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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Challenging Goliath: Informal Unionism and Digital Platforms in the Food Delivery Sector. The Case of Riders Union Bologna.

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ABSTRACT: The growth of digital platforms in many industries attracted the attention of scholars and activists alike. A number of studies, in disciplines such as management, emphasized the role of digital technology in transforming market logics and described platforms as the harbingers of a more democratic organization of economic activities. The more platforms became relevant in intermediating between clients and providers of services and goods, the more conflicts related to working conditions rose, calling for a critical approach to the so-called platform economy. The most recent debate focused on the connection between the rise of platforms and the effects of neoliberalism in relaxing employment regulations and in pushing an increasing number of individuals towards “gig” types of jobs. We deal with these tensions and consider the emerging forms of organization and strategies of workers’ movements. We focus on the food delivery sector and on the most popular informal workers’ movement in Italy: Riders Union Bologna (Rub). The aim of the paper is to investigate the factors that stimulated the rise of informal unionism in food delivery, and to pinpoint the reasons motivating specific struggling and organizing strategies among platform workers.

KEYWORDS: Digital Platforms, Food Delivery, Informal Unionism, Precarity, Industrial Relations

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1. Introduction

Digital technologies are transforming the economy and impacting on the way in which individuals work and consume. The rise of digital platforms is one of the most visible areas where technologies are showing their transformative potential and the scale of their effects. Despite the enthusiasm showed by the business and financial

communities on their potential, the rise of platforms poses crucial challenges, especially when the nature of employment is concerned.

Food delivery, our research setting, represents probably one of the most striking examples of the tensions and contradictions characterizing platform economy: workers employed in food delivery, in fact, are mobilizing and protesting all over Europe, demanding better working conditions and access to same employment standards of subordinated workers. In turn, platforms oppose these claims by openly framing riders as *gig-workers* whose main occupation is not that of delivering food—thus defusing the analogy with those workers. In this contested situation, conflicts are aroused, and tensions disclosed not by traditional formal unions, but by an increasing number of informal, urban-based movements. Platforms' peculiar organization model and the impossibility to get access to traditional workers' representation mechanisms are, in fact, forcing riders to innovate both their struggling strategies and organizing practices to be able to challenge their power. Thus, paying attention to such forms is not only necessary to understand why and how these conflicts are taking form in the platform economy; it might be crucial to understand the future of industrial relations.

This paper aims at contributing to better frame and understand the novel forms of labor organization in the platform economy by presenting the case of Riders Union Bologna (Rub henceforward), an informal union of food delivery workers, active since October 2017 in the capital city of the Italian region Emilia-Romagna. The paper aims at tackling the following research question and related puzzles: how are workers confronting the asymmetries introduced by novel economic actors who do provide market services in a situation where their interlocutors, platforms, are not controlling strictly the place and time of work? In other words, does the peculiar nature of these actors, different from the typical concept of a "firm" employing paid workers, subtract workers from the possibility to claim part of the value created? Does it discharge on workers some of the negative externalities of this emerging business model? If so, is there any room for workers to counter both platform employment strategies and platform ways of framing the nature of work? Or, on the contrary, are these novel relationships among economic actors and workers the norm of a novel form of capitalism, enabled by digital technologies? We try to answer these questions by scrutinizing the emergent strategies and practices of *gig-workers* in a specific sector, food delivery. We will focus on how Rub innovated strategies and organizing practices to counter the narratives and power of food delivery platforms and attempt at assessing the results they achieved. Rub is a critical case in this historical moment, since it succeeded in doing what other movements failed to achieve, that is to reach with the "Bill of Rights of Digital Workers in Urban Contexts" the only agreement between a digital platform and food delivery workers' representatives; it also

stimulated the first national negotiation in Europe wherein a national government actively attempted at mediating the positions and claims of platforms and riders.

The paper is organized as follows. By using existing studies, it will initially present the socio-economic background surrounding the rise of digital platforms. Next, we will identify and define food delivery platforms' business model and its impact on workers. Finally, we will present the case of Rub, focusing eminently on the movement's organizing strategies, on its claims, on the results they managed to reach to date. The analysis will be conducted by using data from Rub Whatsapp chat, from the movement's Facebook page, and from notes taken in the participatory observation conducted by one of the authors who actively engaged in Rub activities since its inception.

2. The rise of digital platforms

The rise of digital platforms is certainly one of the most significant consequences of the "new era of machines" (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014). In the jargon of economists, platforms are an emerging class of businesses often referred to as "multi-sided platforms" that «create value by bringing two or more different types of agents together and facilitating interactions between them that make all agents better off» (Evans and Schmalensee, 2013). According to Evans and Gawer (2016), platforms create value putting actors in contact and facilitating economic transaction among them. Platform business models grow and consolidate thanks to the existence of network effects: the more they attract users on all the sides they intermediate, the more they create the conditions for actors on either side to find counterparts offering the desired goods, services, competences. According to Sundarajan (2016), technological innovation is stimulating the emergence of a new hybrid organizational model, characterized by both the features of the typical hierarchy and the horizontality of the market. Such a model is being deemed as one of the most promising for the future, at least in the opinion of pundits and observers of technological innovation (Bughin, van Zeebroeck, 2017). We are in fact witnessing an explosion of digital platforms: they are spreading across sectors and among a wide range of services. Crowdsourcing.org has mapped 3.000 platforms in 2015, operating in different sectors, all of them characterized by the supply of low- and high- skill jobs, as it happens for the many professionals available on Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester et al., 2018). Platforms' market capitalization increased substantially, reaching, according to the most recent measures, a value of \$ 82 billion in 2017 (Staffing Industry Analysts, 2018): that amounts to a growth rate of roughly 19% per year since 2012.

