

## CHAPTER 3

# Transport Platform Workers

This chapter focuses on the struggles of transport platform workers. Before getting on to discuss different examples, it is first worth noting that there are significant regional and national differences in the way that platforms operate. While there are, as this chapter will argue, tendencies that build connections and collective subjectivities across this kind of work, important differences remain. As I have argued elsewhere (Woodcock and Graham 2019), the emergence of the gig economy has been shaped by nine preconditions that involve different combinations of political economy, technology, and social factors. This is again to stress that technology is not the determining factor, but rather that the following preconditions have an important impact on the form of this kind of work: the strength of ‘workers’ power’ and ‘state regulation’ (political economy); the ‘desire for flexibility for/from workers’ (political economy and social); ‘gendered and racialized relationship of work’ and ‘consumer attitudes and preferences’ (social); ‘mass connectivity and cheap technology’ (social and technology); ‘digital legibility of work’ and ‘platform infrastructure’ (technology); and ‘globalization and outsourcing’ (technology and political economy) (Woodcock and Graham 2019, 21).

It is important here to consider the relative strength of workers’ power across the different national examples. These shape the forms of political composition, and while not determining them, they provide context. As an example, in South Africa there is a history of militant and politicised trade unions, with connections to anti-apartheid struggles. There have also been recent breakaways to the left of the COSATU union federation. Despite this background, the existing trade union movement has only had limited engagement with platform workers so far. In India, which also has a long history of politicised trade unions (with many unions linked to political parties), there are more examples of existing trade unions attempting to organise in new industries such as IT or

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platform work. The focus in both cases has been on private hire transport, with less connection between the existing trade union movement and food transport workers. In the US, with a very different trade union context, there have been some examples of connections with existing unions. For example, the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA) has organised with Uber drivers in New York, but elsewhere there is a more complicated picture. In the case of the formation of the Independent Drivers Guild (involving the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers), Uber paid ‘an undisclosed sum to the guild’ (Scheiber 2017) reportedly for not engaging with the issue of employment status. Other examples are driver networks such as Rideshare Drivers United, particularly in California, or advocacy campaigns such as Gig Workers Rising funded by trade unions. Again, these have focused on private hire drivers rather than food delivery. However, in the UK there is a long history of organising across both sectors. At Uber, this began in 2014, starting with worker networks, then involving the mainstream GMB union, then the alternative union IWGB (Independent Workers Union of Great Britain). The IWGB also organises with Deliveroo workers following the strikes in 2016, while workers have also formed courier networks and some have organised with the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) (Cant and Woodcock 2020).

If the existing political composition has an effect on the forms of resistance and struggle that emerge, so too does the role of the state in shaping the technical composition of platform work. While platforms attempt to evade and avoid government regulation wherever possible, there remain aspects of this that they have to adapt to in particular jurisdictions. For example, mirroring some of the discussion above, both South Africa and India have comparatively strong labour laws, although there are significant problems with the implementation of these. In South Africa, the application of these laws in transport work is limited. However, in India there are significant regional differences. In Bangalore there are strict limits on how much taxis can charge for journeys. This means that while it is quite straightforward to start driving for Uber, there are wage caps for drivers, as the cost of journeys is limited by regulation. Unsurprisingly, Uber is lobbying for these limits to be raised, pointing to this as a source of low wages, rather than the choices made by the platform regarding how much of a cut it takes. In the US there are also significant differences by state. There have been a range of recent legal interventions in both New York and California, while in many other states there has been little attempt to regulate. This is exacerbated by the large investment in lobbying by platform companies, many of which are headquartered in San Francisco. Most recently, this has focused on the question of employment status. In the UK, drivers require licences from bodies such as Transport for London (TfL) to work for platforms such as Uber. This means that there is the potential for regulation, but in practice these licensing bodies have done very little to intervene around conditions of work or employment status. For both kinds of work, there are ongoing and

long-running legal cases around reclassifying employment status to the intermediate category of ‘worker status’, between employment and self-employment.

Each of the nine preconditions plays a role on shaping the specific form of platforms in the gig economy. However, while this framework (Woodcock and Graham 2019) sought to provide a basis for understanding the contours of the gig economy internationally, attention here is drawn to the role of workers’ power, not just as one factor among others, but as the key factor. However, drawing attention to other aspects remains important, particularly those that shape the technical and social composition of platform work or provide alternative points of confrontation for workers, such as regulatory bodies. Across these different national contexts there is a drive towards similar models of operations. Transport platforms, as Nick Srnicek argues, are examples of ‘lean platforms’ that ‘operate through a hyper-outsourced model, whereby workers are outsourced, fixed capital is outsourced, maintenance costs are outsourced, and training is outsourced. All that remains is a bare extractive minimum – control over the platform that enables a monopoly rent to be gained’ (2017, 76).

### Food Transport Workers

Food delivery platforms build on a long history of takeaway food. Over two thousand years ago, Ancient Romans could visit a *Thermopolium*, where there were specialised shops that sold pre-prepared food. In the late eighteenth century, *naengmyeon* (cold noodles) could be ordered for delivery in Korea. The first recorded delivery of pizza was to the palace of King Umberto and Queen Margherita in Naples in 1889. *Dabbawalas* started in 1890 in India under British colonial rule. This was a system of lunchbox delivery and return, using both bicycles and trains, to provide a way to feed the increasing workforce in the city. During the Second World War, the British government briefly tested a system of food delivery for people displaced from their homes. However, the largest shift towards food delivery followed the Second World War. With new patterns of mass media consumption – sitting in front of the television – people also changed how they wanted to consume food. Instead of visiting restaurants, many people began to follow the *royalty* in Naples, albeit much later, having the pizza brought to them. Today, with further shifts in media consumption, it is now possible to buy that very same pizza through a smartphone app.

Throughout this long history there have been people making food and others consuming it. The ways in which this has been mediated have become increasingly complicated. Take, for example, the role of the server in a restaurant. While it comprises a whole range of tasks, at its core it involves bringing food out of the kitchen and to the customer. While we might think of the roles as quite different, there is a similar interaction between a delivery driver and the food commodity. The delivery driver has much further to go, but has less

interaction with the customer. From this basic commodification of food, capital has sought out new ways to profit, beginning from getting workers to make the food and then deliver it to the customers, whether in a restaurant owned by the capitalist or for the customer to eat elsewhere.

