects are collectively reshaping how urban space is understood and governed, how the labour force and individual workers are managed, and even who inhabits cities. But what truly distinguishes the present from the past is a belief in the possibility of creating an urban environment that is not merely an economic support structure – as in the case of old industrial cities – but an integral part of a financially, technologically, and industrially integrated production system.

As presented above, the global reach of digital platforms suggests a worldwide process of platform urbanisation. Just as oil and gas platforms extract raw materials offshore and underground, digital platforms often extract their raw materials (data) from below the surface. Emblematic of the ‘Industrial Revolution 4.0’ (Mezzadra *et al.* 2024), platforms represent a multifaceted ecosystem encompassing labour, technology, and environments. And like technology in general, platforms are not neutral. Rather, their use is shaped by social and political struggles. Transcending its role as merely an economic support structure, platform urbanism marks the definitive convergence of capitalism and urbanisation. It has become a key component of a financially, technologically, and industrially integrated production system that strives to create a uniform worldwide space tailored to its needs. In a context where relationships are based on the merging of human and machine, this new aesthetic and material regime seeks to bring consistency and cohesion to an otherwise conflict-ridden urban fabric.

The rise of the gig economy and platform urbanisation raises a number of issues. The articles in this special issue focus on four in particular: the algorithmic management of work, the emergence of a digital proletariat, opportunities to advocate for workers’ rights, and platform cooperativism.

The algorithmic management of work

De Stefano (2016), Ravenelle (2017), and Rosenblat and Stark (2016) are among those who have underscored the great extent to which workers are at the mercy of algorithms. The situation is made worse by the asymmetry of information maintained by platforms.

Various scholars have attempted to theorise the process of algorithmic management, according to which work is assigned, controlled, and assessed through automated procedures (Rosenblat 2018; Scholz 2017; Stark and Pais 2020; Wood 2021). Among other things, the new ‘platform work managerialism’ is characterised by the algorithmic allocation of work, use of digital tracking and monitoring technologies to enforce and control pace and standard of work, integration of customer ratings into performance management systems, engagement of labour on self-employed or independent contractor status [and] extraction of commission on every transaction mediated by the platform (Moore and Joyce 2020 p. 930).

Of course, the impact of management based on machine learning algorithms extends beyond the gig economy to more traditional work contexts (Jarrahi et al 2021). Its broadening scope raises various legal and ethical concerns, especially in relation to the use of workers’ data without their knowledge and the growth of precarious employment. For example, a working paper commissioned by the European Commission explains that, ‘algorithmic management clearly has important policy implications’ (Wood 2021 p. 13). Likewise, a 2022 report by the International Labour Organization notes that, ‘the right of digital self-determination is a precondition for the implementation of collective rights for digital workers with the aim of addressing regulatory gaps and negotiating working conditions’ (Baiocco et al 2022 p. 24).

Debates surrounding technical dependence on platforms have tended to focus on employment status and the lack of access to social benefits (De Stefano 2016; Drahoukoupil and Fabo 2016; Garben 2019). Because they are treated as self-employed entrepreneurs, platform workers generally have to forego the protections associated with a standard employment relationship (Stanford 2017). Furthermore, algorithms organise and control work in ways that promote fierce competition among workers (Moore and Joyce 2020; Rosenblat and Stark 2016; Stark and Pais 2020), thereby limiting both individual flexibility and opportunities for collective action.

The digital proletariat

The prevalence of atypical forms of work characterised by algorithmic dependence has been growing rapidly over the last decade (ILO 2021). This has led many observers to describe the realities of digital-age employment, especially the precarious conditions faced by platform workers (Schor et al 2020), in terms of the emergence of what could be called a precariat. This group has been variously referred to as the ‘digital proletariat’ (Baril 2023; Ragnedda 2020; Scholz 2013; Van Doorn and Vijay 2021), ‘cybertariat’ (Huws 2014), or ‘cyber-proletariat’ (Dyer-Witthford 2015). Its members, who typically perform on-demand work with little to no job security (Kalleberg 2009), are subject to new forms of inequality (Ragnedda 2020). Invisible, underpaid, and under constant surveillance (Zuboff 2020), they enjoy few social protections (Abdelnour and Bernard 2018; Stanford 2017) despite their vital role in the operation of the digital economy. Accordingly, the theme of a digital proletariat is linked to issues of social justice, labour rights, and the need to address growing precariousness through regulation. Indeed, many researchers have placed the exploitation of platform workers at the heart of their analysis (Cant 2020; Heiland 2021; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Vandaele 2021).

