

Your Order is on the Way: Towards a Deeper Understanding of Riders' Collective Action

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“Bikes on Pause”, May 16, Rembrandtplein. Picture taken by Sadu Saks.

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Introduction

Our research aimed to understand how meal delivery workers, or 'riders', in Amsterdam organize themselves through both formal and informal collective action using an intersectional framework.

In the past decade, platform workers, especially in food delivery services, have significantly increased, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. These positions are often side gigs due to their low income, averaging 8 euros per hour in the EU. App-based delivery work typically involves impersonal employment relationships, with couriers frequently working as self-employed individuals and rarely interacting with their peers. Recently, there has been a rise in global protests among food delivery workers. Couriers advocate for higher pay, safer working conditions, and better delivery gear. In the Netherlands, the grocery delivery service Getir is shutting down, resulting in many riders losing their jobs and needing to sign settlement agreements. Unfortunately, these agreements often fail to adequately compensate the riders. Consequently, more riders have been contacting the FNV, the union supporting riders in the Netherlands. Early in our research, we connected with the FNV, enabling us to follow their road to collective action. The FNV has been actively informing riders about their rights and assisting them with settlement agreements.

We used diverse methods to answer our research question. First, we gained access to unions and their WhatsApp groups primarily through the union's website. These websites provided valuable information about the unions' activities and links to the WhatsApp groups. These WhatsApp groups are central to how riders organize themselves. We gained access to online FNV meetings, particularly those of Riders United. These meetings serve as discussion forums for riders, allowing us to observe the main focuses of their conversations and how collective actions are organized. Then, to conduct interviews, we approached riders in their workplace—the streets of Amsterdam. We went to busy areas with restaurants, hoping to encounter riders. While we did meet a few, we faced challenges in conducting interviews. It's important to note that riders are often monitored during their shifts and may not have time to engage in conversations. Although it was somewhat challenging to find people to interview, through the FNV and friends, we found ten riders and union organizers who were willing to be interviewed. These interviews were the most informative part of our research. We conducted ten semi-structured interviews, allowing us to discuss predefined topics while keeping the conversation casual and flexible. This approach enabled interviewees to shape the discussion and highlight what they deemed relevant. Furthermore, reflections on the

obstacles we faced were a key aspect of our research. For example, our difficulty in interviewing riders on the streets underscored their lack of break time and the absence of designated spaces for them. We enriched our analysis with insights gained from our struggles by including notes from our team meetings in our research portfolio. Finally, we also conducted a survey, which, although not yielding enough results for broad statements, provided interesting qualitative data through open-ended questions. These responses often highlighted instances where riders felt supported by their colleagues. By combining participant observations, interviews, surveys, and visual documentation, our research aims to provide a view of how food delivery riders in Amsterdam organize and support each other within their diverse backgrounds.

After the research period, we processed our interviews and grouped the overlapping themes. In addition to our observations, we looked for similarities in our interviews and survey responses. This resulted in several important commonalities, which we documented in our findings. In our essays, we will look at the most important findings and explore them more in-depth. A recurring theme is that the informal connections and social network of the riders are crucial for participation in collective action. Most riders joined the FNV with a group. The people we interviewed who participated in collective action were also informed through friends. Additionally, the individual background of the riders is very important. For example, people with a migration background are hesitant to speak out because they are more dependent on their job and residency status.

Our common thesis statement is that interaction is essential for collective action and that the impersonal nature of the job and sometimes personal situations are obstacles to such action. Companies exploit this impersonal nature to hinder collective action further. In our essays, we aim to examine how interaction among riders occurs and how they overcome this obstacle. We also explore the various strategies companies use to leverage the impersonal nature of the rider profession to drive riders apart and make collective action more challenging.

Our research has shown that multiple factors influence collectivism and that ultimately, collective actions can be traced back to the level of the individual. Indeed, whether it is through interpersonal relationships or their individual struggles, riders support each other and act on their working conditions before collective action is organized. Firstly, as the Eline Aimé will demonstrate, through the case of undocumented workers, the specific background of riders influences the way they view their work and thus the way they participate in collective action. Indeed, migrational background influences every step of the

way leading to collective action. It influences the way workers view their working conditions, the extent to which riders can participate in collective action but also the way riders view unions. Thus, the individual level has consequences on collective action. Furthermore, interpersonal relations shape collective action. Indeed, solidarity happens first when workers support each other. As Gaia Baldi's essay will show, it is also through small and ordinary acts that riders improve their working conditions and constitute themselves as a group. The informal bonds that result from solidarity, which can be fostered in "free spaces", can translate into collective action. Indeed, informal networks are central to the way riders navigate their challenging working conditions. These networks cultivate collective resilience among riders which empowers them to face the unpredictability of their work environment. Mathanja Van Houwelingen will look at the research from Anna Tsing on mushrooms which thrive in forests affected by human activity and environmental changes. She will connect this to how the riders navigate the new gig economy and how they adapt. Just like mushrooms, riders foster symbiotic and cooperative relationships that promote mutual aid and solidarity. Through informal relationships, riders share knowledge, cope with challenges, and collectively act to improve their working conditions and rights within their industry. Lastly, Sadu Saks will focus on the neo-liberal management and the way it organizes labor in the case of the platform industry. They are central to the riders' working conditions but also to their ability to organize themselves. Indeed, through the hybrid form of management that is present in these platforms, workers are subjected to surveillance, discipline and reward. This social control happens on an individual level and shapes workers' behavior. Thus, we have noticed that in this individualized work environment, the individual and their interactions are central to collective organization. Indeed, control and counter-strategies both start on the level of the individual and their relationships, whether it is through their background, the informal acts of support they perform, the networks that form among riders and even the discipline riders are subjected to.

**Riding Together: The Intersection of Migration and Collective Action among delivery
riders**

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Introduction

When my discussion with Charles, a delivery rider and union member, was coming to an end, I asked him if he wanted to add anything, if there was anything that we had forgotten. He mentioned the impact of migration status on working conditions. When I mentioned this same topic in another interview, it became clear how important this is. Indeed, James pointed out that the protest carried out by the FNV, French and Belgian unions in Amsterdam was a success because so many riders could attend and in the case of French unions these riders could attend because their migration statuses had changed.¹ As this paper will show, this is not an isolated instance in which migration plays a role in the organization of collective action. Indeed, platform companies rely heavily on migration (Orth 2024, 478), thus it necessarily influences the way riders organize themselves.

We set out to do research about food delivery riders in Amsterdam and our question was looking through an intersectional framework of both formal and informal collective action, how do delivery riders in the Netherlands organize themselves depending on their diverse backgrounds? I would argue that migration statuses is a key element in understanding the way riders organize themselves. I will therefore ask the question of : How does migration and documentation influence work and collective action in the case of delivery riders ?

I would argue that migration statuses of riders play a part in every step leading to collective action and that in order to support riders adequately unions should include the concerns of migrant workers. Firstly, collective action is a consequence of the need to improve one's working conditions. I will thus firstly reflect on the influence of documentation on the work conditions and the riders' approach to work. Furthermore, in order to act on these working conditions workers must constitute a group and organize themselves. I will thus explain how migration shapes collective action. Lastly, our research was aimed at providing leads for

¹ James, Personal Interview 03/06/2024

unions and other structures who want to support riders in their effort, and indeed unions are the main way through which collective actions are organized. I will explain the influence of migration statuses on the riders' relations to unions. To do so I will rely on our research carried out in Amsterdam in 2024, this research consists mostly of interviews with riders. Furthermore, I will use literature on collective action, platform work and migrant workers.

Vignette

On the 16th of May 2024, my research group and I went out in the streets of Amsterdam in order to conduct, or to schedule, interviews with delivery riders. We came across a few isolated riders but also groups of riders. We met one of these groups on Muntplein. When we approached them, they were speaking among themselves in a language that was neither Dutch nor English. We apologized for the intrusion, introduced ourselves and asked if they would be interested in participating in our research.

They were confused at first, most riders we approached were, but when we mentioned being university students one of the people we were talking to pointed to his friend who was a few meters away, indicating that we should ask him. We thus went to see him but he had to leave as he had a delivery to carry out. We left shortly after him. This echoes another encounter in which we came across groups of riders who seemed, based only on appearances, to be separated not only according to the company they worked for but also according to the language they spoke, and thus maybe according to their ethnicity.

At this point of the research, migration was not our main focus. However after talking to James and Charles, our encounters with these groups came back to mind. If my interviewees mention migration statuses and on our first attempt at conducting interviews we noticed that riders were forming groups according to language and ethnicity then surely migration is central to collective action among riders.

Migration and work

According to Charles, without tackling the issue of statuses of migrant workers “we will not be able to improve the concrete working conditions”². It appears indeed that the migrational background of delivery riders shapes their working conditions. I will firstly reflect on the way some riders view this occupation and what the implications of this positionality are. I will then explain the influence of precarity on working conditions and I will conclude by coming back to the way challenges faced by all riders can be emphasized in the case of migrant workers.