When looking at food transport, it is worth remembering what Marx argued: the ‘value of a commodity is, in itself, of no interest to the capitalist. What alone interests him, is the surplus-value that dwells in it, and is realisable by sale’ (1867, 437). This realisation of value is at the core of food delivery platforms. Neither Deliveroo nor Uber Eats, the dominant platforms in the UK, start off by making food. Instead, they provide a service that connects restaurants to customers, arranging the delivery of food. Like their relationship to food, these platforms also try to distance themselves from the delivery drivers. Drivers are not employed by the platform, but are considered as self-employed independent contractors. The platform attempts to act as an intermediary between restaurants, customers, and delivery workers. In an alternative world, you could imagine how a service like this would be beneficial to every party: restaurants could more easily sell their food, customers could see the range of options available, and delivery workers could work for more restaurants at one time. However, the platform does not enter into this arrangement to facilitate the existing relationships between the actors. Instead, it becomes a mediator that charges the restaurant a fee (as much as 30% of the order total in some cases), charges the customer for delivery (as much as £4–5), and distributes the work and the payment (as little as £2.80 a delivery) to the driver. This represents a concentration of capital, sweeping away the smaller operations of drivers tied to individual restaurants, while attempting to monopolise the market for food delivery – since restaurants want to register with a popular platform, customers have more options, and delivery drivers cannot find sustainable work elsewhere.

This economic model sounds straightforward. Platforms become intermediaries and profit from both the restaurants and the drivers. However, in practice (like almost all economic models) this has proven not to be the case. As Ranjan Roy (2020) notes, ‘if capitalism is driven by a search for profit, the food delivery business confuses the hell out of me’. Roy provides a fascinating example of the way these platforms burn through venture capital on a scale that is frankly astonishing. A friend of his ran a pizza restaurant in the US. This restaurant did not deliver pizzas, instead focusing on selling food to be eaten on the premises. However, the owner started to receive calls complaining about their pizza deliveries. The owner found that the Google listing for the company now had a delivery option fulfilled by Doordash (a US food delivery platform), though no consent for this had been given. Although being pulled on to the platform was weird enough, this began to cause problems. Doordash was listing pizzas at significantly lower prices than the restaurant charged, for example with a \$24 pizza listed for \$16. As Roy explained, this could have been due to Doordash ‘artificially lowering prices for customer acquisition purposes’ – a common

practice with platforms – but also ‘Doordash scraped restaurant websites’. As Roy (2020) and his friend investigated further, ‘it was clear that the way his menu was set up on his website, Doordash had mistakenly taken the price for a plain cheese pizza and applied it to a “specialty” pizza with a bunch of toppings.’

This could have been the end of the story; however, Roy decided to engage in some platform economy trolling. Given that they could pay Doordash \$16 for a pizza, and that Doordash would then pay \$24 to the restaurant, there was the potential to pocket \$8 in arbitrage. So Roy and his friend decided to try it out and ordered ten pizzas. A worker from the Doordash call centre called the restaurant, placing the order, then a Doordash driver arrived and paid with a credit card for the pizzas. This transaction cost around \$7 for each pizza and its box, meaning that Roy and his friend paid \$230 (\$160 + \$70) and received \$240 from Doordash, making \$10 in arbitrage – enough for a free lunch. Not content to leave it there, they tested again with another ten pizzas. However, this time they only put dough in the boxes, which at restaurant scale cost almost nothing. This resulted in ‘\$75 in riskless profit’ and it went through with no problem. As Roy (2020) concludes, ‘was this a bit shady? Maybe, but fuck Doordash.’ After all, in 2019 Doordash lost \$450 million on \$900 million in revenue. As Roy continues: ‘Uber Eats is Uber’s “most profitable division” ... Uber Eats lost \$461 million in Q4 2019 off of [sic] revenue of \$734 million. Sometimes I need to write this out to remind myself. Uber Eats spent \$1.2 billion to make \$734 million. In one quarter.’ He concludes by noting that ‘the only viable endgame is a promise of monopoly concentration and increased prices’. It is perhaps no wonder then that platforms emphasise how important digital technology is to their operations.

Beyond these overall contours, the focus is often on the role of digital technology in facilitating the emergence of the platform model for delivery. This is both on the side of the platform – with the infrastructure to organise the purchase and distribution of food and the widespread use of algorithms – and on the side of the worker – accessing the work via smartphone, with the labour process being controlled algorithmically. There is often little, if any, discussion of the effect this has on the restaurant and the workers – as if, as Marx (1867, 437) argues, ‘the value of a commodity is, in itself, of no interest to the capitalist’, or the researcher. The next section will focus in on food delivery in London, mostly with Deliveroo, to unpick the experience of the work itself.

## Technical Composition

It is first worth noting that the technical composition of the work at Deliveroo has undergone many shifts and transformations since I first started talking to workers in London in 2016. There have been different rates of pay (with an hourly pay rate at first, then a per drop fee only), the introduction of so-called ‘Dark Kitchens’,<sup>4</sup> shifting balances between cyclists and moped drivers (as well

as cars later), changes to contractual terms, different calculations in the algorithm, and so on. These are all modifications to the overall technical composition of the work.

Before getting into the specifics of the management of the labour process, it is important to outline what is happening with labour power on delivery platforms. Taking food delivery as an example, the platform takes an order from a customer, charging them for the food and the delivery. This could involve separating the price of the food and the delivery, or combining the two. The platform purchases the food from the restaurant, either taking commission or charging the customer a higher price. In order to realise the value of the purchase, the food needs to be delivered within a reasonable time frame to the customer. The platform is selling commodified food delivery, realising value from the restaurant's food (at the same time allowing the restaurant to realise value from the food being produced) and extracting value from the production of the food delivery. As Marx reminds us:

capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is essentially the production of surplus value ... If we may take an example from outside the sphere of production of material objects, a schoolmaster is a productive labourer when, in addition to belabouring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of in a sausage factory, does not alter the relation. (1867, 644)

Therefore, while delivery drivers are not producing a physical commodity, the social relation involves the platform laying out capital in a similar way.

In the simplest terms, the platform extracts value from the delivery labour process by charging the customers more than they pay the workers. In the case of the factory worker or the schoolmaster, this extraction of value stems from the difference between the value produced for capital and the wage paid to the worker. In many cases, for delivery platform workers this difference is not spread throughout the day, but is instead represented in the piece-work rate paid for a delivery. Capital has attempted to refigure this relationship as one of discrete tasks, rather than employing the labour power of delivery workers for a set length of time. With food delivery, this is because there are peaks of demand from customers. The move away from hourly rates is about trying to remove payment for stretches of unproductive time. However, it is important to point out that while labour power is not directly utilised during the gaps between deliveries, this capacity is required for the service to operate effectively. Having delivery drivers available to meet demand is an important part of the platform offering. This is also the case with private hire drivers, to be discussed in the next section, ensuring that there are available drivers nearby to pick up customers. Moving away from regular hours of employment breaks up the work process into discrete parts. As Marx observed in another context:

The capitalist can now wring from the labour a certain quantity of surplus-labour without allowing him the labour-time necessary for his own subsistence. He can annihilate all regularity of employment, and according to his own convenience, caprice, and the interest of the moment, make the most enormous overwork alternate with relative or absolute cessation of work. (1867, 687)

This same process can be observed outside restaurants or at other meeting points, as workers wait, unpaid, for app notifications that capital now has use for their labour. There is also a huge pressure, as noted by Roy (2020), to reduce labour costs.

