

Practicing Ethnography
Roanne van Voorst
De Burcht

Humanizing Couriers

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Introduction

This research report is the outcome of a 4-week anthropological research conducted for De Burcht on the experience of workers in the online supermarket industry and their perspectives on unionization. The methods to collect data included semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and observations of the working environment. We have created three profiles of grocery delivery couriers, which give insight into how workers feel about their jobs. All three workers are male and within the age range of 19-22, working for Flink or Getir. The experiences of these workers cannot be generalized to all workers in this sphere of labor, however, having the profiles side by side highlights similarities and patterns in this industry. We have opted for this format, to bring the experiences of workers to life and contextualize their perspectives. We hope that this gives De Burcht an insight into workers' attitude towards their job, which affects their eagerness to unionize.

A Temporary Worker Showing Covert Resistance: Sylvester

Sylvester is an example of a worker who does not intend on staying at the company for a longer period. This type of worker is one who does not consider this their dream job, having plans to pursue something entirely different later on. As a result of the lack of attachment to the company and job, the worker is more likely to quit the job if the working conditions get unbearable, rather than attempting to create change. This type of worker is very common in the online supermarket industry, typical for students who work part-time. The following excerpt shows the lack of respect workers may have for the official protocol; however, this case is more extreme than the average. Though this worker does not complain about his work orally, his actions show a sort of resistance against the protocol of Flink.

Sylvester is a full-time student, who in November of 2021, was looking for a job where he would not need to speak Dutch, where he would have flexible hours and the freedom to choose when he would want to work. An advertisement for Flink popped up on his social media, where the company was inviting him to come join the team, and so he applied for the job. He has been working for Flink for seven months now, with the arrangement of a zero hour contract.

When asked about his complaints about the work, Sylvester has little criticism. He claims the work has lived up to his expectations, that he enjoys the fact that he gets to keep fit

by making deliveries, and that he can listen to music and podcasts on the job. Although he is reluctant to make any overt complaints, he does mention his dislike for one of the managers at his hub, who apparently does nothing all day and does not help his colleagues. He also discusses the fact that the job does not bring anything of value to his life, he is not learning anything, emphasizing how this is not his dream job, but rather a temporary fix.

He is easy going about the job, which is partly because he manages to adjust the conditions of the job to suit him better, and in some cases, goes against the protocol of Flink. For instance, by law, workers are entitled to a half hour break after working for 5.5 hours. Sylvester, however, often takes an hour long break instead, because he takes advantage of the fact that the workers get paid for their breaks. There is always one of the five shift leaders on shift at all times, and they are the ones who are supposed to keep track of the breaks. However, they change shifts during the day, which Sylvester takes as his cue to go for his extra-long break, because he knows that the new shift leader will not notice who is working that day immediately. This can be perceived as an act of resistance, as proof of the fact that workers may not be satisfied with certain rules, even if they do not overtly contest them.

A temporary worker using his connection with the manager to improve their job experience: Dave

Dave is also an example of a temporary worker. He is not loyal to this job and rather leaves than try to change anything for the better. This is also due it being too much work outside of his regular job. He established bonds with the manager which he benefits from and makes it easy for him to make his time at Getir better on short notice. Dave's profile is typical for temporary workers at Getir, Flink, Zapp or Gorillas: they use implements of covert resistance that give immediate and short-term effects. The following will show how these workers go about doing this. Even if they do not classify their acts as resistance themselves, it goes against protocol of the company and thus can be seen as resistance.

Dave is 19 years old, and he does not have a diploma yet. He is still thinking about what he wants to do. Due to this he is currently working all kinds of different jobs. Since a few months he has been working for Getir. He was looking for a good hourly pay and flexible working schedules., thus one of his friends recommended Getir. He has a zero hour contract and is employed through an employment agency called StaffYou.

When asked about his work at Getir, Dave is mostly quite positive. He likes the salary and the flexibility; how easy it is to obtain and cancel shifts; and the easiness of the work. When asked about any complaints Dave mentions a few things. He does not like how the end time and breaks are handled. The fact that you must be active until the last second makes it difficult to get your full break or end on the right time. This is mainly because you often get a delivery right before you have a break or end your shift, which makes you late. Working overtime is thus expected of you. Next to that there is not enough space within each hub to wait for deliveries and not enough equipment for each courier. Lastly, he complains about the bikes which are old and do not work properly.