Platforms and gig-workers: emerging tensions

The possibility to tap from self-organized networks of gig-workers and the emphasis on the rise of the so-called gig economy were the terrain upon which the rise of digital delivery platform gained traction. More specifically, the rise of food delivery platforms was fueled by the inherent fascination with the rhetoric of the sharing economy, one wherein individuals were mobilizing their own assets and sharing them with others who might need them (Cockayne, 2016). Very rapidly, the utopian ethos behind visions of collective and collaborative forms of consumption was faced by the rise of agents (platforms) that *de facto* acted as arbitrageurs between providers of services and demand. Despite the distance between the initial spirit of pioneering, “cooperative” initiatives and the ethos of for-profit initiatives such as Uber and Airbnb, the “sharing” rhetoric made these platforms popular and fashionable among users, cherished by the public opinion and covered positively by the general press (Schor, 2016).

Despite the initial enthusiasm, platforms’ prominence was increasingly faced with criticism. Two main reasons are behind the emergence of critical stances. Crucial among them is the use of technology to intensify labor (Ajunwa and Greene, 2019; Fieseler et al., 2019). Despite the “voluntary” nature of gig workers engagement in the delivery of food, these platforms are often using algorithms to intensify the effort of workers or to increase their productivity. The second main source of criticism is connected to the use of technologies as devices to increase the control that the “employer” has on the employees (Lampinen et al., 2018; Choudary, 2018). Despite the rhetoric infused in the sharing and gig economy discourses, there appears to be a significant asymmetry in terms of control over the working performance thanks to the use of digital tools: data generated by the rider in the provision of his or her service might be carefully scrutinized by the platform as to intervene in the organization of labor and, for instance, discriminate in the allocation of tasks and jobs.

However, it is especially after the growth of workers’ conflicts in the food delivery sector (Cant, 2017; Tassinari and Maccarone, 2017) that commentators started moving their gaze on how digital technologies actually intensify efforts and exacerbate control on workers (Huws, 2014), and on how they are framing novel ways of working as something radically different from employment in the traditional sense. Because they are often considered as self-employed, in fact, gig-workers are also excluded from benefiting those standards granted to employed workers and from representation mediated by formal unions (Aloisi, 2015; De Stefano, 2015; Graham et al., 2017; Scholz, 2017; Arcidiacono et al., 2018; Giorgiantonio and Rizzica, 2018; Martelloni, 2018; Tullini, 2018; Codagnone et al., 2019).

It has to be noted that some of the most important platforms are providing services that were historically provided in the informal economy, as it is the case for food

delivery (De Stefano, 2015, 2016; Valenduc and Vendramin, 2016). Digital technologies have allowed unprecedented possibilities to centralize the control of such activities, thus facilitating the possibility of formalizing these services (Coe and Yeung, 2015; Schmidlechner, Peruffo et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2017; Täuscher and Laudien, 2018). However, despite this, workers do not get access to any benefit of this formalization, preserving the characteristics of insecurity traditionally associated to informal labor (Chen, 2006; Routh and Borghi, 2016; Breman and Van der Linden, 2014).

As Neo-Marxists scholars underline (Huws, 2014; Srnicek N. , 2016; Scholz, 2017), the rise of digital platforms should be inscribed in longer term socio-economic transformations, thus making it possible to appreciate both the causes of their explosion and their effects on workers. For instance, the tendency to use digital technologies to outsource single tasks to a crowd, coordinated by a central power that guarantees the continuity of a given service (Schmidlechner et al., 2017; De Stefano V. , 2015), is a scaled up version of a feature of global manufacturing since the '90s. Such tendency spread not only because it showed to increase global productivity, but also because it allowed multinational firms to bypass or avoid the effects of national economic regulations and national collective bargaining (Gereffi and Korzeniowicz, 1994).

As Srnicek (2016) states, outsourcing processes have also played a crucial role in removing resources to redistribute, undermining the welfare state, lowering wages and promoting flexibility of national labor markets. These are the very same factors that McKinsey (2016) positions as those that are boosting gig economy. According to their report, in fact, about 160 million people in Europe and in the United States have moved towards some forms of "gig" occupation. Among these, 90 million carry *gigs* out as second jobs to integrate their downsized wage. The other 70 million have *gig* jobs as the sole source of income, given that unemployment expelled them from the employed labor market. In other words, neoliberal policies seem to be pushing an increasing number of individuals towards accepting "small" part-time jobs with reduced wages and protections, creating then the necessary social conditions for digital platforms to rise.

Neoliberalism had a profound impact on the culture of work and organization of our times. Dardot and Laval (2014), for example, describe neoliberal rationality as a force able to influence an individual's ethical dimension, imposing the model of «the enterprise of the self» as an ethical dimension which is crucial in the functioning of neoliberalism and in maintaining its hegemony. Thus, platforms often emphasize their «smart image», targeting especially young individuals with a rhetoric that is functional to avoid the effects of economic regulation, to gain legitimacy in contemporary western societies, and to produce a subjectivity that is functional to neoliberal economy's needs (Gillespie, 2010). Thus, when protests against platforms exploded, as

Tassinari and Maccarone (2017) note in their analysis of Turin's food delivery strikes, platforms opted for a strategy based on the removal of the entire category of subordinate work from the debate.