To return to Marx again, the use of piece wages does not transform the underlying relationship. After all, piece rates have been common in factory work. As Marx notes, ‘wages by the piece are nothing else than a converted form of wages by time, just as wages by time are a converted form of the value or price of labour-power’ (1867, 692). However, in the first footnote of chapter 21 of *Capital*, Marx critiques a position put forward by John Watts that ‘piece-workers are in fact their own masters, even whilst working upon the capital of the employer’ (1867, 692). Rather than altering the relationship, Marx argues that:

they furnish to the capitalist an exact measure for the intensity of labour. Only the working-time which is embodied in a quantum of commodities determined beforehand, and experimentally fixed, counts as socially necessary working-time, and is paid as such ... since the quality and intensity of the work are here controlled by the form of wage itself, superintendence of labour becomes in great part superfluous. (1867, 692)

This point is worth raising here, as Watts’s claims have been restated by both platform capital and others. The platform – so the claim goes – is just bringing together the supply and demand for food delivery. The drivers are not workers, but instead micro-businesses (‘in fact their own masters’) and even have to pay for their own transport and so on. This is an aspect that Callum Cant has addressed: ‘while I was working at Deliveroo, there was one thing I couldn’t work out. I provided the bike, the phone, the electricity, and the mobile data that I needed to work. How did that change things?’ (2019, 65). He explains that it had become popular to say: ‘I basically own the means of production, apart from the app.’ However, as Cant details, this is not the case:

Instead of representing any underlying shift in the deep rhythms of capitalism, platform capitalism is just a change in its surface arrangement. It is important to understand these shifts in composition, but that doesn’t entail rewriting the rulebook. The situation facing platform workers is the same as the situation facing the cleaner who has to bring



their own spray, the chef who has to bring their own knife, or the carpenter who supplies their own tools. They don't profit off the exploitation of their own labour – they are forced to buy stuff in order to work ... We didn't own capital – instead we were forced to include tools used in the production process in our 'means of subsistence' – the stuff we buy with our wages to reproduce ourselves and our labour-power. (2019, 67)

From this analysis, the contours of the technical composition and the exploitation of delivery workers can be clearly seen.

Platform capitalism involves a series of technical changes that seek to immiserate and intensify delivery work. As 'just-in-time' methods transformed logistics to significantly reduce costs, so too do platforms as they attempt to drastically lower costs by trying to pay only-for-the-time. This means trying to strip out any unproductive paid time, with workers only paid for moments of productive time: the journey from the restaurant to the customer. Wells et al. (2020) have captured this with the spatial logics of Uber through the understanding of the 'just-in-place' worker. Similarly, the contractual tricks involved in this work attempt to shift the costs increasingly on to workers, allowing the platform to profit even further at workers' expense. On the question of self-employment, Cant is equally clear: 'the claim that workers are self-employed, whilst it might be viable in court, is obviously rubbish to the workers themselves' (2019, 69).

In the piece I co-wrote with a Deliveroo driver (Waters and Woodcock 2017), he summarised the overall technical composition:

Deliveroo uses a legal arrangement similar to Uber to employ drivers on the platform. Technically, the drivers are categorized as independent self-employed contractors. Deliveroo uses this status to claim that their drivers come from a broad network of entrepreneurs, rather than entering into traditional employment relationships. This implies that drivers are free to offer their services to a range of companies and can even send someone else to complete the deliveries. It is part of a process of 'digital black box labor' in which the labor component of platforms is deliberately obscured. Yet drivers have to pay a deposit to receive their uniform and are expected to wear them while completing pre-arranged shifts. It is an attempt to divest the company from the fiscal protections – minimum wage, holiday pay, sick pay, and so on – afforded to and won by workers. Increasingly, the prevalence of 'black boxes' in society is hiding work and the experience of workers.

In response, we 'tried to peel back the black box, emphasising that work on Deliveroo is not seamless, but rather it takes place in specific geographic locations in the city' (Waters and Woodcock 2017). This meant trying to understand the role of the city, as well as understanding how algorithms



were used to manage the work. Much of this focused on finding the limits of algorithmic control.

As I have noted before, there has been much emphasis on the role of algorithms in the organisation of this work. When I first met Deliveroo riders, the algorithm was often mentioned. However, discussion of the ‘algorithm’ was often vague, covering anything from how the work was being distributed, the ‘thing’ collecting data and evaluating performance, or a whole range of other interactions that workers had with the company. At first, this was something that clearly differentiated this work from many other forms of work – both previous forms of delivery, as well as other kinds of work that people might have done before. As one rider explained to me, comparing it to call centre work, where ‘you know your boss is breathing down your neck, you don’t have that’. Or as another put it:

I guess that it’s this sort of illusion of freedom or something that its, yeah, you just, it’s not customer service basically, and you’re also not selling anything, if you’re as nice as possible you’re not going to get a tip, they’ve already decided before you get to the door if you’re going to get a tip or not so there’s no reason to be extra nice to people like you’re not selling anything, you’re not selling yourself so there’s no emotional labour in it and I think that’s why it’s been like a job that I’ve stuck at longer than other shit jobs because I find it a lot easier to not do that sort of selling yourself side of things.

This ‘illusion of freedom’ was a result of the contractual arrangements that have become common in platform work. Rather than relying on the coercion of managers and supervisors, the platform has to find other ways to encourage workers. As one driver explained ‘you don’t have a manager that’s sort of going to be expecting you, you’re very separate from the company’. This separation meant that there was very little training, leaving workers to figure out many aspects of the work for themselves. As another worker explained, the process of distributing work was often discussed:

I was told when I was hired that it was based on the person closest to the restaurant but sometimes we are all in a big clump, there’s like a central meeting point where everyone comes together and it seems pretty random. There will be like a restaurant down the street and somebody on that side of the clump will get the order. But when somebody is not in the clump you don’t see them so you don’t know they get an order.

As another worker explained, this sense of being managed by an algorithm, despite its opaqueness, had some positive benefits:

The work itself is really good ... because it is the algorithm and that’s the boss ... you do get that kind of a sense of freedom even though it’s

not really. Because ... the algorithm has rules and we're the ones who, knowing that, the guys in the office are data driven, and we're the ones who make the data. So on my app, when I swipe, I'm making the order change from one step of the order to the next. It's been good in the fact that ... once you get into the mindset that you have no interaction with Deliveroo. Other than equipment yeah, I have had no interaction with Deliveroo. You get the emails, the newsletter things, but that is about it. You get the orders and phone calls about orders, but Deliveroo as management, actual Deliveroo people rather than call centre or operations, people who would be employees of Deliveroo, just no, not at all, other than recruitment.

