



DYNAMICS OF VIRTUAL WORK

Migrant Labour in the Gig Economy

The Intersection of Migrant Labor,
Platform Capitalism, and Resistance

Edited by

**Francesco Della Puppa · Dipsita Dhar ·
Nicola Montagna**



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Dynamics of Virtual Work

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Technological change has transformed where people work, when and how. Digitisation of information has altered labour processes out of all recognition whilst telecommunications have enabled jobs to be relocated globally. ICTs have also enabled the creation of entirely new types of 'digital' or 'virtual' labour, both paid and unpaid, shifting the borderline between 'play' and 'work' and creating new types of unpaid labour connected with the consumption and co-creation of goods and services. This affects private life as well as transforming the nature of work and people experience the impacts differently depending on their gender, their age, where they live and what work they do. Aspects of these changes have been studied separately by many different academic experts however up till now a cohesive overarching analytical framework has been lacking. Drawing on a major, high-profile COST Action (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Dynamics of Virtual Work, this series will bring together leading international experts from a wide range of disciplines including political economy, labour sociology, economic geography, communications studies, technology, gender studies, social psychology, organisation studies, industrial relations and development studies to explore the transformation of work and labour in the Internet Age. The series will allow researchers to speak across disciplinary boundaries, national borders, theoretical and political vocabularies, and different languages to understand and make sense of contemporary transformations in work and social life more broadly. The book series will build on and extend this, offering a new, important and intellectually exciting intervention into debates about work and labour, social theory, digital culture, gender, class, globalisation and economic, social and political change.

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ISSN 2947-9290

ISSN 2947-9304 (electronic)

Dynamics of Virtual Work

ISBN 978-3-031-91261-0

ISBN 978-3-031-91262-7 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-91262-7>

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To the digitalized service workers of the world and to their unity in the struggles, to which the current crisis of capitalism calls them and calls us all.

PRAISE FOR *MIGRANT LABOUR IN THE GIG ECONOMY*

“The growth of the gig economy in recent years is a phenomenon of great importance which has remained insufficiently studied. This economy’s specificities such as its notable reliance on migrant workers even when there is local unemployment and the divide this introduces between gig and other workers and the additional hurdles it creates in the way of their becoming organized, remain as intriguing as ever. The papers in this book are extremely useful in this context. Based on meticulous field-work they throw much-needed light on the gig economy in several countries and constitute a timely and invaluable contribution to an understanding of a key aspect of contemporary capitalism.”

—Prabhat Patnaik, *Jawaharlal Nehru University, India*

“This is an excellent collection that brings together important perspectives on migrant workers in the platform economy. The contributions take seriously the challenges that migrant workers face in this kind of work, while maintaining a focus on the workers’ struggles that have the power to change these conditions.”

—Jamie Woodcock, *King’s College, London, UK*

“The central axis of this book can be summarized as follows: on one hand, we witness a monumental expansion of digital labor and algorithmic systems. On the other, we observe the growing presence of migrant labor within these digital activities, characterized by the absence of rights and

high levels of exploitation. Across its eight chapters, the book examines empirical realities in Italy, Portugal, Greece, England, India, and China, suggesting that while each country exhibits specific singularities and particularities, a broader, paradoxical process of homogenization is underway. This process manifests in the precarization and intensification of labor exploitation, particularly affecting migrant workers. A new specter is haunting the world of work: the specter of Uberization.

This book provides crucial insights that enhance our understanding of these emerging labor modalities, and it also suggests that we are witnessing the rise of new struggles and forms of resistance. This dynamic reveals that the evolving morphology of labor is giving rise to a new morphology of social struggles.”

—Ricardo Antunes, *State University of Campinas, Brazil*

“This book is a collective attempt to reveal the latest dynamics of global capitalism with platform and gig economy. It is shown that the new digital technology has not been used to ensure comfort or leisure for the global working class; but, on the contrary, used to extract super profit by making them more alienated, more vulnerable, more unprotected, more precarious, 24x7 job with no holidays, no trade union, no regular income.