The important presence of migrant workers in platform mediated jobs can be explained by several factors, one of them is the accessibility of the recruitment. According to Tom, this position is easy to acquire for someone who does not speak the local language , for someone who just arrived here for instance³. Indeed, the fact that technology and algorithms are managing the app helps reduce contacts with human resources. This means reducing the instances in which one has to speak in a language one does not speak and to a person who might be biased by racist prejudices (Orth 2024, 483). As a consequence, platform work often attracts workers who do not have access to better paying jobs, in other words platform work is often an alternative to other precarious or low-wage jobs.

The fact that platform work attracts workers with a specific migrational background has consequences on collective action. Indeed, in order to organize collective actions, it is necessary for a group to have a common frame of reference (Refslund 2022,1009) .

Successful collective action entails clear demands to submit to authorities (in the case of delivery riders the demands to address to the platforms) and thus a common view on working conditions. However, if we compare platform work to other informal and migrantised labor, the working conditions and the precarity of this occupation are not out of the ordinary. (Orth

² Charles, Personal Interview 30/05/2024

³ Tom, Personal Interview by Gaia Baldi, 21/05/2024

2024, 478) Indeed, according to Julia, “Not all riders know that the working conditions are bad or want to speak up about it “⁴. The fact that some of the riders working for platforms only have access to jobs with bad working conditions is an obstacle to them participating in actions aimed at bettering the working conditions.

Furthermore, being undocumented and being a delivery rider are both precarious statuses, and they often reinforce each other. Indeed, undocumented workers face challenges that other riders won't. For instance, one of the collective actions in which James participated led to a change in the law in 2023 prohibiting platforms from ending contracts because of the absence of documentation of delivery riders.⁵ Before this law, if the platform found out about one's migration status, that person could lose their account thus making the situation of migrant workers extremely precarious. Furthermore, as explained in the previous part, platform work attracts people who are excluded from the labor market. During their time in the platform industry, workers receive limited training and limited contact with customers and coworkers which leaves workers with a great disadvantage when reentering the labor market (Riordian 2023, 246). After working for a platform, workers risk long-term unemployment because of the lack of training and experience in other positions but I would also argue that their isolation creates a disadvantage with workers who could form a network in other occupations but also with workers who could practice the language through their interactions with colleagues and customers. The precarity of platform work can also be explained by the fact that its algorithm based management is seen as an opportunity for those who have limited work rights to have access to work and income. Indeed, some undocumented workers illegally rent accounts on the platforms. This practice is very precarious as the workers risk losing their account if they are found.

⁴ Julia, Personal Interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen , 21/05/2024

⁵ James, Personal Interview, 03/06/2024

Lastly, our research has shown that being a delivery rider is a very isolated type of work. Indeed, in opposition to other occupations, workers do not have colleagues that they interact with during their shift (as they spend most of the shift delivering orders) and they do not have a space in which they could interact (such as break rooms for example). This isolation might be emphasized for migrant workers who might not have an existing network in Amsterdam and who have a different background from other workers. This element together with other characteristics inherent to the job but also to migration might come in the way of group formation.

Migration and collective action

As mentioned, the realities of migrant workers are different from those of other workers of the platform industry. For example they might view their working conditions differently because they are comparing it to other professions available to them. The challenges they face also differ from the challenges faced by Dutch riders. I will now explain how migration statuses influence group formation and consequently influence collective action.

In order to organize collective action, a few criteria must be fulfilled. Firstly the closeness and cohesion among workers is central. Indeed, the way workers interact and the personal relations that are created through these interactions shape collective action (Refslund 2022, 1008). In our research, we witnessed a language barrier between workers coming in the way of effective communication. For instance as shown in the vignette, groups of riders often form along ethnic and language distinctions. The whatsapp groups can be a solution to this problem. Indeed, as mentioned by James, Whatsapp enables people to record themselves instead of writing, which can be useful in cases where riders are not comfortable writing in

Dutch, English, or in French in the case of James⁶. Furthermore, whatsapp enables users to react to messages without text, using only emojis, thus further bridging the gap between Dutch and English speakers and people who might not be comfortable speaking in these languages. Secondly, the unity in the group is essential to collective action. Indeed, the competitiveness of the work environment influences the cohesion in the group which in turn will influence collective action (Refslund 2022, 1008). In the case of delivery riders, competition is inherent to the business model. Indeed, the platforms have to deliver food on demand and still respect safety requirements and quality control. To do so, they need workers to be available at the time of the order, which entails having more workers than what is necessary in order to carry out the limited amount of deliveries (Riordan 247). Therefore, there are more riders than deliveries available to them, which increases the competition among riders. Competition can be an obstacle to group unity and to collective action.

Despite the obstacles to group formation, there are obstacles to collective action specific to workers without documentation. Indeed, one of the criteria for successful collective action is the willingness of the workers to disagree with their employers, namely the importance of the consequences that collective action could lead to (Refslund 2022, 1009). During our research we joined an FNV meeting in which the organizers offered the riders to make a statement in de raadscommissie , but most riders refused because of the risk that it represented. Similarly, the necessity and precarity that led migrant workers to become riders can at times make them more exposed to victimization for their involvement in collective action (Alberti 2013, 4143).

The platforms are aware of the influence of possible consequences on collective action and have used it to their advantage. Indeed, as reported by Julia, many companies use NDA thus limiting what employees might be able to share⁷, furthermore when individuals

⁶ James, Personal Interview, 03/06/2024

⁷ Julia, Personal Interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen , 21/05/2024

received claims, they were not allowed to publicly disclose the amounts they received, thus limiting the information available to workers.

Another element coming in the way of riders participating in collective action is their rapport with law enforcement. Indeed, people without documentation face discrimination with law enforcement and have more to lose if they are prosecuted. For example James mentioned the threat of OQTF (obligation to leave the French territory) being an obstacle for riders who might have participated in strikes and protests otherwise.⁸

Migration and unions

We have thus established that the working conditions and the ability to participate in collective action are both conditioned by the migration statuses of workers. It is often through unions that workers can act on their working conditions and that collective action is organized. I will now reflect on the specific ways in which undocumented workers and unions collaborate. To do so, I will firstly come back on the individualistic nature of platform work and its consequence on unions. I will then reflect on the ways in which these specificities can be (and have been) used to attract more people to join the unions.

Unions often have an economist position, namely they emphasize class distinctions based on contractual terms (Alberti 2013, 4134), in the case of the delivery couriers, unions differentiate between workers and the platforms and their aim is to help the riders better their conditions. This focus on class distinctions does not include gender and ethnic distinctions and this can explain why some riders do not feel represented by the unions: the problems they are facing are not being mentioned. Indeed, as our research has shown, riders often get involved in collective action when it serves their own interest. According to Julia, riders join actions when their position is at stake⁹. In other words, unions can sometimes be seen as

⁸ James, Personal Interview 03/06/2024

⁹ Julia, Personal Interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen , 21/05/2024

service providers (Alberti 2013, 4135) Furthermore, the goals of the fnv (and of other similar unions) are different from those of workers. Whereas the fnv is striving for a larger group of workers connecting and organizing themselves, riders are often looking for individual support and legal help.

It is through the individual support that they sometimes provide that unions attract riders, and especially undocumented riders. As James explained, unions provide individual support that are not work related and it is through these services that riders come to know about the unions.¹⁰ In other words, when unions tackle the issues surrounding migration, migrant workers are more likely to become familiar with unions, which might lead to them participating in collective actions. Similarly, when unions translate Dutch juridical jargon into plain English, it makes them visible to the audience that was looking for this information. I would thus argue that making this information available in more languages will enable the unions to reach more people.

Methodology

The research on which this essay relies has been carried out in Amsterdam between April 2024 and June 2024 and it consists of semi structured interviews conducted with people who were or had been delivery riders. Through these interviews we gathered information about the ways riders view their working conditions and the way they organize themselves to act on these conditions. Migration was not the main focus of our research thus undocumented workers were not the demographic we interviewed. Furthermore the interviewees I could talk to were designated spokespersons with a higher level of education, english proficiency and a citizenship, therefore they do not represent the whole of delivery riders. They did however provide insight as to the struggles of their colleagues. In order to conduct effective research

¹⁰ James, Personal Interview 03/06/2024

on the influence of migration on collective action among delivery riders, it would be beneficial to interview people with various migrational backgrounds and compare their views on unions and collective action.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to emphasize the effects of immigration statuses and documentation on collective action. I started by demonstrating that platform work is particularly attractive to undocumented workers who are excluded from the rest of the work market (due to language, skills or racial discrimination). They thus have a perspective on platform work that is conditioned by their frame of reference and this point of view might differ from other, Dutch for instance, riders. This perspective will in turn influence their wish to join collective action. Not only is the perspective of migrant workers different, so are the working conditions they are facing. Indeed, if platform work is already precarious, it is even more so in the case of undocumented workers who face harsher consequences if their contract ends. Secondly, I explained how migration statuses influence collective action. Indeed, due to the consequences they might be facing, undocumented riders can be more hesitant to participate in strikes or protests. It can also be the case that language comes in the way of effective group formation and communication. Lastly, I have argued that riders are concerned about individual issues, and that is often how they encounter unions. Therefore by tackling individual problems of riders, and more specifically undocumented riders, unions can attract more people to join and participate in the actions they organize.