This process meant that the experience of management is very different to other kinds of work. In the interviews I did with cyclists, this often came up in comparisons to call centre work that many had done before. In the call centre, supervisors would walk up and down the aisles, physically observing workers, as well as being able to listen to live and recorded calls (Woodcock 2017). In contrast, physical supervision is missing from platform work. However, like the call centre, large quantities of data are gathered on transport workers. As I found in the call centre, the actual use that this data is put to is unclear, other than being used to discipline and fire workers (Woodcock 2017). Also, in the case of platform work, the data is being collected via the smartphone and away from any kind of formal workplace. As the previous quote about guessing who will get the order shows, many workers developed rival theories about how the algorithm operated, using these to help them make sense of the work.

The algorithm is clearly important for understanding platforms such as Deliveroo, but focusing on the algorithm misses the relationships between the workers, the platform, and the customer. As one worker explained to me: 'They work on the algorithm, we work on the algorithm, they just interpret the numbers that we come out with.' This is an important point to keep in mind in relation to transport platform work. The labour process involves moving something from one place to another – for example, pizza from a restaurant to a customer. However, it also involves generating data about that process: which pizza was ordered, at what time, by whom, how long did it take to get delivered, much did the customer pay, etc. The generation and capture of this data at work is not a new phenomenon.

As Romano Alquati previously argued, information has historically played two important roles at work. The first is 'control information', relating to the capture of information that can be used by capital to effectively control the labour process (quoted in Wright 2016, 114). This can be seen in Taylor's scientific management, with the precise timing of tasks in order to better exert control over workers in the factory. As Braverman (1998) argued, this breaks up the labour process, allowing capital to deskill and degrade work on

the basis of management's control of information. There are clear examples of this at Deliveroo and similar platforms. On the one hand, huge quantities of data are generated through the workers' participation on the platform, while only just enough information is provided in return for the worker to complete the task. Although there have been changes on some platforms, the practice of only providing the details of the journey one step at a time is a good example of this. This prevents workers making an informed choice about which deliveries to accept, making it impossible to reject those that cover further distances. The use of GPS mapping also prevents the worker from deciding on the optimum route, which reduces the choice of how to complete the delivery.

The second kind of information that Alquati discusses is that which 'constitutes the collective legacy of the working class ... productive information tout court' (quoted in Wright 2016, 4). This involves the information that is generated, communicated, and shared by workers. In the labour process, capital attempts to subsume and then transform this information into something that can be valorised at work. In a factory, this might involve knowledge of materials, use of machines, ways to improve efficiency and so on. With platforms, this involves the attempt to valorise data, which 'enters the cybernetic machine and is transformed into a sort of machinic knowledge' (Pasquinelli 2011, 5). This is where much of the obsession with the role of data in platform work can be found. No longer is this the obvious knowledge theft of the white-coated Taylorist scientific manager watching over the shoulder of the worker. Instead, it is integrated into the smartphones, software, and GPS tracking of the workers' day-to-day (or perhaps millisecond-to-millisecond is more accurate) activities. Pasquinelli continues to argue that this is a process, which builds on Alquati's much earlier analysis, to 'encode workers' knowledge into bits and consequently transform bits into numbers for economic planning' (2011, 5). Data is, indeed, extracted from workers as part of the process of work on platforms (van Doorn and Badger 2020).

There is an important question regarding how central data collection is to the operation of food delivery platforms. For example, while in South Africa I came across a delivery platform that took a different approach to the use of data. While it has become common sense in research on platforms that they must be collecting and using huge quantities of data, the reality for this platform was different. It collected the data necessary for the running of the platform, including trip data to ensure payment and so on. The algorithm that it developed set the rates for the work, taking into account a changing number of factors. However, beyond this the platform did not store granular data. After all, as they explained, data storage can become very expensive for a start-up company and there was little additional benefit to storing all this data. Here, we can see the 'lean platform' (Srnicek 2017, 91) in effect. Data is used to manage a platform workforce, extracting value from the labour of delivery

drivers. When considered in these terms, it is worth considering what platforms claim they are using the data for.

Deliveroo, in a presentation to investors (Panja 2018), put forward its vision of how digital technology would be used in the future. Deliveroo claimed that one of its key objectives was to ‘create its own food offerings, personalised for customers’. This could be a use case for data: with ‘hyper-personalized [*sic*] food produced by Deliveroo; lower price of food; create daily use case; greater margin due to supply chain savings and automation’. So Deliveroo can use all the data it has been collecting to know when you are likely to order takeaway food (probably in the evening, maybe at lunchtime) and predict what foods will be in demand. However, in terms of extracting large quantities of data from workers, the picture is less clear. There is talk of automating kitchens that could bring the cost of making the food down to £1, and automating delivery to £1 per order. As of 2018, the average order on Deliveroo was £24.20, and it wanted to reduce this to half ‘in the coming years’. Part of this involved a claim that in ‘Deliveroo’s vision of the future, restaurants will be limited to “special occasions” and people will only cook “as a hobby” – robots making and delivering food for people who no longer want (or know how) to cook. As with Uber, the long-term plan for the platform is to simply replace workers – despite the huge technical challenges and costs this would involve.

The automation of some functions of the platform has already happened. As Duggan et al. have argued:

app-workers are typically managed via tracking mechanisms and customer ratings, thus forming one of the fundamental principles of the gig economy in that most core HR processes (i.e. the assignment of tasks and performance evaluation) are fulfilled by one of the two groups of users, the worker or the customer. (2020, 6)

A key aspect of the technical composition of this kind of work is the removal of the physical managerial or supervisory layer. There is no person standing over the worker – or indeed even regularly interacting with them – to increase the intensity of the work. Instead, in trusting the algorithmic methods, an important part of capital’s control over labour is lost. The lack of communication means that capital cannot head off the concerns of workers or offer small changes (Cant 2019). This means that even small grievances continue to build with no outlet. Anger stemming from the labour process therefore begins to boil over as workers search for a way to express it.

### Social Composition

Given the dream of automation, it is no surprise that workers on these platforms are treated as though they are some sort of temporary inconvenience.

Workers are pushed further into the background through the use of technology. For customers, meeting the worker is just one point in the interaction of getting a food delivery. Most of the time the customer sees only a representation of the worker, waiting to collect the food, moving across the map and so on. Each of these stages appears as already automated. However, behind the screen there is a worker finding a waiting point, meeting other drivers, managing the difficulties and challenges of the work, trying to make ends meet while bearing the risks of the platform.