In the present neoliberal global (dis)order, war, conflict, unemployment and insecurity often drive more people to leave their home or country and add them to increasing number of migrant labour, now visible portion of global workforce. In fact, capitalism in global scale has not been able to create decent, safe and regular jobs, rather created sea of unemployed work force, easy prey for precarious work.

This book by compiling articles focuses on global south and also specific studies on India, Portugal, Greece, UK, Italy, China has brought new facts and insights crucial to understand development of ‘platform capitalism’ and the gig economy as well as the failure of traditional trade unions and looking for other ways for organizing workers.”

—Anu Muhammad, *Professor of Economics (and anthropology)
at Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka, Bangladesh*

CONTENTS

1	Introduction: Migrant Labor in the Platform Economy—The Intersection of Labor Digitization, Platform Capitalism, Migration, and Resistance	1
	Francesco Della Puppa, Dipsita Dhar, and Nicola Montagna	
	Part I Vulnerability and Inherent Precarity of Migrant Workers in Gig Economy	
2	Migrant Labour in the Greek Gig Economy	21
	Lefteris Kretsos and Vassilis Charitsis	
3	Digital Caporalato and Migrant Labour in the Gig Economy	59
	Gianmarco Peterlongo	
4	Delivering in the Lagoon. Critical Reflections on the Flexibility of Platformised Food Delivery in Venice	79
	Giorgio Pirina	
5	Migrant Gig Workers of India's Consumerist Cities: The Contradictions of Platform Economy and Delivery Work in Neoliberal India	99
	Suddhabrata Deb Roy	

- 6 Vulnerability and Resistance Among Digital
and Platform Immigrant Workers in Portugal** 145
Isabel Roque

Part II Strategies of Resistance

- 7 Organising Migrant Platform Workers in London: The
Case of IWGB** 175
Paolo Borghi and Annalisa Murgia
- 8 Migration, Precarity and Solidarity Among Migrant
Platform Workers in China's Food Delivery
and Ride-Hailing Sectors** 197
Yang Zhou
- 9 Transversal Unionism: Resisting and Navigating
a Neoliberal City Through Identity and Labour Power** 231
Dipsita Dhar, Ashique Ali Thuppilikkat,
and Soham Bhattacharya

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- Modak, Tapas Singh, and Bhattacharya, Soham (2021), “The Covid-19 Pandemic and Agriculture in Rural India: Observations from Indian Villages,” *Review of Agrarian Studies*, 11(1).
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LIST OF TABLES

Chapter 2

Table 1	Drivers and mobile equipment operators/motorcycle drivers, 2015–2023	25
Table 2	Turnover rate for drivers of vehicles and mobile equipment operators (NACE 56 Activities of accommodation and food service activities) in Greece, 2018–2021	25
Table 3	Turnover rate for drivers of transport and mobile equipment operators/motorcycle drivers (NACE 56 Hospitality services activities) in Greece, 2018–2021	26
Table 4	Turnover rate for drivers of transport vehicles and mobile equipment operators/motorcycle drivers (NACE 53 Postal and courier activities) in Greece, 2018–2021	26
Table 5	Drivers of transport vehicles and mobile equipment operators/motorcycle drivers (NACE 53 postal and courier activities) in Greece, 2018–2021	26
Table 6	Sample distribution and participant data	37
Table 7	Population with non-Greek citizenship, 1971–2001, Population Census	40
Table 8	Employment share of migrants in Greece, 1987–2023	41

Chapter 6

Table 1	Sociodemographic characterisation of the interviewees	155
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Chapter 9

Table 1	Expansion of Bangalore City Agglomeration, 1971–2011	256
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Introduction: Migrant Labor in the Platform Economy—The Intersection of Labor Digitization, Platform Capitalism, Migration, and Resistance