We were asked to investigate collectivism among riders in order to give recommendations to structures who want to help them in their effort to better their working condition. Through this paper I want to emphasize that undocumented riders have specific problems that need to be addressed and as the last part of this essay has shown, by helping

riders in their individual struggles unions can successfully attract more people. Therefore, in order to attract more migrant workers, which are an important part of the workforce in the platform industry, unions should focus on their specific needs. Furthermore, communication in languages other than Dutch and English could also be beneficial.

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**Riders' Paths Crossing: Forms of Solidarity, Networks and the Importance of Interaction
Among Meal Delivery Workers**

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Practicing Ethnography

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Introduction: Vignette, Thesis Statement and Methodological Considerations

While conducting interviews for my group's research project on riders' collective action in the Netherlands, I always asked my interlocutors whether they interacted with their colleagues. I sought to understand to what extent they felt connected to fellow riders, what interaction between them could look like. Each time, they all said nonchalantly, without any enthusiasm, that they had some interaction. They talked about it as something that happened occasionally, that was somewhat pleasant, but not a significant feature of the job. Conversely, each time, they clearly stated they felt "alienated", disconnected from others, particularly Tom¹ and Jarek. Recognizing that contrasting the positivity of occasional interaction to a deep-rooted sense of disconnectedness was typical in my interlocutors' accounts, I expected my teammates' interviewees would report similar feelings and observations. However, conversing with Mathanja about interviews, she told me that her interviewees, who, unlike mine, participated in collective action, emphasized connection they had with others when working as riders, or that riders often join unions in groups of acquaintances². Noticing this pattern made me reflect on how social interaction may be related to solidarity, which I knew from previous studies to be an essential part of social movements, and made me want to investigate the nature of these relations.

In this essay, I will look at the dynamics of riders' collective action, in particular in the Netherlands, to maintain that examples of connection and interaction between riders can be identified as an essential basis for worker solidarity, and therefore action. I argue that even "small" acts of support that take place outside of institutions (such as unions) are important in regard to collective action.

To develop my argument, I will use a theoretical framework that considers theory on movements and worker solidarity (e.g. Hodson et al. 1993), as well as academic material from the social sciences that is focused on riders, their organizations and interactions (e.g. Tassinari and Maccarone 2020). As a lot of my group's research took place in online settings, I also take into account Karen O'Reilly's "Ethnographic methods" (2012). An important thing to consider is that my argument will be influenced and limited by the context of my research. For starters, online research took place mainly on the official websites of Dutch rider organizations (FNV's Riders United section and Radical Riders), and on the WhatsApp Group of Riders United. In person, it took place on the streets of Amsterdam Centrum. Indeed, O'Reilly points out that "the best solution to increase reliability of findings consists in multiple forms of observation and interaction, both

¹ I use the pseudonyms used in the research portfolio, to maintain both anonymity and consistency.

² Julia, personal interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen, May 21, 2024.

offline and online” (O’Reilly 2012, 62). Additionally, while we had contacts with people from other European countries, our research remains primarily contextualized in the Netherlands. The research population is also limited; I will use mostly information from interviews from trade unionists, riders and former riders. Their backgrounds, however, do not comprise an all-encompassing variety of personal situations. Taking all this into account, my essay refers to this specific setting and population, mediated by my own positionality, as “social researchers are part of the world they study” (O’Reilly 2012, 222), not something detached.

In my essay, I will first take notice of the formation of solidarity despite obstacles, and what some of these are. Then, I will further focus on worker solidarity and how it manifests even in budding ways, while still being fundamental to action, and how it often first leads to non-institutional, spontaneous networks. Finally, I am going to delve deeper into the importance of interaction in itself, and of the spaces (whether digital or physical) in which it is allowed to happen.

Solidarity and its Existence Besides Obstacles

Riders, workers who deliver meals, face numerous challenges, including from a legal and economic point of view, in the Netherlands as well³. This has generated an interest in whether and how riders organize collectively to improve their working conditions, and how they do so. Despite difficulties, collective action, defined as the phenomenon in which “a number of people work together to achieve some common objective” (Dowding 2013), takes place. Collective action is usually undertaken by movements which, as Sidney Tarrow maintains, have solidarity as one of their main “empirical properties” (Tarrow 1998, 4). Solidarity is essential for making change, hence the fact that it is one of the main elements someone who needs to build a movement will tap into (Tarrow 1998, 6). In the case at hand, I want to focus on solidarity as it is expressed between the workers, operationalised as reciprocal support, aid and recognition among riders. There are many obstacles to it, and to the possibility to act upon it, for instance a “culture of fear”⁴. As the extent of solidarity within a group of workers depends on the dynamics of their labour (Hodson et al. 1993, 400), it could be expected that it is always scarce. However, despite challenges, delivery services have been the site of “labour unrest”, suggesting that scholars should question assumptions about “the potential for the emergence of solidarity and, possibly, of collective action in this new frontier of precarious work” (Tassinari and Maccarone 2020, 36). Before exploring how I observed emerging solidarity in the field, I am now going to focus on two of the reasons it is hindered.

³ According to the FNV Riders United webpage, accessed April 23, 2024.
<https://www.fnv.nl/acties/riders-united#/>

⁴ Alex, personal interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen, May 30, 2024.

First of all, many riders do not necessarily feel involved in their occupation enough to feel a sense of solidarity, especially if they work part-time⁵. In fact, attachment to an occupation and job security is positively correlated to worker solidarity and mutual defense (Hodson et al. 1993, 412). This is confirmed by sociologists Tassinari and Maccarone, who point out that different levels of dependence on the job hinder the consolidation of a shared identity, and there seems to be a division between couriers who rely on the job as primary income and others who may not be as concerned (2020, 38; *ibid.*, 47). My interviewee Tom, who was a rider for one year, expressed such a sentiment, declaring: “it didn’t feel like my full-time job...I already saw kind of the job for what it was...that you get kind of taken advantage of”⁶.

Secondly, the impersonal nature of food delivery services can be alienating, thus posing a major obstacle to solidarity. Tom stated that he disliked “the impersonal way that this job is constructed. Because you are kind of on your own there on the road...it's nice to also have communication with others, and that was not the case at all”⁷. He felt isolated, and mentioned the “alienation” of the workers⁸. Another of the former riders I interviewed, Daan, also did not express a feeling of commonality with colleagues, and stated that he never even really greeted anyone⁹. Jarek also expressed that he felt “lonely”¹⁰. In contrast to this unpleasantness of “non-interaction”, any opportunity for communication and interaction in the job was described by my interviewees as positive. The survey corroborated this finding, as some respondents pointed out that disliked it when there was no contact, and liked when there was¹¹. According to a study on ethnographies of worker solidarity, it also “mitigates feelings of alienation that arise from meaningless work” (Hodson et al. 1993, 398), hence a reason why it is positively regarded even when it is experienced rarely, and in minor ways.

In the end, as I wrote earlier, despite a labour process marked by individualisation, solidaristic ties have consolidated among some workers (Tassinari and Maccarone 2020, 44). A section of them self-organize and make their voice heard, despite “adversarial conditions”, including the ones mentioned above (Kougiannou and Mendonça 2021, 748). This was noticed to an extent by some research participants, like Tom, who said: “I knew like maybe at the end that there were some like community stuff or I saw some stickers around the city about that”, even though he never participated¹². Alex, who did participate, talked about wanting to “get a group of

⁵ Note based on my interviews, from Research Portfolio, 6th June 2024.

⁶ Tom, personal interview, May 21, 2024.

⁷ Tom, personal interview, May 21, 2024.

⁸ Tom, personal interview, May 21, 2024.

⁹ Daan, personal interview, May 28, 2024.

¹⁰ Jarek, personal interview, May 30, 2024.

¹¹ Note based on survey, from Research Portfolio, 6th June 2024.

¹² Tom, personal interview, May 21, 2024.

riders who are in solidarity with each other”¹³. Observing how this happens offers an opportunity “to interrogate theoretically and empirically the processes that underpin the emergence of solidarity and the mechanisms that connect it to “different forms of collective action” (Tassinari and Maccarone 2020, 38).

Forms of Solidarity and Their Connection to Informal Action

The forms in which solidarity can be expressed in a hostile work context are varied and moulded by workers’ agency and “diverse contextual factors” (Tassinari and Maccarone 2020, 35-36). Riders explore different ways in which they can make their voice heard, in this way creating opportunities to influence their working conditions (Kougiannou and Mendonça 2021, 757). Superficially, it may seem like many riders we observed during our fieldwork were not engaged in practices of solidarity, or wholly uninterested. Still, a closer look, informed by theoretical texts, reveals that the seeds for it are present, and their statements and actions in this regard seem sometimes contradictory. In fact, solidarity in platform economy may be conceived as a “continuum” that comprises both “day-to-day behaviours of reciprocity”, such as mutual help, and participation in more “informal” acts of contestation, besides “‘conventional’ forms of collective labour mobilisation (e.g. protests...)” (Tassinari and Maccarone 2020, 50). This suggests that while some couriers may not feel like they are “the protester type usually”¹⁴, that does not mean they are completely extraneous to action, if they partake in solidaristic behaviour. For clarity, it is useful to distinguish two main forms of solidarity, as Tassinari and Maccarone do in their article on gig economy couriers. They write of “embryonic solidarity” and “active solidarity”. These two forms are intertwined, as the scholars argue that embryonic solidarity is crucial as the basis for active solidarity, with which “the prepared-ness to act actually translates in collective action” (Tassinari and Maccarone 2020, 39).