Workers might appear isolated from each other, particularly as their labour process does not require direct cooperation. It only takes one worker to deliver a pizza to a customer. However, across the city, workers collaborate as part of this distributed logistics network, sharing the same roads and fabric of the city. As discussed before, whether in London, Bangalore, Cape Town, or elsewhere, workers find ways to connect with each other during the work. This is often a result of the lack of communication from the platform, providing a way for workers to share knowledge and tips with each other. The main method workers use to communicate is WhatsApp, developing from the way that many workers already connect with friends and family. In the UK, WhatsApp has become the dominant smartphone messaging system, and is widely used too in India and South Africa. In some cases, workers use alternative methods such as iMessage, Telegram, or Signal. Given that workers use a smartphone as part of the work process, they have regular access to it during work. As one worker explained to me:

I suppose that the thing about this industry is that it kind of maybe dug its own grave [laughter] it requires everyone to be on a smart phone and people will bring their own networks out and so everyone was so easily contactable once you sort of enter a network its, as I said, I don't take that the fact that its isolating, but I suppose all it takes is someone to say oh we're all in this WhatsApp group, join, and there's a hundred and fifty other people in it.

WhatsApp provides a very cheap method of communicating. However, it is worth noting that WhatsApp was not designed as an organising tool. Anyone who is a member of a few large WhatsApp groups has probably come across the challenges of using it. The pace of messaging can be very high, meaning that if you are not regularly engaging with the group it can be quite difficult to catch up. Once a group becomes sufficiently large, it is challenging to have a conversation. Instead, it becomes more of a broadcast list, providing a way to send out information to large numbers of people. However, it also allows another important feature: the membership lists of WhatsApp groups are available to participants, so it is possible to peel off a smaller group and start discussions. The use of WhatsApp by platform workers has developed from its existing use outside of the workplace. People share updates about their lives, promote things they are

passionate about, complain about things, make plans, and so on. It formalises networks and provides ways for people to stay in contact. Many workers are already parts of networks mediated by WhatsApp, particularly migrant workers, who can use it to communicate with friends and family across the world. This means that layers of networks can be reached through WhatsApp.

These networks – and the way that workers relate to them – are an important part of the social composition of platform work. Rather than isolated workers, many platform workers come into this work through social networks, often involving migration. There is a long and well-developed tradition of migrant worker organising that existed long before platforms. As platforms have rapidly expanded, capital has quickly drawn in workers – often attempting to mobilise these pre-existing networks through special offers and bonuses. When I first met Deliveroo workers in London in 2016, patterns of migration were clear to see: cyclists were predominantly British or European, often students or recent graduates, while moped or motorbike riders tended to be racialised migrants. In different parts of London there are large communities of Brazilian, Bengali, and Algerian and Eastern European workers, for example. Over the past few years these dynamics have shifted, with increasing numbers of migrant workers (and second-generation migrants) also working on bicycles. These existing migrant networks form an important part of the ‘invisible organisation’ of workers, as Callum Cant (2019) has described it at Deliveroo.

These patterns of migration bring with them traditions of struggle that shape how workers make sense of and respond to the working conditions on platforms. For example, Brazilian workers in London brought with them a community and traditions of self-organising. This has involved forming self-defence groups against motorbike thefts, as well as engaging in strike action and organising. Like communities of Latin Americans working as cleaners in central London (Woodcock 2014b), this has involved radical politics as well as lively traditions of engaging in action. It has also been complicated by splits over support for Bolsonaro in Brazil. In South Africa, many platform workers are migrants from the surrounding African countries, including Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as internal migrants into the large cities of Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban. Many of the migrant workers I spoke to in South Africa were working on platforms in order to save money to return with, or to send money back as remittances. In India, the majority of platform workers who I met in Bangalore were internal migrants, often moving from other cities or the countryside. Bangalore is comprised of large numbers of migrants, as reflected in the wide variety of languages spoken by workers. There were also significant numbers of young workers from Bangalore, drawn into the work by promises of high bonuses. In all these examples, migration, as argued by Papadopoulos et al., has been ‘a creative force within ... social, cultural and economic structures’ (2008, 202). Rather than seeing migrant workers as ‘unorganisable’ – as too many

people have – this can be reconsidered as bringing new traditions and forms of struggle to platform work.

### Political Recomposition

As discussed earlier, the first Deliveroo rider that I met in London was Tim. We walked around central London together talking to other workers, discussing the prospects for getting organised. As we talked about the process, a new moment of political composition was underway. This had been facilitated by the WhatsApp groups and other networks that already existed between workers. Tim had found out about a small trade union on Facebook: UVW (United Voices of the World). At the time, they predominantly organised with Latin American migrant cleaners. As he explained, ‘I’m not much of an activist or anything like that, but I just found them quite inspiring, and wanted to go along, just found out about it on Facebook.’ They were organising with cleaners at Topshop, and Tim turned up to support them. At the protest, he met an organiser from the IWGB (Independent Workers Union of Great Britain), a similar small union, also not part of the mainstream Trades Union Congress (TUC).<sup>5</sup> The IWGB supported Deliveroo workers on strike in London in 2016. The IWGB is a grassroots union with a membership of predominantly precarious and migrant workers (Però 2019). Workers organising with the IWGB had won in campaigns against courier companies in London, including a 28 per cent pay rise at eCouriers, 17 per cent at CitySprint, and improved terms and conditions at Mach1 (Woodcock 2016).

These victories in a related sector had provided inspiration to some of the workers to start organising. Upon meeting one of the organisers, Tim explained how he remembered seeing the IWGB flag and associating it with the CitySprint strike: ‘So I just sort of went over and said “Oh can people from Deliveroo join your union?” And she was like: “Um yeah?!” [laughter]. And I think at that point two other people had approached them as well, so from there we met.’ This small group of Deliveroo riders then started attending meetings of the Couriers and Logistics Branch of the IWGB. Tim explained how he:

got more practical advice about talking to my other drivers and I got a bunch of membership forms and stuff like that. And then from there I sort of started every time I saw someone I’d sort of try and stop and talk. So my performance went down a little bit (laughter) but it was kind of a case of flagging people down as and when I went past them.

Our walk around central London – which would later be followed up with street stalls and many conversations – developed from this.



The strikes played a key part in forming networks of workers. They provided a physical focus point, bringing together workers in groups much larger than those outside restaurants or on street corners. They allowed for debates on tactics and strategy, with mass meetings and the opportunity to meet workers from other parts of the city. Outside of London and with Uber Eats workers, the IWW Courier Network experimented with different ways of supporting workers' struggles. As one organiser explained, the looser network model was 'driven by a perceived need to include as many couriers as possible in collective action whilst recognising that most of them aren't necessarily going to join the union' (Fear 2018).