Francesco Della Puppa, Dipsita Dhar, and Nicola Montagna

1 DIGITAL PRECARIITY: MIGRANT LABOR AND THE EXPLOITATION OF FOOD DELIVERY WORKERS IN NORTH-EASTERN ITALY

On October 7, 2023, *Il Gazzettino*, a local newspaper from the city of Venice and the Veneto region in north-eastern Italy, published an article denouncing the phenomenon of alleged ‘caporalato’ (illegal gangmaster labor intermediation) within the app-based food delivery sector, facilitated by well-known platforms such as Glovo, Deliveroo, and Just Eat,

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F. Della Puppa et al. (eds.), *Migrant Labour in the Gig Economy*,
Dynamics of Virtual Work,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-91262-7_1

in the Venetian mainland. The primary victims of this form of ‘digital gangmastering’ appear to be migrant riders. Initially, this sector offered a precarious and underpaid form of employment that appealed primarily to young locals, often students, who sought to balance what was considered a ‘side job’ with their private lives, family obligations, and studies.

However, due to an acceleration particularly driven by the pandemic (Antunes, 2021), the ‘Uberized’ service sector (Antunes, 2020) has expanded significantly, becoming a labor market with a notable concentration of migrant workers. This expansion has not led to the erosion of the ideological rhetoric that portrays these jobs as vehicles of supposed ‘self-entrepreneurial’ opportunities (Della Puppa, 2022). At the same time, these jobs have become a ‘safety net’ for migrants upon their arrival in the host society and, consequently, also a ‘transitional sector’ toward other, more stable and desirable employment opportunities. So, within the context of Italy—characterized by the ‘Mediterranean model of migration’ (King & De Bono, 2013; Pugliese, 2011), in which informal labor plays a structurally significant role in the national economy—low-skilled digitalized services have emerged as a new entry-level employment sector alongside traditionally seasonal and low-mechanized agricultural labor (Della Puppa & Piovesan, 2023).

The low barriers to entry—requiring only a smartphone to download the app and a human-powered bicycle, as the app itself handles linguistic mediation and navigation—make this type of work particularly accessible to newly arrived migrants, even those lacking social connections in their new socio-territorial environment. For this same reason, food delivery work is also viable for undocumented migrants, for whom the only ‘obstacle’ is the platform registration process, which requires valid residency documents. However, this barrier is often circumvented through the use of intermediaries and gangmasters who provide their identity and platform profiles—sometimes even their bicycles—in exchange for a percentage of each completed delivery, further reducing the already meager earnings of the worker. This practice constitutes a genuine form of labor intermediation what can be accurately described as ‘caporalato’—operating within a digital labor brokerage system, exacerbating

the exploitation already embedded in platform-based work. The platforms themselves suffer no loss from this arrangement; rather, they stand to gain as the number of active riders increases, fostering competition among them.

The newspaper article also reports the formation of an association of migrant riders, the *Italia Rider Association*, which presents itself as a mutual aid and solidarity organization, positioning itself in continuity with the mutualist and class-based worker associations and trade unions of the late nineteenth century. This initiative undeniably represents a noteworthy development.

The transformation of labor facilitated by digitalization has led to the progressive exclusion of workers from the remnants of social protection legislation, an intensification of work rhythms and hours, and the externalization of fixed capital costs onto workers themselves—ultimately yielding significant savings for businesses. Indeed, app-based food delivery labor can be framed within the logistics of the ‘last mile’ and conceptualized as an extreme form of subcontracting.

Analyzing food delivery through the framework of (last-mile) logistics invites reflection on the process of value production within the broader circulation of commodities. While surplus value is traditionally understood as being generated in production, capitalist production, and industrial capital transcend strictly material production. The production process is inherently linked to consumption, as production, distribution, circulation, exchange, and consumption constitute a unified process. Particularly in exceptional cases—such as perishable goods that require swift consumption or specific transportation conditions—commodity circulation plays a role in generating, or more precisely, ‘preserving’ surplus value. The production process, therefore, encompasses both production in the strict sense and circulation. Consequently, the shorter the circulation time of a commodity, the greater the productivity of the labor involved in its production, thus increasing profit and surplus value generation. Service workers, including those in ‘Uberized’ sectors, even if not directly engaged in primary surplus value production, play a crucial role in its preservation by minimizing circulation time. Therefore, riders actively contribute to this process.

