

Mobilization and unionization dynamics of platform workers. A transnational and cross-sectoral approach of mobility-related activities

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Over the past decade, a new type of economic player has not only emerged, but has sparked major transformations across various service sectors. This new figure is defined by an extensive use of digital technologies and so-called disruptive strategies that seek an ever-greater share of the market. The global expansion of these "lean platforms" is rooted in an economic model characterized by the "hyper-externalization" (Srnicsek, 2016) of physical capital and labor, and its ability to bypass work and employment regulations that have traditionally been based on the triple unity of place, time and collective organization (Degryse, 2020).

Work activities related to mobility—ride-share drivers, home delivery of meals and groceries, scooter "juicers"— which are our current focus, play a pivotal role within an economic paradigm that has been referred to by various researches as "platform capitalism" (Srnicsek, 2016; Abdelnour & Bernard, 2018) or the "gig economy" (Huws et al, 2017; Vallas & Schor, 2020). This is due to their economic impact, public visibility, and emergence as an entirely novel type of "emerging work figure" within an expanding gray area of legality (Azaïs, 2019) that, in turn, has given rise to demands for the regulation and recognition of their employment status (Nasom-Tissandier & Sweeney, 2019, Dubal, 2020, Mazuyer 2022). The chronology of their development helps to shed light on the realities of a labor market that spans from one crisis to another. Having entered the US and then world markets beginning in 2010, platforms took advantage of a pool of un- and under-employed workers looking for jobs or extra income in the wake of the 2008 "Great Recession." Moreover, these companies also capitalized on the exponential growth of platform markets in their respective economic environments: aggressive competitiveness within the traditional taxi sector and the opening of new markets for meal delivery. During the Covid crisis their paths diverged. Meal delivery experienced an exponential growth due to the lockdown, resulting in high demand for labor. On the other hand, the drastic decline in personal mobility due to the pandemic led to a collapse in the activity and income of drivers, plunging them into economic despair. Depending on the national context, this segmentation of experiences between the various occupational groups has facilitated different forms of demands and protestations from the platform workers: demands for protection against the deteriorating working conditions by delivery workers, rather for public aid by ride-share drivers.

In addition to these circumstantial demands, platform-mediated workers have made specific claims for "digital labor rights" such as "algorithm social rights" (Chagny & Forrestier, 2021), and they have also taken part in mobilizations by engaging in new forms of protest, be they individual or collective (Dufresne, Leterme & Vandewattyne, 2018, Brugière, 2020; Dufresne & Leterme, 2021). These organizational dynamics have led to various forms of worker collectives (Trappmann et al., 2020) or other autonomous structures beyond the traditional bounds of organized labor (e.g. trade unions) and that are in themselves part and parcel of the revitalization of collective action (Kesselman & Sauviat, 2017). This cycle then creates new challenges for trade unions. Among the challenges facing labor's ability to represent and defend the interests of platform workers are: the rapid and persistent evolutions of the sectors at play,

the use of self-employment status to bypass regulations and social dialogue; the ability of companies to quickly adapt their strategies to court rulings in order to circumvent them; the social composition of the workforce (e.g. students, low-skilled workers, workers looking for additional income, legal or illegal migrants) and their distance from—and potential distrust of—trade unionism; and organized labor’s defense of more “traditional” actors in sectors with potentially contradictory interests, as epitomized in the case of the taxi sector. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to reduce the challenges of platform work and organizing to a simplistic opposition between grassroots collectives and institutionalized unions. Instead, it is important to emphasize the diversity of organizational forms that vary according to national contexts (Cini et al, 2021) as well as the increasing implementation of cooperation logics, more or less incipient, sustained and formalized between these two main types of actors: unions have engaged in logistical and media support within the framework of collective actions, and legal and financial support within the framework of salary reclassification, including through unionization drives (Vallas, 2019). The latter can occur through the affiliation of workers collectives and associations (Sachs, 2019) or through the direct inclusion of individual workers (Gasparri & Tassinari, 2020).

We thus wish to account for the dynamics of unionization within platform capitalism, through a comparative analysis of the relationships that unite workers, collectives, and other structures of contestation with trade union organizations. This requires close attention to broader timescales as well as more focused temporalities. These dynamics are also present within the unions themselves, notably through the adaptation of their structures, such as to unionize independent workers, or their positioning towards public policies aimed at regulating platform work.

These patterns can be analyzed across different national contexts, marked by the emergence of platforms that have concomitantly mobilized the same economic models and strategies to conquer new markets, which makes the study of this “shared shock” a unique object of comparison (Thelen 2018). The differences in how these new economic models have been received in different countries have, understandably, produced different power relations (Carelli & Kesselman 2019, Kesselman 2021). This comparative dimension lies at the heart of our project. The linking of experiences of unionization and mobilization of platform workers in countries with different languages and trade union cultures, notably Francophone and Anglophone, from the global North to South, as well as from East to West, will allow us to interrogate the full extent of the degree of disruption brought about by the advent of platform work (Davis & Sinha, 2021, Ford & Honan, 2019). The linking of flagship sectors of on-demand work, based on recent research, will allow us to highlight avenues of comparison in the regulatory processes of these emerging sectors (Chagny, 2019; Dufresne & Leterme, 2021).

Ultimately, the question that underpins this thematic dossier can be summarized by the following formula: what variations can be observed at the local, national, and transnational levels in terms of the forms and dynamics of unionization in the face of the global phenomenon of platformization of mobility-related sectors?

In response to this question, contributions from various disciplines (sociology of trade unionism and industrial relations, sociology of social movements, sociology of work and labor, political science, management science, law, etc.) will enable important interventions at the level of theory, method, and empirical case studies.

This special issue will be structured around 4 thematic axes:

1. Analysis of the changing field of platform workers' collective representation: to give an account of the evolving forms of the organizations (collectives and trade unions) involved and of the relations maintained between them, as well as to analyze these industrial relations dynamics within the perspective of the national context(s) studied and the impact of the economic and health crises on the field.
2. Analysis of the collective action of platform workers' mobilizations: to describe the various modes of action, whether "classic" (e.g. demonstration, strike, rally, or a blockade of an administrative office) or new and sector-specific (e.g. temporary collective disconnections from the apps, traffic slow-down, lawsuits for salary reclassification, alternative forms of organization). Here, we show particular interest toward the types of actors involved and the forms of cooperation that emerge in this context.
3. Analysis of the demands and strategies put forward by the various union figures: to highlight any agreements and disagreements concerning the major issues concerning platform work (e.g. employment status, income, working conditions, social protection, social dialogue), linking them in particular to the regulatory framework, the social composition, and the identities of the relevant professional groups.
4. Analysis of the "disruption" generated by platformization. What are the consequences of the emergence of these activities on trade unionism and industrial relations in each country, and in a comparative perspective, on the relations that institutionalized trade unions have with policy-makers and companies, who have themselves become major players involved in the process of changing and reconfiguration of norms? By tracing the power relationships within which actors are engaged, we can better study the full range of actions taken by new stakeholders in the "public sphere" (e.g. platforms, traditional competitors, public authorities at various echelons, consumer associations, experts, etc.) (Azaïs et al., 2017) and thus make larger arguments about changes in the economic structures and regulations of the mobility sector.

Calendar

1. November 30, 2022: deadline for paper submissions. Papers must adhere to the journal's guidelines: <https://www.riir.ulaval.ca/en/publish-in-riir/instructions-authors>
2. Summer/Autumn 2023: Publication of the dossier by the journal.

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