Firstly, the research participants who never participated in “conventional” collective action still reported having a positive opinion of couriers who do act. For Tom “it’s a very logical response”¹⁵, Daan thinks “it’s always good if you do some collective action and it’s always good to talk with your colleagues”¹⁶, and Jarek finds it “important and useful, because, like, as an employee, if you have bad working conditions, then you should have, like, a way of making them better, and this is probably one of the ways that that can be done”¹⁷. Alex, both a rider and an

¹³ Alex, personal interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen, May 30, 2024.

¹⁴ Tom, personal interview, May 21, 2024.

¹⁵ Tom, personal interview, May 21, 2024.

¹⁶ Daan, personal interview, May 28, 2024.

¹⁷ Jarek, personal interview, May 30, 2024.

organizer, notes that when he took initiative, many who had never acted showed him support¹⁸. In fact, Charles, a unionist, declared that public opinion being on the side of riders' action is "a weapon" organizations want to use¹⁹. This points to the existence of support even when it does not take the form of direct involvement.

Furthermore, we recorded numerous examples of mutual help. Six out of seven respondents to our survey reported having received a moderate to great amount of support from fellow riders²⁰. We also asked participants to write down some examples of how this support manifested. Several people recall being helped if their bike was broken, or helping others whose one had broken. One person wrote "switching orders when someone had bad experiences with specific addresses"²¹. Interestingly, one respondent considers "chatting" and "greeting" part of this support²², pointing to the significance of interaction, which I will discuss later. Moreover, even organizations such as the now-inactive Radical Riders provide "support in case of acute work issues"²³, taking care of "ordinary" problems as well as more long-term struggles. That these actions take place among riders in general is also confirmed by various academic studies on the topic, such as Yu, Tréré and Bonini (2022)'s article on Chinese delivery workers' mutual aid practices. The researchers found evidence that riders, among other things, provide "equipment assistance" and "emergency assistance" (Yu, Tréré, and Bonini 2022, 117), much like in our case.

When this more embryonic solidarity does evolve into action, it is not necessarily immediately in a "formal" way that goes through unions. Research suggests the presence of "informal" action among delivery workers. I use informal in the sense of the term that is used by sociologist Jamie Woodcock in referring to some of platform workers' "different organisational forms" (2021, 82). He argues that they include "informal networks", not only "formalised worker networks, new trade unions, or branches of existing ones" (ibid.). He describes the presence of "less formal or alternative forms of worker organisation", characterised by "organised spontaneity" (Woodcock 2021, 82). Indeed, Joe reports that with non-union groups you can "just go and burn bridges"²⁴. Moreover Alex, for instance, recalled that the moment he first felt compelled to act, he wrote his own petition and convinced people to sign it himself, acting alone at first but in the end managing to threaten a strike that wasn't "a proper organised one", but that still called the attention

¹⁸ Alex, personal interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen, May 30, 2024.

¹⁹ Charles, personal interview with Eline Aimé, May 30, 2024.

²⁰ Survey data, from Research Portfolio, 6th June 2024.

²¹ Survey data, from Research Portfolio, 6th June 2024.

²² Survey data, from Research Portfolio, 6th June 2024.

²³ According to the Radical Riders webpage, accessed June 18, 2024.

<https://radicalriders.nl/>

²⁴ Joe, personal interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen, May 30, 2024.

of a manager²⁵. Likewise, Jarek told me about how workers successfully exercised their right not to work in in unsuitable weather conditions through mass complaints²⁶. In other cases, groups can even lead to organizing. Paul, for instance, recalled being added to groups by colleagues who had become his friends, who would make complaints as well as promote “small-scale actions” and petitions there²⁷. This supports the claim that “informal networks afford the building of solidarity bonds among riders” (Yu, Treré, and Bonini 2022, 112), and encourage the formation of “‘spontaneous’ rider unions and smaller mutual aid groups” (ibid., 118). These networks can consequently be seen as “the building blocks from which more formal organisations can be developed” (Woodcock 2021, 72), additionally highlighting the fact that “workers are not unorganised merely because they are not members of a formal organisation” (ibid.). In fact, we were encouraged by a researcher on riders and migration to “focus on how workers organise themselves informally”²⁸. Interviews with Joe and Alex have both made it evident that informal networks and “social calls” have even led people to get involved with the FNV²⁹³⁰, the major Dutch trade union.

Interaction and the Spaces in Which it is Cultivated as Fundamental

All the small acts of solidarity, such as mutual help, and the key role of informal networks underline the importance of the connection and interaction that are hampered. Indeed, in the previous paragraph I pointed out how networks of solidarity are related to action. FNV unionist Julia claims that most riders who join the FNV come in “informal groups, via friends, or colleagues”³¹. Riders interviewed for academic articles indicate that collective action can get “kicked off” when workers come to spend more time with each other (Tassinari and Maccarone 2020, 45). Even though they were fleeting moments, in the centre of Amsterdam we were able to observe riders interact during breaks or stops³². While for most it is not a frequent experience, riders occasionally connect. For instance, Tom talked about conversing while waiting for a meal to be ready, and that he thought those were “good”³³. Talking, interacting, contributes to countering the issue of the individualization of delivery work, as it leads to the existing solidarity I have discussed, because it

²⁵ Alex, personal interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen, May 30, 2024.

²⁶ Jarek, personal interview, May 30, 2024.

²⁷ Paul, personal interview with Sadu Saks, June 4, 2024.

²⁸ Sadu’s note from the meeting with Andrea, from Research Portfolio, April 24, 2024.

²⁹ Joe, personal interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen, May 30, 2024.

³⁰ Alex, personal interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen, May 30, 2024.

³¹ Julia, personal interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen, May 21, 2024.

³² Participant observation diary, from Research Portfolio, May 16, 2024.

³³ Tom, personal interview, May 21, 2024.

relates to cohesion. Indeed, cohesion, “the extent to which workers seek each other out for social contact” (Hodson et al. 1993, 399), is a “fundamental precondition for solidarity” (ibid.). When cohesion is not present, workers are indifferent to each other, but when there is cohesion, the present “friendship networks” become essential to collective action (Hodson et al. 1993, 399). Among riders it seems that, while the structure of platform economy is individualised, when it is overcome, it is through this cohesion, these networks. As Tom said, you can be “alone on the streets”, but then also feel “a connection with the other drivers”³⁴. If one then pursues interaction, it helps in various ways.

For starters, talking leads to a sharing of information, which is essential for people to know their rights, to then demand them. In fact, this is encouraged by unionists and organizers. As Mathanja noted during the first Riders United meeting we joined, union leaders encourage riders to share information with others, to inspire them to join³⁵. The importance of communication and informing employees was emphasized also by Julia³⁶, and Joe, as an organizer, claimed that he is very vocal with the goal to motivate fellow riders to act collectively³⁷. Regarding other groups, to raise awareness Radical Riders created a space on their website where people could share their “rider stories”³⁸. Interaction goes against the interests of platforms, who seek to “establish individualised employment relations” (Tassinari and Maccarone 2020, 38). Joe believes that management is aware that damaging the morale of workers can “make people sad and not wanna talk to each other”, so that they don’t “talk about this”³⁹, their labour.

What happens then when people do feel free to talk? When and where is that even possible? Anthropological theory suggests the existence of what James Scott terms “hidden transcripts”. With this expression, he indicates “discourse that takes place...beyond direct observation by powerholders” between the subordinate (Scott 1990, 4). Yu, Treré and Bonini confirm the presence of hidden transcripts in the conversations riders have in private environments (2022, 120). It is interesting to keep this in mind when looking at the expressions used by rider organizations: Radical Riders, for example, promised the opportunity to “chill with workmates without the boss supervision...honest discussions”⁴⁰. This brings me to the “question of space” and its relation to interaction. Research has shown that the availability of “free spaces”, free from the “managerial gaze”, the “existence and nurturing of social relations” and the development of worker solidarity

³⁴ Tom, personal interview, May 21, 2024.

³⁵ From Mathanja van Houwelingen’s notes on the meeting, from Research Portfolio, May 16, 2024.

³⁶ Julia, personal interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen, May 21, 2024.

³⁷ Joe, personal interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen, May 30, 2024.

³⁸ Stories, in Radical Riders webpage, accessed June 22, 2024. <https://radicalriders.nl/stories/>

³⁹ Joe, personal interview with Mathanja van Houwelingen, May 30, 2024.