3. Informal Unionism in Food Delivery. The Case of Riders Union Bologna

How are the parties involved in a platform business model (specifically the platform and workers) different competing for the appropriation of value? In our case, value is not exclusively monetary: in the perspective of gig-workers it also denotes security and safety. Are there any specific forms of interaction and struggle among gig-workers and platforms that might provide us with an emerging overview of how industrial relations might be in a future when platform will be a hegemonic model? We attempt to contribute to this debate by dealing with a specific research setting, the business of delivering food via platforms through the activity of independent gig-workers named *riders*. The choice of the research setting is motivated by the fact that food delivery has become a relevant topic of debate in the media all over Europe and the sector wherein protests and gig-workers mobilization gained visibility.

Specifically, in this section, we will focus on the case study of Rub, an informal union representing food delivery workers in the capital of the Italian region Emilia-Romagna. We chose to focus on the case for a variety of reasons. The first is the fact that it is a "critical" case (Flyvbjerg, 2006), since it is a popular experience—in the sense that it had a remarkable attention in the media and in the political debate—and it is the first movement in Italy to sign a bill, specifically the «Bill of Digital Workers' Rights in Urban Contexts» in May 2018. The second reason for our choice is that one of the authors had the chance to take part into the process that brought to the bill and actively observed all of the interactions among workers, policy makers and platforms, as well as the overall strategy of the movement. In the next pages we will focus on how activists organized workers in a context characterized by high levels of turnover, and by the tendency to discourage conflicts by using digital technologies. We will pay attention to the claims the movement developed, but also to practices and strategies they have adopted to achieve their goals. Finally, outcomes at both local and national level will be presented by pointing out the obstacles to their implementation and the limits of the movement's strategy.

Methods

The study is the result of a year-long project that took the two authors to analyze, systematize and code the evidence collected by one of them during a two-year

involvement in the activities of the informal riders' union in Bologna. One of the authors collected data in vivo thanks to his participatory observation allowed by his involvement in the movement. His notes, transcripts and syntheses of conversations and assemblies were the preliminary source of material. Then, the two authors had access to the entire library of contents generated by the riders belonging to the movement, specifically the group's Whatsapp chat, its Facebook page and the related contents, all of the audio and video contents created by the group. Specifically, the entire corpus of text consisted of 493 pages of transcribed messages, 191 photos, 47 audio records, 2.174 Facebook posts and comments. While workers were informed of the ongoing study, data was anonymized in order to protect their career. While it is not possible to have a real estimate of the number of members of Rub, members of the Whatsapp group chat at May 2018 were 74.

Tab.1: main first-order and second-order categories

Labor conditions	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital control • Wage • Injuries • Legal framework
Platform response	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard response • Soft response
Workers' resistance	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Claims • Struggling strategies • Organizing • Practices • Strike
Results	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critiques • Outcomes
Urban Policies	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest clash • Politic activity

Fig.1 offers a word cloud synthesizing the main concepts and words emerging from the analysis of the chat, just to give a glimpse on the emerging themes and categories that came out of the analysis. The analysis of the contents was made collaboratively. In particular, following typical protocols for content coding (Corbin, 1990), the two authors first assigned single paragraphs of text with single codes and keywords that synthesized their content. Each one of the authors did that autonomously, then the

Rub was born in October 2017 when a group of ten food delivery workers hired by the three platforms active in Bologna at that time¹ started to meet. Their meetings were stimulated by the rise of protests in Europe (Cant, 2017), and by the Italian strike against Foodora in Turin occurred in October the 8th 2016 (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2017). Beyond this initial group, other activists engaged in different struggles played a crucial role in facilitating the birth of the union: the symbolic potential of food, and of food delivery, in fact, was perceived as a way to bring the problem of work precariousness high on the agenda of the popular opinion.

The informal nature of the union does not result from a conflict with traditional unionism as it often happens for precarious workers in the Italian context (Ballarino, 2005). This rather emerges from the impossibility of having access to the representation rights granted to subordinate workers, given the way in which platform jobs are framed by platforms: they are in fact portrayed as micro-tasks performed by individuals in their spare time. For this reason, they should not be conceived as a way to attain a wage and a general sense of professional security. Thus, despite food delivery platforms formalized a service that already existed in many urban contexts, they did that avoiding to reframe such activities as proper jobs. In this context, since official and traditional channels of representation were closed to them, riders were forced to adopt strategies and practices that resemble those of informal workers (Fine, 2006). This resonates with what has happened in other sectors, where formal representation was not viable, especially in fragmented and unregulated sectors: something similar happened to migrant workers in the food sale industry (Tapia and Turner, 2013; Lakhani and Tapia, 2014) or to young precarious workers (Tapia and Turner, 2018).

Informal unionism also meant that new struggling and organizing strategies had to be conceived. First, the then rising movement focused on the choice of an urban scale of operations and on the construction of an urban identity. This has allowed them to assemble all riders, regardless of the platform they worked for: «Our aim is to have a minimum level of protection valid for all those food delivery workers operating in the city of Bologna», as they reported in one of their initial Facebook posts. However, what took form was a two-level organization: one level where workers of single platforms met to discuss their specific problems; one level, a sort of city assembly, where common strategies and practices of actions were developed. The urban-level assembly was open to riders and to all the individuals who wanted to support the struggle by sharing their skills and knowledge or by simply supporting the organizing process. In

1 They were Deliveroo, Just Eat and Sgnam, a local start-up. Glovo and Foodora later started operations in Bologna, respectively in December 2017 and February 2018. In November 2018 Foodora announced the sale of their Italian division by Glovo without guaranteeing continuity of employment for their workers,. In July 2017 Sgnam was bought by the Italian start up MyMenu.

this regard, Rub resembles an “urban coalition” formed by food delivery workers, students, researchers, activists and unionists.