The emergence of a digital proletariat reflects the extent to which the Internet has profoundly transformed the nature of work, fragmenting and decentralising it (Scholz 2013) to the point that platform work becomes ‘digital labor’ (Cardon and Casilli 2015; Scholz 2013). This process involves the ‘commodification’ (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft 2014) or ‘servitization’ (Casilli 2019) of platform workers, who have come to be treated as services for machines. In other words, human labour has been transformed

into a standardised economic resource, thereby creating a vast pool of ‘ghost labour’ (Gray and Suri 2019).

The fact that platform work is typically performed by migrant workers only amplifies the associated precariousness. To date, the relationship between platform work and migration has only been partially documented (Cant 2020; Lata *et al* 2023; Riordan *et al* 2022; Van Doorn *et al* 2023; Van Doorn and Vijay 2021). Nevertheless, existing research shows that the platform workforce is largely composed of ‘newcomers’ or ‘permanent residents’ who hold degrees and work permits (Baril 2023; Ziegler *et al* 2020). A deeper understanding of the situation will be vital to appreciating its political and economic implications. Rethinking policies and regulations with a view to better protecting the rights of migrant workers (Van Doorn and Vijay 2021) will also help identify possibilities for mobilisation and collective action.

Opportunities for promoting workers’ rights

Given the profound worldwide impact of digital platforms – as described above – the emergence of the platform economy has given rise to unfamiliar dynamics and a wholesale reconfiguration of the urban labour market. In turn, there have been widespread calls for government action alongside efforts to organise platform workers (Dif-Pradalier and Dufresne 2019; Dufresne and Leterme 2021; Fabo *et al* 2017; Newlands *et al* 2018; Stewart and Stanford 2017; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017; Van Doorn *et al* 2023). Currently, minimal trade union membership (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017) undercuts the potential for collective mobilisation (Abdelnour and Bernard 2018). But despite their highly individualised working conditions and lack of formal representation, platform workers have demonstrated a capacity to organise and defend their rights through efforts that received considerable media attention during the pandemic (Polkowska 2021; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). The workers involved have had to find ways of reconciling entrepreneurialism and solidarity, whereby the success of an individual’s business activities depend on the collective defence of workers’ rights (Popan 2021).

A great deal of research has addressed the widespread failure of platform workers, especially those in the food delivery sector, to unionise (Cant 2020; Graham *et al* 2017; Polkowska 2021; Popan 2021; Vandaele 2021; Vandaele *et al* 2019). In many ways, platform work is an anathema to trade unions, which have traditionally fought to preserve the standard employment relationship (Hyman 2007). They also typically operate within a national sphere, where they participate in shaping the language, the political culture, and decision-making processes surrounding the regulation of labour (Martin and Ross 1999). As a result, unions tend to pursue mobilisation and collective action based on the prevailing political frameworks and trends in a particular country (Tarrow 2005). In other words, their outlook most often lacks a transnational dimension.