These things irritate him, but it does not result in mobilizing. Dave does not think in matters of career with this job. It is temporary because he does want to go to school again. Because of the temporality and non-existent loyalty toward the job he does not see the point of mobilizing. He found his own way of dealing with the issues and irritations he faces when working. He just does whatever he wants: when he wants to leave early, he does; when he wants to take a longer break, he will; when he does not feel like doing a delivery, he will remain seated. He bonds with the managers, and this gives him the opportunity to do the things stated above without it causing him any trouble or result in dismissal.

A temporary worker that rationalises poor treatment by dissociating from their role in the workplace: Erik

Erik's experience at Getir provides a vivid example of the numerous ways in which the automated and lazy culture as well as organisation of the platform economy leads to a maltreatment of workers and a culture whereby no one takes responsibility for the chaos and mistreatment that it brings to individual people. Erik's profile also highlights the typical way in which many of our interlocutors reacted to this type of culture- by rationalising their mistreatment through dissociating from it. Such narratives are for example 'I'm only a temporary worker so I don't care'. We also labelled this rationalisation as a form of covert resistance. Other interlocutors such as Sylvester show similar attitudes.

Erik is a 22-year-old recently graduated psychology master's student. He started working for Getir as he was finishing his masters. His sister recommended Getir to him, based on its low skill level requirement, and flexible hours. He obtained a 16-hour weekly contract directly with Getir. Since his very first shift, he has experienced issues with shift managers and the

organization of the shifts; his manager has called him asking him to work, as well as repeatedly putting him on the schedule for days he specifically said he could not work. When asked about the issues with Getir, Erik claims ‘there is so much I can shit on Getir about’.

Erik feels little loyalty and trust towards Getir. He paints several pictures that describe poor management, poor interactions, and a generally unsocial working environment. His first impressions highlight his general disappointment with the working culture. He was surprised at how customers treated him. He said that people would complain about how late he was, they would not cooperate when he struggled to find the address, and sometimes they would not even open the door properly. In terms of his colleagues, he claimed that their antisocial behavior was uncomfortable; everyone was always sitting on their phones, and there was little engagement with one another. Making friends on the job was something Erik ruled out within his expectations early on.

The bonus system employed by Getir is one of many instances that highlights the poor management and working culture. It is calculated based on ratings from your weekly average reviews. If the rider has a rating of at least 4.9 stars they can get a small raise, below that they get nothing. Erik explains how manipulative this is because customers only rate riders if (1) the rider is extraordinarily nice or (2) if they are extremely bad. However, a bad rating may not be the driver’s fault, yet rider’s will always be held accountable. Consequently, riders are manipulated into working harder against the odds for an almost unreachable bonus. When Erik calls out the managers they say: ‘It is Getir headquarters who put these schemes in, and there is not anything we can do.’

Erik finds much more negatives than positives within his job. His list of complaints is endless. Yet he does not feel the need to mobilize; he has little respect for Getir and little interest in improving the culture. I think it is because of the lazy, antisocial culture that he finds himself in.

Conclusion

Based on our research findings the main patterns we found are that workers generally do not overtly complain about the poor working conditions. They often do not feel that they hold personal value to the company, and this is largely rationalized through the temporality of the job. This also leads to an absence of initiative amongst drivers to engage beyond the bare minimum of the job. We believe that the nature of the job, and the attractive attributes that are advertised by the companies, that attract riders are ultimately the core of the lack of

unionization. Hence, we devised some recommendations that we believe will make trade unions more attractive. Even though they use different implements of covert resistance and go about their job a little differently, the workers often do show a similar approach to their jobs. Everything they do has the same immediate short-term effect and that is why the recommendations and tips could be applicable to all the workers. This should give the union a common ground which they eventually can act up on:

1. Use social media to draw attention and support the common forms of individual resistance, to coerce a collective identity.
2. Research the demographic of delivery drivers, because this affects the needs of the worker and the ways in which they can mobilize.
3. Create sub trade unions to help solidify a collective identity and are specific to different categories of workers
4. Offer a free trial period for union membership to advertise yourselves and show drivers that being part of a union is beneficial!