Mobilizing food delivery workers and obtaining their attention and engagement was not easy. As one message sent in Rub Whatsapp group in October 2017 clarifies: «I have tried to speak to my colleagues to motivate them to unite and join the movement, but many of them disagreed. Some say that this is a *lavoretto*², while others are worried to lose their job». This message well represents the main obstacles to the organization of a movement: on the one hand, those who take it as a small part-time job will be recalcitrant to invest energies in a struggle; on the other hand, those whose revenues depend heavily on the delivery of food are afraid that protesting will have them fired.

Additionally, food delivery workers are highly dispersed, since the context in which they operate is the labyrinth of city streets wherein they are constantly running in different directions to complete their tasks. This dispersion complicates socialization processes: «Isolation is serious in this job. It is sad to see people like me, doing the same job I do, cycling in the streets with me every day without even knowing their name and who they are», says one of the workers in a message sent in the group in November 2017. Such isolation is not simply the result of the fragmented nature of this job, but also of the high level of turnover that characterizes it. It is important to note that turnover happens not only because workers move to a more stable job once it becomes available, but also because platforms’ recruiting practices tend to favor it. Workers in the movement we are analyzing refer to these strategies as “wild recruitment”: mass hiring of workforce. We will delve deeper on this issue in the following sections, but it is important to notice that this practice allows platforms to have an extended crowd of workers on which to rely for providing food deliveries. Moreover, it allows them to exert control over the workforce by exercising a credible threat of substitution.

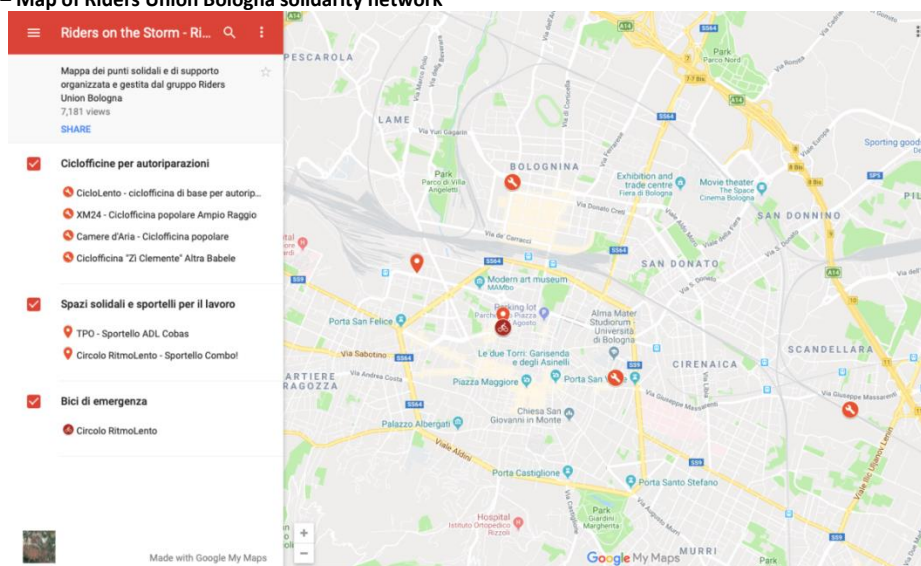
Rub attempted at overcoming these obstacles to mobilization and organization. First, they inverted the way in which digital technologies are used by platforms. They appropriated digital communication tools to organize: platforms in fact use messaging apps frequently (Telegram and Whatsapp eminently) to both coordinate their workforce and to instantly communicate with them in case of problems. Since these apps were used for working purposes by riders, the movement had a remarkable opportunity to insinuate in these flows of communication and use the same apps to favor the first contact with riders. Specifically, alongside the groups controlled by

² Italian word which literally means small job, identifying a job done occasionally and for a short period of time. In this specific case it is used to mention a job which it is not worth to struggle for.

dispatchers³, autonomous groups managed by workers took form. This stimulated the emergence of complaints and protests in official groups created by platforms, especially when weather conditions were making food delivery dangerous. It is the case of the first spontaneous strike happened in Bologna on November the 13th 2017, when an unexpected snowstorm made streets unsafe for delivering. Workers asked in official groups to suspend the service and, after receiving a refusal, they decided to log out from their shift *en masse* thanks to parallel communication in informal chats.

The most relevant practice developed by Rub activists to avoid the effects of turnover was mutualism: providing facilities for workers to make the movement a reference point during their delivering activities. The movement decided to cater for practical needs which were not taken care of by platforms, such as bike repair workshops, stalls where riders could recharge their phones, warm shelters where riders could wait for orders. Furthermore, after-work moments of socialization among colleagues were organized to overcome their isolation and to discuss their problems. Mutualism of this sort as a strategy to consolidate the movement and to win riders' resistances was facilitated also by the contribution of local activists engaged in other protests. Fig. 2 shows the variety of places and spots offering services and resources to riders in the City.

Fig. 2 – Map of Riders Union Bologna solidarity network



³ This is the definition used to indicate those who are responsible of coordinating the food delivery workforce.