App-based food delivery can be seen as the outcome of an extreme form of subcontracting, wherein the logistics and transportation services necessary to preserve surplus value are not carried out by in-house employees—such as the now-vanishing ‘pizza express’ workers or dedicated delivery staff employed by pizzerias and restaurants before the advent of food delivery platforms—nor by workers of subcontracted firms that externalize the circulation phase of the production process. Instead, these services are performed by individual workers who, while formally classified as self-employed, are in reality controlled and directed by algorithms (Kojima, 2015). This represents a return to—or more precisely, the creation of—a hybrid form of piecework and home-based labor (Toffanin, 2016). This system allows companies to adjust production in real-time to meet demand, a defining characteristic of subcontracting. More significantly, it shifts the costs of capital procurement and maintenance onto workers while simultaneously reinforcing the ideological narrative of supposed ‘self-entrepreneurship.’ This narrative is embedded in a neoliberal lexicon filled with euphemistic and sanitized expressions, such as ‘platform economy,’ ‘sharing economy,’ ‘co-working,’ all of which serve to reframe subordination as ‘synergy’ and transform wage laborers into ‘collaborators,’ ‘partners,’ or ‘entrepreneurs.’ Through the coercion to perceive their material conditions as a state of ‘autonomy,’ masked by the ideological illusion that their labor is flexible, independent, and easily combinable with other productive and reproductive activities, workers experience the highest degree of external control and subjugation over their existence (Kojima, 2015).

This ideological construction appears to have influenced the members of the *Italia Rider Association* as well. According to *Il Gazzettino*, the association does not identify exclusionary migration policies—such as those tying residence permits to employment contracts, making legal entry and residence in Italy and Europe difficult, thereby increasing migrants’ vulnerability—as the cause of riders’ dismal wages and working conditions. Nor does it attribute responsibility to the gig economy platforms that reintroduce archaic forms of labor exploitation reminiscent of early industrial capitalism. Instead, the blame is placed on doubly marginalized workers: migrants who are both exploited by the platforms and further subjected to ‘digital caporalato’ by intermediaries who profit from their labor. Once again, the platforms themselves, which have a vested interest in maximizing the number of competing riders scrambling for any available delivery, are absolved. Instead, the responsibility

is attributed to ‘Bangladeshi and Pakistani gangmasters’ who rent out smartphones to their compatriots and to the ‘Bangladeshi and Pakistani workers’ themselves, who are accused of lacking road safety awareness or food handling knowledge.

2 PLATFORM CAPITALISM AND THE UBERIZATION OF URBAN TRANSPORT IN LONDON

On May 2, 2024, British newspapers reported that over 10,500 London black-cab drivers had filed a £250 million lawsuit against Uber, accusing the company of violating taxi booking regulations and deliberately misleading authorities to obtain a license. The case revives a claim first made five years earlier concerning Uber’s operations in the capital between 2012 and 2018. The cab drivers allege that Uber enabled its drivers to accept bookings directly from customers rather than through a centralized system as required for private hire services, making them suffering financial losses due to unfair competition. They claim Uber was fully aware of these regulations but misrepresented its booking process to Transport for London (TfL) to secure its license, unfairly taking business away from black-cab drivers.

If successful, the lawsuit could see cab drivers awarded over £250 million, with individuals potentially receiving £25,000 or more. Uber has denied all allegations, calling the claims ‘completely unfounded.’ A company spokesperson asserted that Uber operates legally in London is fully licensed by TfL and continues to serve millions of passengers and drivers across the city. Although Uber has denied all allegations, calling the claims ‘completely unfounded,’ if successful, the lawsuit could see cab drivers awarded over £250 million, with individuals potentially receiving £25,000 or more.