⁴⁰ According to the Radical Riders webpage, accessed June 18, 2024. <https://radicalriders.nl/>

beyond individualization are interlinked (Tassinari and Maccarone 2020, 45). In these free spaces, groups can consolidate social ties and interact, possibly organizing, and in any case enacting the “embryonic solidarity” that is tied to collective action (ibid.).

The so-called free spaces can also be digital (Tassinari and Maccarone 2020, 25). Indeed, much of my group’s research took place in online setting and through digital means for this reason as well.

Private chats and other digital spaces are the site where interaction and solidarity can emerge besides physical settings, and they are especially relevant when it comes to a contemporary profession that is based on apps (Yu, Treré, and Bonini 2022, 108; Tassinari and Maccarone 2020, 40). Yu, Treré, and Bonini even go as far as arguing that group chats can provide support “as traditional trade unions used to do” (2022, 119). The authors also expressly define chats as “learning environments, ‘hidden transcripts’ of resistance and solidarity building spaces” (ibid.), features I have already established to be characteristic of free spaces. Additionally, frequent interaction in these groups appears to be associated with a disposition to join a union or labour association (Woodcock 2021, 72). With my group we were able to observe this dynamic, even joining the Riders United chat(s) ourselves. Their WhatsApp community is their main communication channel. Although only administrators could send messages in the main group, in the different ones the participants can too, exchanging a variety of kinds of texts, usually with their rights in mind⁴¹. Our interviews point to the fact that WhatsApp is the main channel for discussions not only for freedom but also for “practical reasons”⁴². For instance, voice messages allow for easy communication without having to take time to type, or use your hands at all⁴³⁴⁴. This still indicates an emphasis on communication and on the urgency to facilitate it. In the end, “meeting points and use of WhatsApp are an important reminder that workers are not passive actors” (Woodcock 2021, 2), but that they actively seek out interaction with a goal of improving their working conditions.

Conclusions

In conclusion, solidarity and action, in their different forms, intertwine with interaction in a circular manner. Solidarity between riders is hindered by the individualisation of the job, and the riders frequently express feelings of alienation, but it still emerges. The way solidarity emerges are not necessarily large-scale actions such as strikes, but also more “embryonic” forms, that include

⁴¹ Whatsapp observations, from Research Portfolio, June 6, 2024.

⁴² Charles, personal interview with Eline Aimé, May 30, 2024.

⁴³ Charles, personal interview with Eline Aimé, May 30, 2024.

⁴⁴James, personal interview with Eline Aimé, June 3, 2024.

everyday mutual help and support between colleagues. Any bonds that form in this way can create informal networks that act as groups, even if not institutional or formally recognized. Ultimately, all points to communication and awareness as essential to establish solidarity, and therefore a starting point and reinforcement of collective action, which may bring a successful improvement of working conditions. Consequently, supporting riders' collective action should entail fostering daily connection, including recognizing the importance of small acts of help and of spaces where workers can connect and also feel free to express any grievances or ask for advice.

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A Hidden Battle:
Dishonest Company Strategies that Undermine Collective Action

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Practicing Ethnography

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Work in the 21st century is marked both by the histories of labour and the evolving managerial technologies. This makes for a hybrid system in which it is easy to depoliticise the actions of both employers and employees, whether it comes to control or resistance. During our research on collective action amongst food delivery drivers in the Netherlands, I noticed patterns in the way companies would strategically undo worker solidarity and work disruption, making it harder for unions to organise workers. This hybrid form of social control can render resistance practices such as protesting and striking inefficient. From outrageous cases such as NDA's which prohibit riders from talking about the conditions publicly, or a 'fake' union created within a company, to less noticeable yet crucially pervasive policies - our research provides multiple case studies for my analysis.

Theory

To analyse the strategies that food delivery platforms employ in order to undermine workers' collective action, I will take a Foucauldian position to provide an anthropological analysis. Michel Foucault's frameworks of governmentality and biopower are analytical tools which help to understand how modern societies regulate and control populations. Governmentality refers to the "art of government" or "conduct of conduct" (Foucault 1977-1978), which includes the practices, strategies and rationalities used by authorities to manage individual citizens and the larger population. It can be understood as the Western liberal advanced states' subtle way of controlling citizens through a set of empowering techniques like autonomy, self-actualisation, self-realisation, and self-esteem.

Biopower (Foucault 1978-1979) focuses on the regulation of populations related to physical and metaphysical bodies, with the aim of 'optimising' life, health, and productivity. Together, these frameworks can explain the ways in which neoliberal companies such as food delivery platforms adopt governmental practices into their managerial systems and how it reflects within broader social, economic, and political strategies of control. By applying certain strategies, companies can efface the fundamental preconditions for resistance at the individual level. I will also rely on the analysis made by Singh, Garcia and Lindtner (2023) in which the authors present the following five key categories of strategies companies use in the sector of food delivery: management strategies, incentive structures and moralised narratives, algorithmic control, information asymmetry and rhetorical devices. These five will allow me to connect the ethnographical findings of our research study to the theoretical framework. The focus of my work will be to tie the situation in the

Netherlands to larger understandings of workers' power, in order to provide tools for unions lagging behind the constant evolution of managerial control strategies. Updated frameworks can be the starting point to developing counter-strategies.

Methodological reflection

The process of research for our team was marked by challenges which turned to be our greatest analytical assets. Whilst in the preparatory phase of our fieldwork, we had certain cultural presuppositions. An important one, for me was thinking that drivers would be social and extroverted. What I came to find out is that this image is part of the manufactured expectation of workers imposed by their employers. Delivery drivers have to emotionally labour to please clients and get good ratings which impact their income directly. This realisation is partly what led me to company strategies that manipulate the creation of a specific workforce, whose individual behaviour is sold out at low rate and high profit in the name of algorithmic efficiency and automatised human interaction. Because the field was hard to access and even gatekeepers, such as unionisers and community leaders struggled to reach drivers, the barriers came to be a most telling element. The most significant among them are the artificially and purposefully instilled barriers. While we could have accessed more participants with a longer time of research, I doubt I then could have so clearly seen the crucial role that platforms play in undermining collective action.

Company Strategies

I. Management strategies

Management strategies in the article "Old Logics, New Technologies: producing a Managed Workforce on On-Demand Service" refers to the 'traditional' management strategies compared to 'new' technological management. The authors make a point to historicise and politicise the labour processes and place them in a wider neoliberal context. Neoliberal techniques in Foucauldian theory also relate to the use of varied forms of control "to obtain desired behaviour from workers" (Singh et al. 2023, 3). The management strategies of delivery platform companies are "a combination of technological and non-technological managerial strategies", which lead to "(re) organization of work that further adds to workers' precarities" (ibid). Algorithmic management can be experienced differently by workers based on other social factors such as "local labor market conditions, societal

structure, and existing labor protection policies” (ibid). In our research in the Netherlands, workers experience abuse of controlling company practices. The weather conditions seem to be one popular instance where otherwise uncovered injustices become more visible. Riders are still forced to drive out during rain, snow, icy roads or storms.

Paul worked as a food delivery driver after his school days ended, for pocket money. One afternoon, he would avoid an incident. The weather was bad, rain was covering the streets and overflowing canalisation. He kept going, knowing that if he did not meet his quota for the day, his rating would fall and his salary would take a considerable hit. So he kept going, as did all his mutuals in the field. One order was particularly far from his usual delivery circle. As he crossed the street on green, wind blowing into his ears, water hitting his eyes, headlights suddenly blinded his vision. The winter night had completely masked the black car heading towards him. Paul now recounts to me how close it came to hitting him, but that his cycling skills came in clutch (proud of himself) and he swerved, avoiding the car but not the hard concrete. He admitted his mom had wanted him to stop the delivery gig after that.

Paul¹ never considered organising, even when he had a close encounter with harm. Another one of our participants, however, admitted that a storm was how he became a unionist. While he was working with Gorillaz, all the riders were forced to work or else an absence would be counted as unpaid leave. Joe explained: “So, essentially, they wouldn't get paid because their shift got canceled by the weather. Which is illegal”². He continued to mark the severity of the situation, “And it was code red storm. Two people had died in Amsterdam and they were still trying to send people out to go ride. One of my coworkers had a very big argument with the warehouse manager at the time (...) And the manager said (...) if I don't do it, I'll lose my job. (...) yeah, (but) then these guys will lose their lives.”