The support of local activists played a key role in developing strategies to enlarge union rank-and-file and to prevent possible “disconnections” by platforms. In the first case, activists organized leafleting in front of some of the most popular delivery restaurants, informing workers waiting for the food to be delivered on the facilities provided by Rub and inviting them to join their meetings. In the second case, activists provided masks representing famous cyclists that were supposed to be used during the movement’s public actions. This latter practice served to protect riders’ identities and thus avoid possible platform’s retaliation, in addition to symbolically communicate the pressure of the job.

Claims

Despite the emphasis placed by many studies on the effects of self-employment, its legal status was never a relevant topic in Rub’s discussions. The most urgent need emerging in internal discussions was the absence of an insurance in case of injuries. As one of the workers states in an audio recorded in the group in October 2017:

«The main point is that we risk our life... I don't know whether any of you has ever worked in the rain on a scooter or on a motorcycle... but there is no insurance, there is nothing... tomorrow a car may crash on you for whatever reason and you stay home with no pay... distractions may happen, especially when you do repetitive jobs like this: exploited, always on the limit of speed, always active, in the middle of the streets... There is no story at all... these are working injuries because you wouldn't be doing that in that way, or you wouldn't be doing it if you weren't working».

The lack of insurance in the case of an injury is just the tip of the problem. Since food delivery workers operate in the streets, it is a high-risk job in itself. Many of them mix different sources of income and, because of their self-employment status, this may imply that an injury occurring while delivering food might have a radical impact on their other jobs. As one of the workers states in another message in the same thread: «I am a musician. If I break my arm I won’t only be able to work for platforms, but I will also have to give up in having gigs (concerts). Safety it is the most important thing, because you can even resist for a while with poor wages, but if you lose your leg or your arm you are done». Secondly, the risk intensity of the job is constantly increasing. Riders are continuously pushed to exceed their performances and to increase their

efficiency to place high in the rankings elaborated by platforms algorithms. In other words: the more they work the more their performance will put them high in the rankings, thus allowing them to be favored in the choice of new deliveries and increasing the number of gigs they attend to. Being faster and more efficient is a pressure riders perceive continuously.

Another factor responsible for the increase of the risks bore by riders is the payment logic of the platforms they work for, a system wherein they are paid for each single delivery they complete. This piece rate system forces them to increase the speed of their work: fast delivering, in fact, not only allows riders to improve their individual ranking, but also to improve their daily income. Platforms, by combining the effects of ranking and those of piece rate payments, establish a system which relates higher wage to the riders' availability to accept increasing risks of injuries. This is not the only reason underlying platforms' adoption of a piece rate payment system. As a message sent by a worker in Rub WhatsApp group in January 2018 clarifies: «With this formula, the company pays only the task of delivering, without taking into consideration the time they (riders) wait for orders. It is not a surprise then that the rating system is based mainly on the number of deliveries you can take every shift». Moreover, as later stressed out by another worker in the same thread of discussion: «The real problem of this payment system it is that it puts us in competition with each other. For those like me who can deliver fast, this is not a problem; there are people who do not want to risk their life and they decide to work according to their rhythm».

Platforms did not enter the urban market of Bologna directly using piece rate payments. Instead, they initially paid hourly wages, and only then gradually moved to piece rate by acquiring worker's consent. In their establishing process, they did not only need to form their network of restaurant and consumers, but they also needed to attract enough riders—their fleets. An initial “generous” treatment was necessary. Once riders started having enough revenues coming from their delivery gigs, platforms started paying high initial single delivery payments, thus making the piece rate system more desirable than the hourly wages. Only later they redefined the payments for each single delivery, lowering it. Deliveroo, for example, introduced a dynamic payment system. This is a particular system of piece rate that does not correspond to a fixed amount for each delivery. On the contrary, the amount of money paid for each delivery is calculated by an algorithm that takes into consideration the distance and the time taken to deliver. It is not surprising that the discussion on pay rate payment system was articulated and opinions were different among Rub members, as this message in the same thread of discussion testifies: «I'm not saying piecework is a beautiful thing. The point is that even those who have piece rate and don't want to risk their life still earn much more than me. And at the end of the day rent and bills remain the main problem. I also think that the solution should be a fair hourly wage, but now the only

ones who can pull off a decent salary are those on piece rate. And this is a fact, so it is not surprising that instead of claiming for hourly wage some workers want to increase the single delivery payment».

Nonetheless, the discussion has been resolved by looking at wages in a different frame: the one determined by introducing the notion of employed labor. A crucial role in this shift was played by the internal leadership which emerged as Rub activities proceeded forward. On the one hand, a significant share of workers was worried that such a request could mean losing the flexibility of food delivery gigs, that is necessary to combine food delivery income with that coming from other gig jobs. On the other hand, many criticized the flexibility rhetoric as being a way to justify the absence of rights. A mediation was found by looking at long-term transformations of labor processes, in particular to the trajectory according to which labor is increasingly controlled despite giving workers apparently higher levels of autonomy. There was a semantic shift that revealed necessary for the movement to coalesce around a specific set of claims. This regarded in particular the critique to the concept of flexibility and an encompassing inscription of it in larger transformations of work. Rub members perceived themselves as a vanguard of a much wider group of workers who were demanding a revision of the very nature of “work” and thus a redefinition of the criteria according to which workers are recognized access to benefits and security. It is with such approach that Rub started to demand the inclusion of riders in the national contract for logistic and transport workers, a contract that includes various allowances and guarantees.