Nevertheless, unions in various countries have adjusted their approaches and demands with a view to addressing issues of social protection in the gig economy (Bernaciak *et al* 2014; Fairbrother and Yates 2013). For instance, they have attempted to organise precarious workers and inform them of their rights. The rights of platform workers have also been the focus of public awareness campaigns and alliances with other civil society organisations (Dufresne and Leterme 2021; Fairbrother and Yates 2013). Still, much remains to be done in terms of extending union protections to the platform economy (Joyce *et al* 2023). Many observers have underscored the need for responding to algorithmic management through collective bargaining (De Stefano and Taes 2023). Others have called for the ‘creation of a transnational digital workers union or trade secretariat’ (Graham *et al* 2017 p. 155). But whereas some hail the potential of so-called new unionism to transition the labour movement as a whole from a state of crisis to one of renewal

(Bernaciak et al 2014), others argue for a more pragmatic focus on organisation, capacity, and purpose (Fairbrother 2015). In any case, the question remains whether unions and platform workers should fight the platform economy head-on or opt for a roundabout approach, namely by creating platforms of their own.

Platform cooperativism

Countering the power of platforms is no easy task, given their high level of technical sophistication and proven ability to attract capital. One option is cooperativism: an economic, social, and political model based on collaboration between individuals to achieve common goals and a commitment to satisfying members' needs and aspirations. For more than two centuries, cooperatives have been developing a democratic approach to business and resource management as an alternative to the capitalist economy's emphasis on competition and individual profit (Williams 2007).

Specifically, the cooperative platform model promotes the creation of online platforms that are managed collectively by users in a way that gives workers greater control over their data and activities. Such an approach has the potential to reduce economic and social inequalities while ensuring a more equitable distribution of the benefits generated by online activities (Scholz 2016). It could also reduce the concentration of power in the hands of a few large tech companies, thereby limiting the exploitation of self-employed workers and providing for fairer online interactions (Scholz and Schneider 2016). This would involve harnessing the algorithmic design of applications such as Deliveroo or Uber as part of a cooperative business model based on a commitment to transparency and democratic governance (Scholz 2016; Scholz and Schneider 2016). Research into the feasibility of cooperative platforms has identified challenges that would be easier to overcome in the ride-hailing and employment services sectors than in the cases of food delivery, personal care services, or micro-tasking (Bunders et al 2022). In particular, platform cooperatives will need to address issues of medium- and long-term economic sustainability and scalability (Pirone 2023). But notwithstanding the difficulties involved, the development of worker-owned, union-supported platform cooperatives offers an attractive means of improving conditions for workers in an increasingly digitised world (Scholz 2017).

Presenting the articles³

Like other articles in this special issue, the opening text draws extensively on the rich empirical data gathered in the context of the PLUS Project. In this case, Mattia Frapporti and Maurilio Pirone look at how digital platforms establish a territorial presence within a given urban context, as well as how this process shapes opportunities for collective action. Based on the situation in Bologna, the authors provide both empirical and theoretical insight into how diverse categories of platform workers (i.e., not only riders and drivers) react to spatial reconfigurations and changes in urban life associated with platforms' territorialisation strategies. Specifically, they explore how such workers seek out both singular and variable alliances with other workers, customers, and even the platforms themselves. The authors argue that the adoption of a given approach by a broad spectrum of platform workers depends on the specific circumstances of urban territorialisation, which can vary according to 'the connection with established industry sectors, the assignment of an employment status, and the labour process organization'. The analysis of workers' reactions relies on Hirschman's (Hirschman 2004) well-known distinction between exit, voice, and loyalty (EVL) – which has never before been applied to the operations of specific digital platforms at an urban scale. For instance, the article addresses why, in Bologna, cleaners with Helping chose the exit option. Given the impersonal algorithmic management of the platform, they

preferred direct communication with customers in a local market whose small size encouraged informality and reliance on work of mouth. By contrast, Airbnb hosts opted for loyalty, given the higher level of income available from this particular platform. As for Deliveroo drivers, they chose voice in response to a combination of low wages, strict algorithmic management, and a lack of stable employment prospects outside the platform. The article proposes a rereading of EVL, insofar as the exit option can be interpreted as a constructive strategy that provides workers with greater bargaining power (and income), the voice option can be exercised outside traditional labour organisations (e.g., in the framework of loose collectives, such as those observed in the food delivery sector), and the loyalty option can reflect a highly strategic choice (given the role played by rankings and ratings in providing access to customers). But whereas the practical challenge of connecting with other platform workers makes it difficult to speak with a collective voice, despite the possibilities offered by various communication tools, the exit and loyalty options can be exercised on an individual basis.