These strikes were widely shared across social media. In the same way that Tim had found unions in London through social media, workers in other cities reached out to offer solidarity to strikers in London. The struggles were circulated across networks, then reshared, with new strikes taking place across Europe. As Callum Cant (2018) has argued, a transnational wave of strike action started in August 2017. Cant argued that a connection could be seen across Europe, starting in the summer of 2016, then followed by spring 2017 and winter 2017. Across these strikes, Cant pointed out three important trends:

First is an increase in incidents over time. Second is a sporadic month by month but consistent quarterly increase in the total number of workers mobilised. Third is an increase in the synchronicity of mobilisation across all seven countries. Together these trends confirm that a transnational wave of worker resistance has taken place. (2018)

New forms of organisation began to unfold across Europe during these waves of strikes. As documented in *Notes from Below*, these involved differences and similarities with what was happening in the UK. For example, as Arthur Hay (quoted in Cant, Hay, and Bouvier 2018) in France noted, their organising began in 'September 2016, just after the London strike. I remember we were talking a lot about what you were doing in the UK, that movement was the inspiration. It showed us it was possible to get organised, and we decided to do the same.' As strikes spread in France, there was an attempt, as Bouvier (quoted in Cant, Hay, and Bouvier 2018) explains, 'to make a national union of all the riders, but it has been difficult to organise everyone to do everything at the same time. There is local reality to contend with. Sometime you're alone, sometimes there are a lot of bikers who want to fight, who want to struggle.' There was nothing automatic about strikes leading to forms of organisation, with many challenges along the way. A similar dynamic to the UK was identified in Belgium by Kyle, who described how, when they started organising, it involved 'the courier community. You know, fixie people who love cycling. Within that community you have very precarious and non-white workers. But there are a lot more who work on mopeds' (Cant, Sepulchre, and Kyle 2018). This meant trying to find ways to overcome differences within the workforce,

moving beyond the distinctions created by the organisation of the work. While in some cases alliances were developed between moped riders and cyclists, this was more challenging elsewhere. For example, Kyle reflected on how their success with cyclists came from creating ‘a community at first, that’s how you organise a movement – by talking about hobbies and shared interests with people was a way to start’. This proved more challenging with workers who did not have the same shared interests around cycling.

Although there are clearly differences between national contexts – as well as those between different groups of workers – a new political composition of workers was beginning to form across Europe. Digital communication allowed for experiences to be widely shared, providing a way for workers in one country to learn about what was happening elsewhere. As Cant and Mogno have argued, this ‘communication took on the form of collective inquiry, through which workers thrown into an unfamiliar composition of capital began to understand their contexts’ (2020, 405). In the European context, this was strengthened through in-person meetings of organisers. On the back of the strike waves, an international meeting of food platform workers was held in Brussels in October 2018. This brought together workers from 12 different countries, including Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Spain, and the UK – representing 34 different worker organisations. The meeting founded the Transnational Federation of Couriers. As Clara Mogno (2018), one of the organisers of the meeting, explained:

The appeal has been launched from Brussels, and the projected struggle immediately takes on a transnational character. Platform capitalism operates across the globe, but differentially. Now more than ever, it is essential for all workers in the so-called ‘gig economy’ to be able to access inquiries on the many local forms of exploitation. This would allow for the prediction of possible transformations in each country. At the same time, workers must prepare a counterattack which does not limit itself to Europe, but which can fight in the same weight-class as the platforms themselves; that is to say, on a planetary scale ... The abolition of competition between workers fostered by gamification and piecework. The creation of transnational and transcontinental alliances. Help and guidance for all who seek to struggle against digital exploitation. The formation of an open and solidary federation which advances an intersectional struggle. These are the aims of the first Transnational Federation of Couriers.

As can be seen from this explanation, there are shared grievances and demands that emerge from the organisation of platform work. As these platforms, including Deliveroo, Uber Eats, Glovo, and Foodora, spread across Europe, they have attempted a new technical composition of delivery work. In response, workers have developed shared responses and, in the process, coordination across borders has begun to develop organically.

These processes have not been limited to Europe. There are increasing connections being formed between food platform delivery workers across the world. This includes networks of food delivery platform workers emerging in India and China as well as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan. In early 2020 an organiser from Hong Kong visited the IWGB in London, meeting Deliveroo riders and sharing similar stories about grievances and the actions that workers have been taking. At some points, this is facilitated by common platforms – with Deliveroo operating in the UK, Europe, and Hong Kong, while Uber Eats increasingly operates across the world – but where the platforms are different, there remain shared aspects of workers' struggles. The conversations between workers in different countries are comparatively easy to facilitate, particularly through the widespread use of software such as Zoom.

These connections can also be clearly seen in the wave of coordinated strikes in Latin America in 2020. These involved strikes against Uber Eats, Glovo, Rappi, and iFood across countries including Costa Rica, Guatemala, Brazil, Mexico, Ecuador, Chile, Peru, and Argentina. The strikes were called in protest at working conditions, particularly following the global Covid-19 pandemic. These built on demands being made in different countries that demonstrate a familiar pattern: higher wages (including a minimum rate), protective equipment for workers, improved terms and conditions, lack of accountability and deactivation by the platform, as well as justice for workers who have been attacked or killed. In Brazil, which has been greatly affected by Covid-19, the strikes were particularly large. For example, during the strikes of 1 July 2020, thousands of workers participated in São Paulo. Pictures of the protests on Paulista Avenue (a key street in the city) were widely circulated on social media. Migration between the UK and Brazil meant that drivers began to connect over the strike, sharing solidarity messages and videos.

From 2016 to 2020 there were waves of struggles that organically forged connections on a local level and then reached out transnationally. This emerging political composition has been shaped by a shared technical and social composition that means that many workers relate to their work in increasingly similar ways. The demands raised by a delivery worker in London, São Paulo, Paris, Bangalore, Cape Town, and so on increasingly align. The patterns of migration and experiences of other kinds of work and struggles feed into this new composition. This raises important questions about forms of successful and sustainable organisation, but it demonstrates that food platform work is far from isolated, and is alive with resistance.

### **Private Hire Drivers**

As the example of food delivery workers shows, an understanding of the changing technical and social composition of the work can provide important

insights into the forms of struggle that emerge. There are many similarities between food delivery and private hire drivers. Uber is perhaps the most studied example of this kind of work – and, as noted before, one in which the obsession with algorithms is most pronounced. As I have argued with Cant (Cant and Woodcock 2019):

What has taken place is a huge attempted decomposition of workers by capital. Taking Uber as an example, drivers who may have previously worked for a local taxi company now find themselves as bogus self-employees engaging with a multinational platform. Along with many other workers drawn onto the platform due to the promise of flexibility – or lack of employment options elsewhere – they are now part of a workforce that is estimated to be around three million. As Uber has sought greater amounts of venture capital, it has also savagely driven down wages and tested and refined new forms of algorithmic management. Unlike the diverse and disconnected taxi companies, this decomposition has also created shared conditions among many workers logging onto the Uber app. These have forged new international connections through which tactics and strategies are being shared, laying the basis for a powerful new recomposition of platform workers.