The leaders of the group, a handful of individuals who took part to the preliminary activities of Rub and animated the chat, managed to convince workers that wage is not only a matter of hourly pay: it is also connected to other allowances such as benefits in the case of working holidays and in the case of bad weather conditions, the concession of paid holidays and thirteenth and fourteenth monthly salary. A thorough discussion in the chat emerged on these issues and members gradually converged towards unifying claims that considered the needs of both groups of workers. In other words, in a context where platforms were still denying the productive nature of their activities. «Riders are employee as others are and they need to benefit of the same rights. This is the point», as stated vigorously in a message sent by a worker in December 2017.

However, the recognition as employees is not enough to solve riders’ problems, that are also created by how digital technologies impact on their working conditions. Therefore, claims were also directed to limit their use. Riders demanded the abolishment of the ranking system and the respect of their personal privacy. Workers, in fact, report how platforms’ apps localize them even when they were not in their

working shifts⁴ and, often, also when geo-localization was deactivated on their smartphones. However, the abuse of digital technologies by platforms is not limited to workers: it also involves society. As Srnicek (2016) maintains, data is for digital platforms what oil was for manufacturing firms: an energy reserve that is crucial to compete in the market. Digital platforms appear to be as black boxes not only for those who are working for them, but also for those responsible of regulating their activities. This has represented one of the key argument Rub used to stimulate politics in paying attention to the necessity of regulating platform activities.

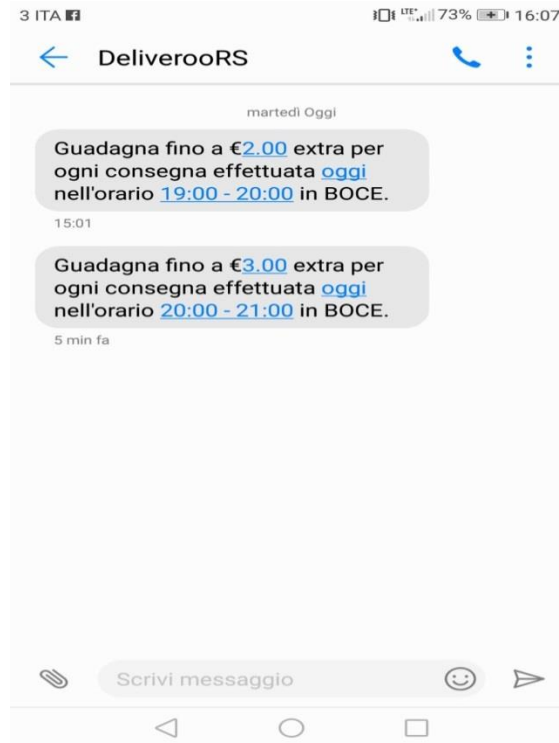
Finally, one of the crucial claims introduced by Rub is that of a minimum number of working hours guaranteed to every rider. This claim on hours must be read in a double sense: on the one hand it would give access to a certain and dignified remuneration; on the other hand, it would challenge the wild recruitment practice, that is it would limit the number of riders hired by platforms. These claims are similar to those of dock workers, who faced a similar problem in the past (Bettini, 2004).

Worker's struggling strategies and platform's response

Since platforms' functioning logics do not allow workers to use traditional struggling strategies and practices, these needed to be renewed. The first innovation regarded the notion of strike: traditionally it was meant as abstention from work aiming at blocking a service and at creating an economic pressure that should convince employers to enter a negotiation. Platforms are organized in a way that prevents this way of protesting. First, despite the absence of a centralized workspace, digital control and the use of messaging groups allow them to put direct pressure on workers, discouraging them to participate to any initiative which would harm their business. Platforms also rapidly react by making use of their large workforce which is also used to react in case of strike: while a worker abstains from work, dozens of others might be called in service in a matter of minutes. At the beginning of every week, platforms estimate the workforce they will need every day. Then, they will allow single riders to choose the shifts they want to work until the necessary number of shifts is reached. This number constantly exceeds their actual needs, allowing platforms to better dilute work, giving them a margin to react in case of strikes. The most efficient of these systems is Deliveroo's Frank, an algorithm that controls the fleet's size, and, as represented in fig. 3, motivates the fleet to join by sending messages announcing a payment increase for each single delivery. For instance, and referring to fig. 4, when Rub riders decided to abstain from work on May the 1st 2018, Deliveroo messaged all

of its riders telling them that an extra payment was going to be corresponded that very day. Through these practices, platforms are somehow depriving typical and traditional forms of strike of meaning and effectiveness.

Fig. 3 – Frank's message to Deliveroo fleet during 1st May rider's strike



For these reasons, it is very difficult for workers to stop delivering services during strikes. Therefore, after the first strike occurred on November the 13th 2017—a strike that reached the limited result of slowing the service without blocking it—riders started a second strike on February the 23rd 2018 after an entire month dedicated to its organization. This time, the strategy adopted by Rub was not that of leaving the shift empty by withdrawing riders' availability. On the contrary, they leveraged upon their possibility to refuse single orders repeatedly while in service, thus causing the service to block. After a significant number of meetings and several leafleting activities and other initiatives aimed at involving a relevant number of workers, this second strike succeeded in blocking deliveries.