A further example of platform economy, Uber exemplifies the shift toward platform capitalism and gig work, where digital platforms mediate and extract value from user interactions. As highlighted by Nick Srnicek (2017), Uber uses data and network effects to dominate markets while disrupting traditional business models. By avoiding direct employment of drivers, the company sidesteps obligations like minimum wage, health-care, and transfer risks to worker (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Woodcock & Graham, 2020).

Since its emergence in the early 2010s, Uber has transformed urban transportation. By leveraging smartphone technology, Uber connects

passengers with drivers, offering a more convenient and affordable alternative to traditional taxis. Its success lies in its affordability for customers and flexible—albeit precarious—work opportunities for drivers. Customers benefit from low fares, while drivers, often migrants or individuals from lower-income groups, gain access to flexible work with minimal barriers to entry. Uber’s asset-light business model, relying on drivers to supply vehicles and riders to use their smartphones, enabled rapid global expansion with minimal financial risk, allowing investments in branding and market growth instead of costly physical assets. London has been a key site for Uber’s success since its launch in 2012. The city’s large population and high demand for transportation made it a prime market, where Uber now dominates the ride-hailing sector with 67% market share, followed by competitors like Bolt. By 2023, Uber had over 45,000 licensed drivers in London, playing a critical role in the city’s transportation system. However, Uber’s expansion has highlighted significant social and economic inequalities. Most of London’s private hire vehicle (PHV) drivers are ethnic minorities or migrants, many of whom turn to Uber for flexible employment due to challenges in traditional labor markets. Research shows that the vast majority of Uber drivers are male immigrants, primarily drawn from the bottom half of the London income distribution (Berger et al., 2019; Gebrial, 2024). This racialized workforce contrasts sharply with the predominantly white and higher-earning black-cab drivers. Although Uber provides economic opportunities for marginalized groups, many drivers face low earnings, job insecurity, and long working hours, often leading to dissatisfaction and collective actions such as strikes.

As evidenced by the ongoing lawsuit, Uber’s presence and economic expansion in London have faced significant challenges that questioned the narrative of autonomy and ‘being one’s own boss’ central to its ideology (Aslam & Woodcock, 2020). In 2017, TfL initially refused to renew Uber’s license, citing safety concerns and inadequate reporting of incidents, including sexual assault allegations. After legal battles, Uber implemented stronger safeguards and was eventually granted an 18-month license in 2020. Critics argue that Uber’s emphasis on growth has sometimes come at the expense of passenger safety, with its PHV license requirements being significantly less rigorous than the stringent ‘Knowledge of London’ test required for black-cab drivers. In 2021, a landmark court ruling concluded that the drivers were workers because of Uber’s level of control over them, including setting fares and not

informing them of a passenger's destination until they were picked up. The UK Supreme Court's decision ruled that Uber must consider drivers as workers from the time they log on to the app, until they log off and provide drivers with benefits such as holiday pay and minimum wage protections, marking a significant shift in the gig economy's labor landscape. Finally, London has also been central to driver organizing efforts, highlighting the vulnerabilities and resilience of Uber drivers. The city's socioeconomic conditions, combined with the isolating nature of platform work, have made drivers particularly susceptible to exploitation. However, London's dense urban environment has facilitated collective action, with drivers organizing through online forums, messaging apps, and in-person meetings at key locations like airports. Early protests and strikes in 2014 laid the groundwork for ongoing labor activism, aiming to improve pay and working conditions. Despite setbacks, such as difficulties with union partnerships, drivers have successfully raised awareness of gig economy exploitation, contributing to broader struggles for worker rights in platform labor.