Titled 'Platform Work, Exploitation, and Migrant Worker Resistance: Evidence from London and Berlin', the second article is an empirically based study of the factors determining the ways in which platform workers – most of whom are also migrant workers – are able to resist the platforms that exploit them. By contrasting the situations that prevail in London and Berlin, Oğuz Alyanak, Callum Cant, Tatiana López, Adam Badger, and Georg Adam explore how border regimes, national systems of industrial relations, and local labour markets jointly shape the experiences of platform workers while impeding (or enabling) labour resistance. Given the barriers to their participation in the conventional labour market, migrants simultaneously recognise the exploitative nature of the platform economy and find themselves drawn to it as an easily accessible means of earning money. And although employment and migration status strongly influence the decision to use them, different forms of resistance – including wildcat strikes – remain available to platform workers in both cities. In line with the recent literature on the subject (Bessa *et al* 2022), the authors explain that, 'whereas in Berlin this tactical choice is produced by the restrictions on the right to strike within the existing industrial relations framework, in London it is the result of a complete absence of any protected right to strike at all'. This insightful comparative case study based on the results of the Fairwork project invites readers to reconsider the possibilities for alliances with established forms of trade unionism in a context of differentiated repressive state action. Furthermore, the authors insist on the need to see migrant workers as leaders at the forefront of social change and the renewal of social action through their resistance to not only the exploitation of migrant labour by digital platforms but also the ways in which state policy seeks to devalue their contributions and criminalise so-called irregular migration.

The third article provides a deeper understanding of the ways in which migrant platform workers organise and take action. But whereas the recent scientific literature and media attention have focused on logistical issues and widespread conflicts in the ride-hailing and delivery sectors, Stefania Animento and Valentin Niebler turn their attention to platform-mediated work performed by cleaners inside private homes. Through a case study of the Helpling platform in Berlin conducted as part of the PLUS Project, the authors delve into questions raised in the article by Alyanak *et al* by taking a closer look at the action and resistance strategies adopted by those migrant workers who dominate the cleaning sector workforce. The analysis also confirms the key role of regulatory frameworks by showing how German rules limit opportunities for organising among workers who make themselves available to platforms for only a short time. In addition, the article highlights how the spatial dispersion of highly individualised work across the city and a lack of identification with the work environment further hinders labour organising among platform workers in the domestic cleaning sector, as well as the need to move beyond the informal exchange of information and tactics among such workers. Other

significant obstacles to organising include the unwillingness of legislators to regulate the sector at either the federal or local level, along with the minimal level of practical support offered by established trade unions (with the notable exception of the counselling offered in Berlin by BEMA, an agency financed by the German Trade Union Confederation [DGB]). Building on earlier work, the authors nevertheless show that these very real challenges have not resulted in a lack of agency, collective action, or resistance. Examples of all three can be found in the activities of mutual aid groups associated with specific migrant communities (Latin American and Spanish-speaking), which platform workers rely on in lieu of workplace-based forms of socialisation and support. In this way, the article provides a clearer picture of both the opportunities and barriers facing workers hoping to challenge the power of digital platforms. It sets out a highly promising approach for researchers interested in other forms of platform work, especially in the care sector, and can certainly inform academic discussions in the fields of critical migration studies and labour sociology. It also raises stimulating questions about the importance of gender in relation to issues of power, algorithms, and platformisation (Buolamwini and Gebru 2018; Churchill and Craig 2019; Cook et al 2021; Morell 2022; Rani et al 2022; Rodríguez-Modroño et al 2022; Salvagni et al 2022), which have not been at the heart of the present thematic collection.