The managerial practices that are recognisable here can be traced back to Scientific Management or Taylorism. Industries would apply these strategies by breaking down worker's task flows into standard measurable bits. As with other neoliberal production systems, the objectives are productivity and efficiency. We can see this in the riders work organisation, which is measured and

¹ Sadu Saks, personal interview with Paul, 04/06/2024

² Mathanja van Houwelingen, personal interview with Joe, 28/05/2024

controlled through time, space and speed during delimited shifts. It has translates to “a significant loss of workers’ autonomy and bargaining power.” (Singh et al. 2023, 3) This can further be connected to a Foucauldian analysis of biopower, where the workers’ physical bodies are subjected to high risk of harm and trauma, for the sake of managerial profit and algorithmic organisation of productivity. It reflects a shift towards neoliberal practices of governance in which subjects are constructed as individual units of governance. The separation and lack of shared spaces is another management strategy, which further pushes for individual strategies and segregation of workers who struggle to collectivise their exploitation. Another non-technological management strategy is the promotion of the job as the epitome of freedom and flexibility, whereas such language of self-development is not made for the well-being of the worker but for the creation of a personal sense of responsibility. It is a form of control which disguises exploitation as an individual choice. While the scale of automation made possible by technological advances may seem new, the contemporary strategy to automate and atomise work is connected to older strategies of labor management.

II. Incentive structures and moralised narratives

While not a revolution in management strategy, automation and individualisation gains an ever-more pervasive nature through algorithmic incentive structures and the moralised narratives crafted by management, both inside and outside the company itself. From previous research and our own, I explore the nature of such bonuses which are based on speed and costumer ratings, offered during peak hours and for inviting friends to join the platform. Tom explained how he was first attracted to the gig because of the flexibility, “when I started there was like more advantages in pay, like just some extra, like some bonuses and stuff like that. And that got like, less and less.”³

Far from straightforward rewards for good work, they conceal complex and opaque allocation which further fragment worker solidarity and their associational power - a ‘dividing practice’ as in foucauldian analysis. While platforms promised freedom and working at will, in reality riders are forced to log into the app regularly and during specific hours, which when unfulfilled can result in a check-up by management or terminations. This also counts for the cancellation of orders or leaves from working. A few of our interviewees also counted that during already rare interactions with other drivers, the most common subject of conversation would be to compare completed orders and remuneration.

³ Gaia Baldi, personal interview with Tom, 21/05/2024

The complicated thing about such narratives of self-employment is that workers can genuinely appreciate them at first. It may seem like a good deal compared to other low-entry jobs. That is the trick within the system, further exaggerated by the fact that riders work as such for very little time before moving on. As “the role of capital now is not a direct (but no less violent) form of power rooted in mobilising workers’ feelings and hopes by cultivating promises of happiness, the good life, and a better future” (Singh et al. 2023, 3).

The system can be recognised in foucauldian theory as ‘techniques of control’, where bonuses and incentive structures are a form of soft power, encouraging a certain embodied behaviour from workers which benefits the platform. It is also related to ‘normalisation’ as workers internalise such norms. Workers also reported that meeting daily milestones was the primary factor driving the work process and thus overwork is built into the specific form of incentive-based piece-rate system.

III. Algorithmic control

While the algorithmic control aspect has already been discussed in above sections, it can now also be connected to Foucault’s concept of surveillance. By setting standards of performance and a continuous monitoring, the data collection is used to penalise or reward. Labor processes are datafied and granulated into actions that can be captured. The algorithmic control of workers sets the grounds for discipline of the individual as a rider. The algorithm can enact various methods of governmentality without the necessity of human interference, such as changes in pay structures and the discrimination and bias of order allocation.

We found out that indeed, riders were often informed of policy changes randomly, in the form of a simple notification. Company management hid behind the algorithmic system to avoid any face-to-face confrontation with riders, thus making it really complicated for workers to make demands. The algorithm is also responsible for producing precarity: it moralises speedups, injury, and conflicts through piece-rate systems.

Through customer ratings, workers were also expected to provide performative service work, such as greeting clients pleasantly, pacifying conflicts and allowing unregulated demands such as climbing too many floors to complete a delivery. The data capture also disciplines workers, notably by creating a competitiveness among workers through information discrepancy in order allocation. Algorithmic control is creating new modes of labor exploitation, but it also poses new challenges to labor resistance. The normalisation and the penalisation of deviance reduce the

likelihood of collective dissent, as individual compliance becomes a priority for job security. Our interviewee, Jarek⁴, explained how this precarity affects workers who are international disproportionately. “I did have a lot of colleagues from Southeast Asia, Bangladesh, for example, and they were all working a lot, (...) just working here for one year, and then they were sending the money back home.”. Riders whose positions may depend on the job more than others have simultaneously more reasons to protest and yet less means to do so.

IV. Information asymmetry

Companies purposefully create information asymmetry between workers in order to create confusion and lack of unity between workers. Knowledge of rationalities behind decisions could allow workers to make informed actions. When such information is not given uniformly, workers must rely on ‘collective sense-making’ to understand the reasoning behind managerial decisions. Many of our interviewees talked about the change in pay when platforms decreased bonuses for workers and special offers for costumers. They were not given any specific reason, so riders had to make sense of it by themselves. Based on our interview with Julia⁵, an unionist from the FNV, companies also make use of NDA’s (Non-Disclosure Agreements) which restrict employees from exposing the working conditions. There are also different forms of contracts, such as pay-rolling, A- and B-phase contracts. The use of NDA’s to restrict information and the employment of different contracts creates varying levels of job security and access to information.

Decisions such as business location were often discussed in the media before employees were officially informed. This leads to unrest and uncertainty amongst workers. In the context of gig economy platforms, information asymmetry is a deliberate strategy used to control workers by withholding crucial information. It is a foucauldian technique of control: by creating a gap in information, platforms can manipulate worker behaviour and perceptions of self and others. When riders lack access to accurate or complete information, they are unable to challenge management effectively. This maintains the status quo of a power imbalance in favor of the company.

This purposeful dissemination can also create uncertainty, as riders are unsure of the broader and potential repercussions of their actions. It also relates to biopower: by restricting information and using various contractual arrangements, companies individualise the workforce. The collective sense-making can foster some degree of solidarity, but often it is fragmented and based on

⁴ Gaia Baldi, personal interview with Jarek, 30/05/2024

⁵ Mathanja van Houwelingen, personal interview with Julia, 21/05/2024

speculation rather than factual knowledge. In turn this can lead to frustration, distrust and internal conflicts. Different contracts also create a segmented work force with varying levels of job security and access to information. This segregation prevents workers from forming an united front, as their interests and conditions are not equal.

V. Rhetorical devices

Managerial decisions and work system updates are disguised under the narrative of ‘for the benefit of the workers’, ‘with a bigger picture behind’. Benevolent language is a tool used to dissipate the exploitative content of work measures and systems. Phrasing such as ‘essential workers’ during the Covid-19 pandemic sheds lights on some aspects of delivery work while invisibilising others. It creates a disparity between the conditions and the precarity of the work versus the image of drivers as ‘essential’ and ‘heroes’.

It also encompasses moralising narratives. Platform companies use this language to create a sense of corporate belonging and extract labor, especially during crises. The narrative of being "part of a family" or "team" is often emphasised to fuel a sense of loyalty and obligation, further blurring the lines between genuine care and exploitation. Such rhetoric is strategically employed to mitigate dissent and create an illusion of mutual interest between the company and its workers, thus shaping behaviours. This sense of moral duty often compels workers to go beyond their contractual obligations. Additionally, platforms deploy terms like "partners" instead of "employees" to promote an image of equality and shared goals, which contrasts starkly with the lack of worker rights.

This semantic shift serves to mask the precariousness of gig work and the lack of benefits traditionally associated with employment, such as health insurance, job security, and legal protections. Rhetorical devices also extend to the portrayal of work flexibility as an unqualified benefit, ignoring the instability and unpredictability it introduces into workers’ lives. The promise of being able to "be your own boss" is a powerful allure, but it masks the lack of control workers actually have over their schedules, earnings, and working conditions. By framing the conversation in terms of opportunity and entrepreneurial spirit, platforms deflect criticism and responsibility for the exploitative aspects of their business models.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have examined the distinct strategies used by food delivery platforms to undermine worker solidarity and collective action. By employing Foucault's frameworks of governmentality and biopower, we have proven how these companies use a combination of management strategies, incentive structures, algorithmic control, information asymmetry, and rhetorical devices to control and shape their workforce. These strategies de-politicise and de-historicise labor relations but also fragment workers' unity, making it increasingly harder for unions to organise and for workers to resist.

Understanding these strategies is fundamental to developing effective countermeasures. By updating frameworks, unionisers and workers can reflect the evolving nature of labor and managerial control. Our research has shown the need for a more nuanced understanding of labor dynamics in the gig economy. By digging deeper into the mechanisms of control and their superficial cover-ups, we hope to empower workers and labor organisations to challenge the exploitative practices and dishonest narratives.

Since our research was not focused on the theme of my essay, some key strategies are better represented than others by ethnographic data. Further research could focus on gaining insight into information asymmetry and rhetorical devices in the Dutch context of delivery work. I could have tried to bend our findings to be relevant for those two topics, but it could have resulted in a twisted analysis. Thus I decided to leave them more theoretical, still grounded in fieldwork experience but leaving space for deeper contextualisation. I had a large collection of literature while in the research phase of writing, but decided to limit my argument to a few. Hopefully, it allowed my argument to be concise and in-depth.