Before getting on to discuss this new political composition, it is first worth briefly reflecting on the key dynamics of the technical recomposition that has taken place.

Uber has become an important focus for this kind of work because of how widespread the platform is. This means that when discussing platform work, Uber often becomes a stand-in for the diversity of different forms of work that this can involve. Ravenelle (2019) has noted this with academics, as many may already have experienced this kind of work as customers. However, there are some important differences from food delivery. The first is that unlike the process of buying food from restaurants and selling it to customers, private hire involves a more straightforward relationship. The platform sells a commodified transportation service, providing a customer with a journey. As noted earlier, this is not a new offering. What is new is the way in which the work is organised. The platform takes the booking from a customer and then distributes this to a worker. Taking Uber as an example, this involves a claim that it is not employing these workers, but instead only providing the technology to connect customers with drivers as independent contractors. For Uber, this is a hugely beneficial arrangement. It means having a large pool of potential workers to call upon when needed, only paying them for the time when they have a customer in the car, not having to meet any existing employment regulations, all while forcing workers to take on the risks of the work by paying for their own ‘means of subsistence’, as Callum Cant (2019, 67) referred to it.

This means that platforms such as Uber can lay out their capital in a way that is attractive to venture capital investment. After all, large wage bills and commitments to benefits look like more of a risk. Huge investment has poured into Uber, allowing for rapid expansion across the world. At first, this offered strong incentives for drivers and customers as the platform aimed to become a monopoly. Competition with rival platforms meant that many workers were able to make good money at first, particularly when venture capital money could be spent to pay drivers more than the cost of the trip. However, platforms are not able to run at a loss long term, even if the plan is to automate drivers away. The core business model is therefore one that is familiar from many other forms of work: Uber aims to pay drivers less than it charges the customer. Although this percentage differs between cities and regions, it represents a period of unpaid work for drivers. The platform also benefits from having drivers waiting around unpaid for the next job. After all, one of the selling points of these services is that waiting times are very short, something that can only be achieved with a large surplus of workers.

In a similar way to food platforms, the new technical composition of this work relies on data collection and algorithmic management to control workers. However, it is worth drawing attention to the differences from private hire transport. For example, in London the majority of the vehicles used by Uber drivers are leased Toyota Prius cars. This means that many workers are locked into high weekly payments, through having to choose a car that is acceptable on the platform. Workers need to hold a specific private hire licence, issued by Transport for London. While theoretically drivers have the freedom to work whenever they want, the cost of the 'means of subsistence' (Cant 2019, 67) means that this work is only practical full time and has to include busy periods such as weekends and evenings. The costs are significantly higher than working in food delivery with either a bicycle, moped, or motorbike. This kind of work is also often racialised, with many migrant workers. In London, for example, private hire transport is split between the traditional black cabs (which can pick up passengers from the side of the road) and minicabs (which have to be ordered in advance). The majority of black cab drivers are white British, and entry into the work involves passing 'the knowledge', a memory test of London's geography. In comparison, the majority of minicab drivers are racialised and migrant workers. Uber recruited heavily among minicab drivers, with many firms closing as workers switched over. This meant that, like food platform work, these workers did not enter platform work as isolated individuals.

This is different to the composition of the work in the US, where many of the barriers to entry on platforms can be much lower. For example, in some parts of the US workers do not need a licence and can use a much wider (and cheaper) range of cars. This means that part-time work for platforms is practical and much more widespread. In countries where levels of car ownership are much lower, such as South Africa and India, platforms engage in other practices to

bring workers on to the platform. While in Bangalore, I had a long conversation with a driver who worked mainly for Uber, although he would also work for the rival Ola when there were special offers. He had been recruited by Uber with the promise of being able to make large amounts of money and assurances about monthly income. He had moved into the city, selling family land in the countryside to fund the purchase of a car. However, once he had taken on this large level of debt, the initial special offers from Uber began to decline. He was left with high payments to make, which were incommensurate with his actual income. He had also lost the family land that provided an alternative means of surviving.

For those who do not have the means to access a vehicle, platforms have provided ways to bring workers in without one. In both India and South Africa, it was common to find workers who were driving a car owned by someone else and being charged very high rental fees that were sometimes collected directly by the platform. As a worker in South Africa explained to me, this meant he had to make the rental fee each week before he earned any money. When he was ill for a week, he failed to make this minimum and the platform charged him, so that he effectively lost money. Many workers start through this arrangement, attempting to save enough money on low wages to take on the debt of their own car.

Across these different arrangements, shared grievances begin to emerge from the labour process: low pay, safety concerns, management issues, and fear of deactivation. As with food delivery workers, the roads provide meeting points for workers. While there are not the same meeting points at restaurants, drivers still find places to meet, share experiences, and join WhatsApp groups. Algorithmic management has been a common focus of grievances, mirroring the issues that other platform workers have found. In particular, this form of management has proven opaque to many workers. Unlike food deliveries, transportation can often involve large distances and significantly different costs. While there are peak times for demand, these are more diverse than the mealtimes of food delivery. Transport platforms have experimented with different ways to encourage workers to stay on the app, with Sarah Mason (2018) identifying the use of gamification and bonuses to compel Lyft drivers to keep working. An important part of this has been the use of customer ratings to discipline workers. Unlike food delivery, customer ratings play an important role in the management of private hire drivers. In many cases, this means that drivers have to go above and beyond to ensure that customers provide them with a good rating. In some cases, cutoff points for acceptable ratings can be as high as 4.5 out of 5 stars, meaning that any ratings below perfect put the driver at risk of deactivation. This means that workers must put up with customers' whims and bad behaviour, given that low ratings can risk their livelihood. The main risk here is deactivation from the platform, which can be difficult to challenge. Being removed from the platform means that drivers cannot work, while still having

to bear the costs of the vehicle, insurance, and so on. These forms of managerial control often have to operate within the employment status debate – platforms exert control over the labour process, while simultaneously attempting to look as though they are not employers.

From these grievances, workers have found ways to resist. The political recomposition of private hire drivers has a longer history than food delivery platforms. For example, Uber drivers in London have been organising since 2013. At first, workers shared problems with the work and had initial meetings with the platforms. These networks later formed into the LPHADA (London Private Hire App Based Drivers Association), which became part of the larger GMB union. Drivers launched an employment tribunal case against Uber in 2016, but left after dissatisfaction with the union to join the IWGB (which would later organise with Deliveroo workers). Across this longer history of organisation there have been experiments with different ways of organising, including directly against platforms, through the courts, and targeting the regulator Transport for London and the Mayor of London. This has involved strikes and protests, as well as campaigning on social media.