Platforms' reactions were very different from those that characterized the November strike. In that case, Just Eat and Deliveroo distributed a survey among workers where they gave workers the possibility to speak about their problems, guaranteeing that their voice would have been listened to. Just Eat also decided to organize social events for workers, organizing informal meetings where the dispatcher appeared friendly and open to hear about their problems. Instead, in this second case, reactions were harder. For instance, in the days following the strike, Deliveroo recruited 100 new workers as a response, doubling the entire fleet they had at that moment. Deliveroo also revisited its organization by dividing riders in three groups according to their ranking. Those in the first group would have had the priority in choosing their shifts, while those in the third tier would be forced to take the shifts that were not selected by first-tier riders. This created a vicious circle that also made it difficult for third-tier riders to improve their rankings and avoid such mechanisms. However, this was just one of the many signals of a refusal by platforms to listen and make concessions to workers' claims. Yet on December the 11th 2018, a protest outside Deliveroo Italy headquarters in Milan - where riders from Turin, Milan and Bologna participated - received no response, motivating them to occupy the hall of Deliveroo's office.

After realizing that striking was not enough to affect platforms behaviors, a different strategy was necessary. The idea was that of targeting the public opinion, aiming then to influence the behaviors of institutions so to increase pressure towards platforms and to open a negotiation. As Agarwala (2013) states talking about similar dynamics in India, this is a common practice used by informal workers. Because of the high level of power asymmetry, they tend to use their power to influence voters' choices rather than trying to condition employers' behaviors. In other words, the idea is that of using the "strengths of the weak" to get attention by media and support from other groups of workers as well as from citizens. If food delivery workers can be considered as affected by a "structural weakness" (Olin Wright, 2015), in fact, a condition of vulnerability that depends not only from their job but also from their social position, the same characteristics can be used as a narrative weapon. In so doing, Rub allowed for the construction of a unifying narrative that made large shares of its adherents aware that they were socially vulnerable (Olin Wright, 2015), rather than autonomous and smart gig-workers. Something similar happened when the exclusion from representation and from access to traditional unionism was concerned: the construction of a narrative that re-set the identity of workers within the chat and in the messaging flows of Rub allowed to construct a shared identity opposed to the fragmented ones that characterized riders at the beginning. This reframing and the identity that came out of these narratives were crucial to attract the attention of

national media in a time when the newly appointed government made strong promises related to the reduction of precariousness.

As far as practices are concerned, Rub used those inspired by social movements. This is the case of the critical mass held on October the 27th 2017, when riders joined forces with the Bologna cyclist movement and slowed down traffic in the city. Other public protests were organized, such as a rally held on November the 24th 2017, the annual “Black Friday”, where platforms were named and shamed. On May the 1st, a “Rider’s pride parade” was joined by two thousand citizens and other precarious workers. With the same aim of influencing the public opinion, social networks were widely used for the following purposes: reporting and publicizing Rub activities, sharing ironic memes targeting food delivery platforms, shaming their advertisements on Facebook with several comments reporting food delivery working conditions. The result of this strategy was that of attracting national media attention, with an exponential interest coming to food delivery sector by newspapers and TV programs. Such visibility attained through these social media practices attracted formal workers unions that supported and gave visibility to the initiatives of riders’ informal organizations, Rub in particular. This strategy moved the struggle from a worker’s dispute to a media “hot cause” (Rao, 2008), empowering workers’ position and allowing them to improve both the number and effectiveness of their initiatives.

Nonetheless, it is the relationship with the city that allowed Rub to move ahead and attain the first visible outcomes. As fig. 4 shows, Bologna emerges as one of the most common words in Rub’s Facebook page. The focus on the urban dimension of the movement’s activities and practices aimed not only at mobilizing citizens to support their struggle; it also appealed to the formal institutions of the city, in particular the City Council. The movement actively sought to involve the Council through a simple and effective framing strategy: since riders’ workplace is the city and its streets, the municipality had the responsibility of taking care of the situation and was directly called into questions. Furthermore, the struggle initiated by riders appealed to the more general transformation of the economy of the city. In particular, it crossed the ongoing debate on the gentrification process the city—a major university town in Italy—was going through and its residential consequences. Thus, Rub perspective is not far from what Baldwin states (2016, p. 59): «Cities should not be thought of as a mere collection of people, but rather as complex workspaces that generate new ideas and new ways of doing things. In a nutshell, cities are to the twenty-first century what factories were to the twentieth century. Urban policy will be new industrial policy».

In more practical terms, it is by pursuing this perspective that Rub wrote on 6th December a letter to the mayor of Bologna asking «the opening of a negotiation between Riders Union as a subject truly representative of the needs of platforms’ workers, the Municipality of Bologna and the platforms involved, with the aim of

protecting workers and promoting an ecological and sustainable mobility». After this, the municipality has called together the main platforms operating in the city at that time (Just Eat, Deliveroo, Glovo, Foodora and Sgnam) and later elaborated the «Bill of Rights of Digital Workers in Urban Contexts».

Fig. 4 – Word cloud of 100 most used word in Riders Union Bologna Facebook page (October 2017-April 2019)



Outcomes and critiques

Rub is still far from reaching its goals. The elaboration of the Bill was not followed by a widespread acceptance of its indications by all the platforms active in the city. Nonetheless, Rub's struggle was not ineffective. First, Rub managed to empower its position and gain visibility for its actions. The choice of abandoning masks and operate publicly clearly testifies how the fear of retaliations was solved and how the movement gained legitimacy. Furthermore, especially after its media exposition, informal unionism among food delivery workers has spread in other cities in Italy: Florence, Modena and Padua. More to the point, the general opinion towards the actions and goals of workers changed. In Honneth's words, they managed to reach «a recognition

of social esteem as being an active part of the process of realization of the society» (Honneth, 2007, p. 171).