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How riders form symbiotic relationships to navigate the gig economy

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In today's society, almost everything can be resolved online in a very short time. New jobs are constantly emerging in our capitalistic world, where many companies capitalize on people's desire for instant gratification. Since COVID-19, platform work has become incredibly popular. People love the freedom it offers—they can work outdoors, stay active, and enjoy a flexible schedule. However, there are downsides. If deliveries aren't fast enough, ratings suffer. If customers dislike the food, ratings go down. It's a race against companies focused on maximizing profits without much regard for their workers ¹.

Bike couriers in the Netherlands face harsh working conditions. Their bikes often break down mid-ride, they can't take a day off during storms, and they work long hours for low pay. During my research, I talked to various riders who initiated collective action. When I asked them what triggered their action, they said it was an ordinary day and couldn't recall the specific catalyst. However, it had something to do with company changes that did not benefit the riders.

One rider told me he printed a leaflet and got everyone to sign it around the warehouse. He explained that it was a buildup of everything the company had done, and he was fed up. He wanted to inform the riders about what was happening, and they praised him for standing up. When the company director heard about the commotion, he immediately took an Uber to meet the rider. The meeting wasn't very helpful for the rider because he did not feel heard, but it showed him that the company was scared and wanted the riders to stay silent².

After this incident, the rider contacted a friend who had also initiated action among riders, and they teamed up to form an unofficial union called 'Radical Riders.' Despite the personal nature of the job and the bad working conditions, the riders that I spoke to enjoyed their jobs and had strong connections with their colleagues.³ This was an interesting finding because it is a job where you mostly work for yourself, and the connection is removed. Still, the riders knew where to go for help, mostly through informal connections, and found ways to form alliances and stand up for their rights.

¹ Julia FNV, Personal interview

² Joe Rider, Personal interview

³ Joe Rider, Personal interview

Fieldwork

In the last few weeks, I researched collective action amongst riders in the Netherlands with my group. We did this research for De Burcht in Amsterdam. In this essay, I want to explore our findings in the field and look at them in depth by examining Anna Tsing's research. By connecting Tsing's study on mushrooms and their survival in diverse human and post-industrial landscapes with the experiences of bike couriers navigating the gig economy, I aim to draw parallels between these contexts. How can Anna Tsing's concept of "contaminated diversity" help understand how food delivery couriers navigate and organize collective action and solidarity within the disturbed labor market of platform work, characterized by precarious conditions and individualization, to achieve cooperation and improve their working conditions?

I will explore the new gig economy and its transformative impact on the workforce, particularly focusing on how people come together in collective action. Much like mushrooms thrive in environments altered by human activity, the gig economy has emerged from our capitalistic society and our desire for instant gratification. I will illustrate how bike riders, like mushrooms, develop symbiotic relationships to navigate challenging work conditions. However, I will also critically examine these relationships, highlighting that while some riders successfully form supportive networks, others find it more difficult to establish these connections. Our research approached through an intersectionality framework, reveals that not all riders equally benefit from these symbiotic relationships, underscoring the complexities and inequalities within the gig economy.

Theoretical framework

Anna Tsing's research focuses on the matsutake mushroom, which thrives in forests affected by human activity and environmental changes. In her book, "The Mushroom at the End of the World," Tsing explores how these mushrooms grow in landscapes disrupted and disturbed by industrial activity. Her significant finding is the concept of "contaminated diversity," which refers to the resilience and adaptability of life forms, including mushrooms, in environments altered by human intervention. Tsing shows these mushrooms create complex, interdependent relationships that allow them to survive and thrive despite adverse conditions (Tsing, 2015).

"Contaminated diversity" challenges traditional views that see such disturbed environments as degraded and incapable of supporting diverse life. Instead, Tsing demonstrates that these environments can foster unique forms of diversity, where organisms form complex, interdependent relationships that enable them to survive and thrive (Tsing, 2015).

One of the central ideas in Tsing's work is interdependence. In disturbed environments, organisms often develop symbiotic and cooperative relationships that help them navigate adverse conditions. These relationships can include mutual aid, where different species support each other's survival, and symbiosis, where close and long-term interactions benefit all parties involved. Such interdependencies are a testament to the resilience of life, demonstrating that even in the face of disruption, ecosystems can adapt and flourish (Tsing, 2015).

Example: Matsutake Mushrooms

An illustration of "contaminated diversity" is found in the life of matsutake mushrooms, which are central to Tsing's research. Matsutake mushrooms thrive in forests disrupted by human activities, such as logging or certain land management practices that alter the forest floor. While seemingly harmful to the ecosystem, these disturbances create the specific conditions matsutake mushrooms need to flourish (Tsing, 2015).

Matsutake mushrooms grow symbiotic relationships with particular tree species, such as pine trees. They form mycorrhizal associations with the roots of these trees, exchanging nutrients in a mutually beneficial relationship. The mushrooms provide the trees with essential minerals and, in return, receive carbohydrates produced by the trees through photosynthesis. This symbiotic relationship exemplifies the interdependence central to "contaminated diversity" (Tsing, 2015).

The adaptability of matsutake mushrooms to disturbed environments is a key aspect of their resilience. Logging activities disrupt the soil and forest composition and can initially seem detrimental to the forest ecosystem. However, these disturbances can reduce competition from other vegetation, allowing matsutake mushrooms to establish themselves more easily. This ability to take advantage of altered conditions demonstrates their remarkable adaptability and the potential for new forms of ecological flourishing in contaminated landscapes (Tsing, 2015).

Gig economy

In exploring Anna Tsing's concept of "contaminated diversity," we have gained insight into how matsutake mushrooms adapt and thrive in disturbed, human-altered environments. This theoretical framework provides a valuable lens through which we can examine the disturbed labor market in which food delivery couriers operate. By drawing parallels between the adaptive strategies of matsutake mushrooms and the organizational tactics of riders, we can better understand the complexities and challenges these workers face in the gig economy.

The term 'gig economy' refers to a labor market characterized by short-term contracts or freelance work, as opposed to permanent jobs. It involves individuals being contracted to carry out small tasks

or jobs—called ‘gigs’—often mediated by online platforms. These platforms, utilizing internet technology, act as intermediaries between the suppliers of labor (the workers) and the demand for services, such as delivery, cleaning, administrative tasks, and data processing (Tassinari en Maccarrone 2019, 36).

In the gig economy, work is typically allocated and managed digitally, frequently through algorithmic management methods. This means that algorithms and digital platforms assign, monitor, and evaluate tasks. The number of workers participating in the gig economy is increasing rapidly. For example, a survey by Huws et al. (2017) indicated that during 2016-2017, between 9% and 22% of workers in seven European countries earned some income from gig work (Tassinari en Maccarrone 2019, 36).

The gig economy is seen as the latest stage in the evolution of atypical forms of employment. Its expansion has sparked significant debate regarding its impact on regulatory and protective institutions. Gig work challenges traditional regulatory frameworks based on collective bargaining, creating legal 'grey areas' where individuals lack access to social safety nets. Although recent advancements have been in understanding the labor processes in the gig economy, knowledge about the social relationships among gig workers remains limited.

Foundation for solidarity

As mushrooms adapt to new and created environments, food delivery couriers navigate the emerging gig economy. This new way of working, driven by technology and algorithms, requires a fresh perspective on work and the formation of solidarity, which differs significantly from traditional workplaces (Tassinari en Maccarrone 2019). Drawing on Anna Tsing's concepts, we can see that couriers, much like mushrooms thriving in unexpected places, initially found their jobs appealing due to promised benefits like freedom, flexibility, and the opportunity to work outdoors⁴. However, this novel work environment raises questions about the foundation of solidarity. How do these workers forge community and support when their experiences differ from those in traditional employment settings?

Arianna Tassinari and Vincenzo Maccarrone researched the role of solidarity as the foundation for collective action. In the gig economy, where work is predominantly individual, forming collectivism is challenging. They studied how riders manage to unite despite these conditions. They describe 'active' solidarity as a process in which workers, recognizing the collective nature of the labor process, become aware of their shared interests and begin to act collectively. This sense of unity and mutual

⁴Joe, personal interview

dependency empowers them to oppose management and transcend the apparent individualization of their daily work experiences (Tassinari en Maccarrone 2019, 36).

In the gig economy, the foundations for solidarity among workers are inherently different and generally weaker than in traditional 'Fordist' workplaces. In traditional settings, workers are physically present together, making recognizing their collective nature and shared interests easier. This physical proximity fosters interpersonal relationships and a strong sense of community, crucial for building solidarity. However, gig economy workers often work independently and remotely, leading to physical separation that reduces opportunities for face-to-face interactions. This isolation makes it harder for workers to develop the interpersonal bonds necessary for solidarity (Tassinari en Maccarrone 2019 37-39).

The gig economy workforce is also highly segmented based on contractual status, labor market attachment, and skill levels. This internal differentiation intensifies competition among workers, making it difficult for them to see themselves as part of a unified group with shared interests. The transient and unstable nature of gig work further undermines the development of a collective identity, as workers lack long-term employment relationships that can foster solidarity (Tassinari en Maccarrone 2019, 37-39).