In 2019 this emerging movement of private hire workers began to organise transnationally. This is another instance of the third example from the start of this book: that these platforms have laid the basis for international networks of workers. The example of the driver in Cape Town came up time and again while I was doing international research with Uber drivers. Similarly, workers in London were increasingly building networks and connections with drivers in other countries. While travelling for work, I was often able to take the opportunity to meet workers and share stories and experiences from London.

The internationalisation of private hire drivers' struggles intensified after Uber announced that it would be launching an IPO (Initial Public Offering). This provided a clear focus for coordinated action between workers in different countries, bringing together and strengthening networks that had been emerging over the previous few years. Given the importance of the IPO to Uber, it also provided a test of whether worker action could be effectively organised on an international basis. After all, Uber had warned in documents released in the run-up to the IPO that it expected that 'driver dissatisfaction will generally increase' (quoted in Bary 2019). Given that an IPO involves investment, it provided an important opportunity to damage the reputation of Uber. In the background to all of this, and indeed mentioned by Uber, was the issue that if it 'were forced to classify its drivers as actual employees rather than contractors, that change would weigh on its financials. Employees are entitled to legal protections around wages and overtime' (Bary 2019). This meant that coordinated workers' struggle around the IPO had the capacity to disrupt Uber in both the immediate and the longer term.

On 8 May 2019 driver networks in the US called for a two-hour coordinated strike to coincide with a day of action against Uber (Franklin 2019). In



WhatsApp groups in the run-up to the strike, increasing numbers of drivers from around the world stated that they would participate: in France, Scotland, England, Nigeria, Chile, Brazil, Panama, Costa Rica, Australia, and the US (including New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Seattle, Dayton, Minneapolis, Chicago, Washington DC, Boston, Philadelphia, and Atlanta), and more. Of course, this did not mean that all Uber drivers in those locations went on strike, but rather that there was enough organisation present that networks were attempting to organise action in that location.

The action gained widespread coverage in international news. It was discussed as one of the reasons why Uber's IPO failed to meet its lofty expectations. The energy and visibility of these actions spurred different networks to start formalising. Later that year, in December 2019, the first national meeting of worker and union organisers in the transport platform sector met in Mumbai. The conference had 157 delegates and 15 unions present, representing 25,000 workers across 11 major cities. It launched the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT), a broad coalition that also included delivery drivers. The first general secretary of IFAT, Shaik Salauddin, argued that it was 'a historic moment and marks the growing strength of local union of Ola and Uber and other app-based drivers across India and their desire to speak in a unified voice' (quoted in Hussain 2019). IFAT received support from Biju Mathew, the secretary of the NYTWA (New York Taxi Workers Alliance), building connections along the lines of migration between New York and India, and sharing experiences and strategies between the two. It also involved support from the ITF (the International Transport Workers Federation), forging links with the established trade union movement – something that has proven harder to achieve in other countries and regions. Sangam Tipathy, the assistant regional secretary for the Asia Pacific of the ITF, pointed out that it:

emerged out of 2 years of work and several meetings amongst the driver leadership from across the different states to network them, share stories of unions fighting for drivers rights against the app-based and rideshare companies in other parts of the world and help build the campaigning capacities of the unions. (ITF 2019)

Building on these successes, I supported members of the IWGB, including the UPHD (United Private Hire Drivers) branch and staff, on a project focusing on 'Transnational Organising Strategies for App-Based Drivers'. Starting in September 2019, this involved connecting workers from these previous struggles, developing existing networks, as well as introducing workers who I had met during my periods of academic fieldwork. The project built towards a convening of drivers held in January 2020 in the UK. The outreach was mostly organic and often led by social media. There are some important observations to be made here. First, digital technology has greatly reduced the barriers to

communication, both within existing worker communities and across the world. The use of social media campaigning by many groups of workers has made struggles more visible, particularly those that would often be hard to find from another country. However, this also means that groups focusing on social media are much easier to find. Therefore, care has to be taken in reading the activity of groups from their social media output – after all, it has become common to find something projected on social media that might not actually be reflected in reality. This can be particularly acute with organisations that are facing off against a global platform such as Uber. There were a number of instances in which rival groups were operating in a region or country, and from social media it can be difficult to understand the differences. The conference therefore provided an important opportunity for worker organisers to share and exchange experiences in person.

Despite the ease of connecting beyond national borders, there remain other constraints when trying to organise transnationally. The first is that while the cost of online communication might have fallen drastically, the cost of travelling in person certainly has not to the same degree. An international conference presents serious logistical challenges, including the securing of visas and documentation. This is something that can be particularly challenging for platform workers, given the lack of employment contracts, variable earnings, and so on. The conference successfully brought together workers from 23 different countries across six continents. While the majority worked for Uber, there were also Ola, Lyft, and other platform workers represented. Nicole Moore (from Rideshare Drivers United in California), was quoted in the press release for the conference (Richardson 2020), arguing that:

This is unprecedented. App-based transport workers are coming together from around the world because we are all subject to the same exploitation. Multinational corporations like Uber make billions from our labour and work to undermine labour rights for everyone, while we're left struggling to survive on poverty pay. Global exploitation calls for a global resistance strategy and that is exactly the work we will begin at the conference.

This international conference was followed up by a broader 'Global Digital Workers Conference' organised by the Transnational Workers Network on 25–26 June 2020. As they explained (quoted in Mobile Workers Alliance 2020) in the call for the conference:

Join the first global initiative of workers in defense of their rights against the abuses by transnational companies in the platform economy ...

The 'Global Digital Workers Conference' aims to be the culmination of the process of creating a global platform that defends the rights of gig workers and taxi drivers. This initiative, the Transnational Workers

Network (TWN), seeks to organize more sectors and connect workers in the so-called 'gig economy' or 'uberization of the economy' in which workers are affected by the deregulation processes that allow the growth of transnational companies through misclassifying workers and calling them 'false self-employed' or 'independent contractor' ...

Currently there are organizations participating from the United States, Spain, France and the United Kingdom. At the end of June we will do the public presentation. Within this framework of collaboration, different platforms of workers and unions are exchanging experiences and collaborating in our investigations from different countries.

This conference included platform workers more widely, including food platform worker organisations from France, Collectif des Livreurs Autonomes de Paris (CLAP), and Spain, RidersXDerechos, as well as private hire, the broader Mobile Workers Alliance (MWA), and support from the large US union Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

Across both food transport and private hire driver platforms, there are a number of initiatives unfolding to bring workers together to share experiences and plan collective struggles. The existence of multiple initiatives – with talk of more emerging at the time of writing – shows the exciting potential within the new political composition emerging in these sectors.