However, in the case of Bologna, another significant outcome was reached. The «Bill of Rights of Digital Workers in Urban Context» still represents the only valid agreement obtained by workers and some of the food delivery platforms in Europe. Apart from Rub and Bologna's City Council, the bill was signed also by the three main formal unions (CGIL, CISL, UIL) and Sgnam, which is an Italian platform employing the vast majority of riders in the city. However, for those platforms voluntarily signing it, the bill is a valid agreement that recognizes common rights for all digital workers—regardless of their contract—operating in the city of Bologna. The bill, after an introductory section that stresses the crucial role of local administrations in enforcing labor rights in urban contexts, is articulated in four parts. The first defines the bill's scope: it aims at disciplining not only food delivery, but all the forms of work mediated by digital platforms taking place in the city. Second, the bill defines and lists rigorously workers' information rights: they are entitled to know the tasks they will have to perform, they have the right to be noticed in case of disconnection. The bill also states that workers are entitled to a minimum amount of guaranteed working hours that need to be proportional to the availability given by the single worker.

Third, a section named «Protection rights of the person and of his/her fundamental assets», includes two crucial points. In particular, the 4th article not only guarantees an hourly payment, but it clearly mentions its relationship with existing national contracts. This is a crucial part of the bill: it excludes the use of pay rate systems, and it also bound riders' hourly wage to collective bargaining. Furthermore, this article regulates holidays and bonuses in case of adverse weather, an insurance against injuries, a total or partial reimbursement for their means or production and 10 hours of paid union assembly each year.

Major multinational platforms are still not affected by its principles and they continue to compete in the market as if the bill did not exist. Just Eat refused to sign it because of Art. 4, Deliveroo and Glovo never participated in the negotiations process. For this reason, the bill still needs to be implemented to reach the aim of effectively and integrally regulate the food delivery business in the city.

In the days following the signature of the local bill, the Italian ministry of labor Luigi Di Maio defined riders as the symbol of the “abandoned generation”, that is the generation of youngsters being under-employed and deprived of the rights that workers of past generations enjoyed. He invited Rub for a meeting and opened to a possible national and government-led solution of their problems. The ministry wanted to open a national negotiation. between workers' representatives and digital platforms. The negotiation started immediately, involving not only platforms' and

workers' representatives, but also the most representative formal unions and employers' associations.

At the beginning of the negotiations, digital platforms seemed to be open to discussion. In particular they coalesced in two employers' associations: Assodelivery, representing the main multinational platforms such as Deliveroo, Glovo and Just Eat, and a smaller one formed by Italian start-ups such as MyMenu/Sgnam, Moovenda and Foodracers. This seemed as a way to overcome the typical fragmentation of the sector and a sign of goodwill. Nonetheless, platforms never really entered the negotiations and actually slowed the process by refusing to recognize workers representatives as legitimate counterparts and using vague definitions of both their activities and of the potential allowances that might be the focus of the negotiations.

When the government in October 2018 forced digital platforms to present a proposal of agreement, they avoided a contractual solution demanding for a law which would have clarified riders' status as self-employment. Thus, after nine months the negotiation stopped. Currently, the government is debating a law which will extend them the possibility of getting access to the same benefits recognized to subordinate workers. If it will succeed, this will represent a crucial gain of this struggle which will impact not only to food delivery platforms, but to all Italian platform workers.

3. Concluding remarks: Riders Union Bologna and the future of industrial relations

The case of Rub sheds light on the transformations happening in the context of the platform economy, including those affecting conflicts. In a historical moment when unionization is facing the highest point of its crisis, the contemporary rise of informal unionism testifies how the coalescing of workers in organized forms is still fundamental, even in times of self-employment and novel forms of organization of economic activities brought about by digital technologies. This should motivate scholars to pay attention to such forms of organization and their strategies since they keep increasing in numbers, visibility and effectiveness.

The experience unfolding in Bologna is relevant as a vantage point to understand the impact that digitalization has on labor. Rather than preventing poor and unsafe working conditions that characterized food delivery in the informal economy, platforms use digital technologies to extend their control over the workforce stimulating an intensification of workers' performances without providing any protection for their risks. The experience of Rub shows how this process can be challenged, but also how their weakness may be transformed in a strength point.

Finally, the choice to avoid the power asymmetry which characterizes food delivery by targeting the public opinion and national and local institutions, represents a characteristic that distinguishes Rub from similar ones, and it probably explains why Rub was the only movement able to reach the formulation of a bill and to have at least a platform sign it.

Nonetheless, food delivery workers' struggle in Italy has given new lymph to the debate on the future of industrial relationships. Following the attention that media gave to this struggle, riders became a paradigm of some of the most recent trends affecting this field. Despite media representations of Rub as «unionism 2.0», its informal status, the use of mutualism and the strategies it adopted are not particularly new. Not only they were proper also of past Italian union activities, but they are also common among global workers movements, especially in emerging economies where a large share of the working population is excluded from formal recognition and from the access to regulated industrial relations. Thus, even if food delivery workers are a peculiar case, its analysis might shed light on other areas and industries interested by the diffusion of platforms and more generally on the increasing digitalization of economic processes and the subsequent tendency to avoid regulation. How institutions, employers' associations and formal unions will deal with these experiences mushrooming in the digitalized food delivery sector, will tell us something important for the future of industrial relations.

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