Moreover, managing gig work through digital platforms and algorithms isolates workers from one another, reducing opportunities for collective action. In a market-driven environment where workers often compete against each other for gigs, this competitive atmosphere further fragments the workforce. It hinders the formation of a unified group identity (Tassinari en Maccarrone 2019, 37-39).

These combined factors create an environment in the gig economy where the foundations for solidarity are inherently weaker, posing significant obstacles to the development of collective action among gig workers.

How riders organize themselves

We have explored the gig economy, which can be viewed as a 'disturbed environment,' and how it can impede collective action. Nonetheless, this essay demonstrates how food delivery riders still establish solidarity and organize collectively. Our research identified several factors that facilitate collective action among riders ⁵. Here are a few key elements that lead the base for collective action.

⁵ Based on the findings in our portfolio

1. Informal Groups and Social Networks

The existing informal networks among friends and colleagues significantly contribute to the success of collective action. Riders form closer relationships in companies where workers have spaces to meet, such as break rooms for Flink employees. Additionally, the backgrounds of the riders and common elements like ethnicity or language influence group formation, leading to networks based on these shared traits. Julia from the FNV also mentioned that those who joined the FNV always joined in a group or via friends.

2. Online Community Formation

Online communities are central to mobilization efforts. WhatsApp groups are the primary mode of communication, successfully bringing workers together. These groups facilitate informal discussions and allow people to ask questions.

3. Union Support and Legal Help

Unions act as a bridge between informal connections and more formal or legal actions. While bureaucratic approaches are necessary and useful in the long run, direct action tactics have also been impactful. Unions support collective efforts, provide legal assistance, and make information accessible to riders.

4. Access to Information and Resources

Many riders are aware of collective action efforts but lack a deeper understanding. Support from friends or acquaintances in unions can encourage them to learn about their rights and the importance of unionizing. While not essential, knowledge about labor laws, local discourses, and rights is beneficial for joining unions.

Challenges of collective action

If you look at our findings, the most important thing is the connection between the riders. However, because of how the gig economy and platform work are organized, it is very difficult to overcome the riders' individuality and form alliances. If we look at the theory of Arianna Tassinari and Vincenzo Maccarrone, we can see how the riders overcome individualization.

Despite challenges from spatial dispersion and individual app interactions, they say that solidarity among food delivery riders is developed through overcoming individualization and fostering social relationships. Two key factors facilitate this process: the availability of 'free spaces' and the nurturing of social relations (Tassinari en Maccarrone 2019, 45-47).

Free physical or virtual spaces allow riders to organize and challenge the status quo without managerial control. Physical spaces, such as common waiting points, enable face-to-face interactions where riders form social ties and mutual support. These interactions lay the foundation for active solidarity. Over time, these spaces become venues for riders to exchange opinions and share contact information.

Virtual meeting spaces, like group chats on instant messaging apps, allow riders to voice complaints and share grievances. These spaces help riders recognize their shared experiences, solidifying a sense of collectivity. WhatsApp groups are beneficial for coordinating meetups, sharing concerns, and offering support with practical issues (Tassinari en Maccarrone 2019, 45-47).

Nurturing Social Relations

Existing social networks and maintaining spaces for socialization are crucial for overcoming isolation. Maintaining spaces for riders to meet and socialize is essential for sustaining mobilization. The experience of mobilization helps forge a shared identity among gig workers. Protesting in large numbers empowers participants and changes their perceptions of power relations. This leads to social identification among participants, extending beyond the workplace. Framing activities, like using work uniforms and delivery boxes in protests, reinforce their visibility and mutual recognition as part of the same workforce, shaping a shared identity and consolidating antagonism against management (Tassinari en Maccarrone 2019, 45-47).

In summary, Tassinari and Maccorone's theory says that solidarity among food delivery riders is built through shared experiences, informal networks, and free spaces for social interaction and collective action. Despite gig economy challenges, riders find ways to organize and support each other, driven by a shared sense of identity and common grievances.

Methodology reflection

During our fieldwork, interviewing riders was challenging, particularly when attempting to engage with those from diverse backgrounds to fully understand the role of intersectionality. We conducted fieldwork quickly, and finding people to interview was very difficult, particularly people who did not speak English or Dutch. So, finding people from a diverse background was not very successful. If we had more time, we could have focused on establishing relationships with people so they would open up more. The people we spoke to in our research were very open and used to being interviewed.

This does not mean that anthropological research was unsuccessful. Mette Marie Vad Karsten wrote an article on short-term anthropology. She argues that short-term anthropology offers a more agile and adaptable approach, providing empirically based hypotheses, ideas, and insights to address problems

and view challenges differently within a short timeframe (Karsten 2019, pg 16). One of the findings we brought back to the organization is that we struggled to find people from diverse backgrounds.

Unevenness of network

It is important to acknowledge that not all riders perceive their job as a "disturbed environment." Some enjoy their work and choose not to participate in collective action because they are content with their situation. Moreover, not everyone is part of the symbiotic relationships formed within these networks. For example, I spoke to Joe, a rider actively organizing collective action. He refused to ride during a bad storm, feeling supported by his union and knowledgeable about his rights. However, his colleagues, who had just started working, did not want to stop riding because they feared losing their jobs. They did not feel comfortable enough to join the collective action and continued working despite the storm, highlighting the insecurity and lack of support experienced by new riders ⁶.

We can compare this to Tsing's research. As I stated before, the mushrooms were able to live in this disturbed environment because of their mutual relationship with others. The mushrooms benefit from the disruption because it reduces competition from other vegetation, allowing them to establish themselves more easily. However, Tsing also highlights that this process is not uniformly beneficial to all organisms in the ecosystem.

Just as in Tsing's mushroom metaphor, the benefits of these networks are not equally distributed among all riders. The unevenness of these networks can be attributed to several factors which we found during our fieldwork:

1. Access to Information and Resources:

Experienced riders or union members have better access to information about their rights and resources that can help them navigate their jobs. In contrast, new or isolated riders may lack this knowledge and support, making them more vulnerable.

2. Job Security:

Riders who view their job as a primary source of income and feel secure in their position are more likely to participate in collective action and benefit from these networks. In contrast, those who are new, feel insecure or consider the job as a temporary or secondary source of income may not feel the same level of connection or commitment to collective action.

⁶ Joe, personal interview

3. Intersectional Factors:

Factors such as ethnicity, language barriers, and immigration status can affect a rider's ability to connect with others and benefit from these networks. For example, riders who share a common language or cultural background may form tighter networks, leaving others feeling excluded.

4. Perception of the Job:

Riders who see their work as a 'real job' are more likely to engage in collective action to improve their working conditions. Others, who may view it as a temporary gig or side job, might not feel the same need to invest in building or participating in these networks.

In our research, we observed that some riders, like Joe, felt supported by unions and informal networks, which empowered them to take collective action, such as refusing to ride during a dangerous storm. However, his colleagues, who were new and feared job loss, continued to work despite unsafe conditions. This illustrates the uneven benefits of these networks and the varying degrees of security and support among riders.

Conclusion

Just as matsutake mushrooms thrive in disturbed, logged forests by forming symbiotic relationships with tree roots, riders adapt to the gig economy by developing informal support and communication networks. These networks, often facilitated through digital platforms like WhatsApp, allow riders to share information, offer mutual aid, and organize in response to immediate challenges, such as broken equipment or bad weather.

The interdependent relationships among riders mirror the symbiotic relationships in Tsing's ecological studies. Riders rely on each other for support, just as matsutake mushrooms and their host trees rely on mutual exchanges of nutrients. This interdependence creates a form of collective strength, enabling riders to navigate their precarious work environment more effectively.

While the gig economy presents significant obstacles to collective action, food delivery riders still form strong, supportive communities. These communities are crucial for navigating the uncertainties of gig work and advocating for better conditions and rights. Through their resilience and adaptability, these riders demonstrate the power of solidarity in even the most challenging environments.

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Conclusion

To conclude, interaction is essential for collective action. The impersonal nature of the job as well as some characteristics inherent to the diverse backgrounds of the riders are obstacles to such action. Indeed, we have firstly argued that the migrational background of riders can shape their working conditions and influence their participation in collective action.

Secondly, we have shown that personal connections and informal solidarity are central to the way riders organize themselves and better their working conditions. Similarly, we have demonstrated that networks created by riders are what is enabling them to navigate the challenges inherent to their work environment. Lastly, we have explained the way platforms are controlling workers through their algorithm-based management.

As a consequence, we created a list of recommendations that we will share to unions (through De Burcht) in a leaflet. These recommendations include the creation of “free spaces” in which riders can meet up and create interpersonal relations, as well as share information and talk about issues they may face. Furthermore, entities who want to support riders should keep in mind the particular concerns someone who has a migratory background may face, as well as the existence of “informal networks” they may reach out to. Some recommendations are based on academic research, which is the case for company strategies that undermine riders’ collective action. We argue that staying up to date regarding the constant evolution of management techniques and debates in research can allow unions to create more efficient and relevant counter-strategies. It could also provide support in legal implications in the long run, such as grounds for unethical company strategies.