The article by Heiner Heiland explores the conditions that foster or discourage labour unrest and mobilisation within the platform economy by highlighting the role played by a city's intrinsic spatial logic. Although largely ignored by the existing literature, this constitutes a key aspect of food delivery platform-mediated work. The analysis is based on the results of two in-depth case studies, conducted in Cologne and Berlin, whose mixed methods research design combined interviews, multi-sited ethnography, and a survey. The author shows how the work and resistance of riders are embedded specific yet highly dynamic socio-spatial contexts that help determine the effectiveness of both. Accordingly, 'the spatially distinct and intrinsic logic of cities shapes the forms and strategies of labour unrest and thus leads to different outcomes'. Differences were observed in how individuals experience not only work but also instances of collaboration and mobilisation involving fellow riders in the same urban centre, with protests tending to be more institutionalised in Cologne, and more autonomous and militant in Berlin. In other words, it is a matter of 'scale and place', insofar as such differences result from local characteristics and contextual factors rooted in an urban context that operates as a 'structural principle'. Referring to Marshall's distinction, the author argues that what he calls the 'urban atmosphere' must be treated not only as a constitutive dimension of the opportunities and strategies that structure mobilisations involving food delivery workers but also as a dynamic variable in constant interaction with the surrounding environment.

Promising avenues for supporting platform workers, especially those open to trade unions, are at the heart of Luca Perrig's article. It highlights the asymmetrical power relationship between workers and platforms, along with the political and strategic need for workers to have access to their data profiles. As the author explains, efforts on the part of gig workers to influence the algorithms that control their activities (the possibility of accessing work, the order in which to make deliveries, the route to follow, etc.) can help them 'develop a good understanding of the data they produce, and the margin they have in order to take advantage of it'. For instance, workers' use of data from their digital profiles accessed through a Subject Access Request (SAR) under the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 'can be a negotiating tool' in dealing with platforms. Based on doctoral research that led the author to work as a rider and to study the activities of Swiss trade unions, the analysis seeks to make sense of the black box that is algorithmic management. Although insofar as gig workers are recognised as employees and therefore subject to labour law, the latter does not regulate the specific features of algorithmic management. Meanwhile, the extreme individualisation of workers and total lack of human interaction fostered by algorithmic management makes it difficult for workers to

organise and mobilise. Nevertheless, gig workers have taken collective action in various cities worldwide, and trade unions have begun to take an interest in addressing the impact of platformisation (De Stefano and Taes 2023). More broadly, awareness of related issues has enabled the development of new and promising alliances between trade unions and organisations for the defence of digital rights. Such collaborations could support the renewal of social action on an international scale.

The final article is based on an ethnographic immersion in one of Barcelona's first bicycle courier platform cooperatives, called Mensaka. Arthur Guichoux followed the example of other researchers interested in platform work (Cant 2020; Perrig 2022) by working for almost a year as a rider with this pioneering organisation, which uses the Coopcycle platform. He then went on to work for the Coopcycle federation (<https://coopcycle.org/en/federation/>), which enables individual couriers, cooperatives, and associations – as well as restaurants or shops – to offer their services through a smartphone application. As of 2023, the federation had around 60 members in Europe, roughly a dozen in the Americas, and one in Oceania. The article assesses the potential of the cooperative framework as a sustainable alternative to capitalist platforms, insofar as cooperatives can be understood as both 'collectives of work' and forms of long-term mobilisation. The author traces Mensaka's origins to the mobilisation of Spanish couriers who, after successfully challenging major platforms like Deliveroo and Uber in court, shifted their efforts to create a self-organised alternative as part of the international platform cooperativism movement (Scholz 2016). As explained in the article's conclusion: 'It is no longer a question of fighting an adversary, but of mobilising to create a viable alternative'. The alternative in question would be fully embedded in an urban environment that it seeks to enhance by eliminating worker exploitation, carbon emissions, and the commodification of personal data within the home delivery sector. Although initiatives like Mensaka provide proof of feasibility, their medium- to long-term (economic) viability remains uncertain within an extremely competitive environment. For now, such alternative approaches to organising platform work – like those described by Animento *et al* in their article on the home cleaning sector – are confined to the margins or at least easily overlooked. Their proliferation – and entry into the mainstream – will require the development of alliances, including across different sectors, alongside customer engagement.

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