3 MIGRATION, PLATFORM ECONOMY, AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY IN BANGALORE

It rained profusely last night in Bangalore; a part of the shanty homes in Whitefield slum, has started being engulfed by the rushing stream from the overpour. Fatima in her early 20s refuses to leave her home though, with her valuables like rice, atta, winter essentials, clothes and documents, she sits on the wooden bed. The bed has been already pushed up with some stones and wood logs to protect it from the incoming water.

Fatima, a domestic help, a migrant worker, wife of a Gig worker, a Muslim woman from West Bengal, does not leave her drowning home. In her mind she hopes and prays for a miracle, a sudden sun-beaming sky or some magic that solves all her problems. Fatima is not alone, there are more than 5 lakhs of migrant workers from Bengal who are surviving in Bangalore city like that, without a proper home, regular electricity and decent sanitation. They don't have land rights, mostly manage within the gray zone of state-certified legality, work as daily wage laborers, gig workers, and often get questioned about their citizenry. While most of these people are interstate migrants within India and Indian citizens by law, it's their linguistic and religious identity that makes their claim on citizenship rights suspicious.

The Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants are often termed as Bangladeshi and endure routine harassment and discrimination from the ruling dispensation (Paul, 2023). Their assumed ‘illegal immigrants’/ ‘infiltrator’ positioning within the neoliberal-Hindutva state narrative, is both colonial in nature and communal in character. By eulogizing border regimes and migrant bureaucracy on the one hand it upholds the racial supremacy; on the other hand by equating religious identity with nationality, it evokes questions on the secular premises of citizenship. So, when one thinks of conceptualizing migration and gig work, often migration is imagined as a cross-border, transnational activity. But in the case of South Asia, especially India, it’s the rural-to-urban, cross-state migration that due to its peculiar religious-linguistic composition, brings in pertinent questions of citizenry rights within the national border.

The recent scholarship has shown (Iqubbal, 2021; Rathi & Tandon, 2021; Raval, 2020) that there is a significant correlation between migration and participation in gig work in India. They also argued ‘migrant gig work is always the outcome of a complex interplay between institutional (dis)embeddedness, personal and professional life trajectories, and (self-) organised forms of labour struggle’ (Katta et al., 2024). Across South Asia the lived experience of marginalized communities like oppressed castes, religious minorities and women particularly, exposes the multilayered relationship between social identity and labor process. But how these social ruptures engage with the platform capital, there hasn’t much discussion about that.

Urbanization, emergence, and expansion of cities are a direct outcome of deepening of capitalist expansion and the centralization of surplus produced within it. *Right to City* as a critique of the capitalist cities, as well as a slogan of inclusive and democratic cities (Lefebvre, 1968) emerged at a particular juncture of capitalism.

Harvey (2008) along with a host of other geographers deepened Lefebvre’s framework to emphasize and underline that ‘[t]he question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire.’ While Lefebvre’s framework saw *Right to City* more as a question of individual freedom to access resources; Harvey expanded it to include the right of the commons or the working class.

The present phase of capitalism with the hegemonic impulse of the finance capital has brought in a specific set of temporality to our universe.

The Fordist model of production had a specific set of temporality which was shaped by the rhythm of factory production.

The present phase on the other sets in motion processes which are volatile and fluid, whose temporality shapes everything including the City and its rhythm as well. This temporality is intrinsically linked with digitality and its encompassing spread. ‘Digitality’ not only involves interconnectedness of individuals with each other within space-time that is fundamentally different from the analog, human-scale version of space-time. Digitality as a sum total of advances in both information technology (speed and precision) and the hardware technology (affordable devices) affects and shapes all spheres including production, circulation, and consumption of commodities in capitalism. Since, cities are agents as well outcomes of capitalism; cities of today can neither be understood nor be critiqued without understanding the ways in which digitality intervenes in the daily life of the cities.

Migrants are an integral part of the working class forming the ‘surplus population’ that’s central to profit maximization and surplus generation. The denial of *Right to City* hence is no longer an individual denial in the Lefebvrian sense, but it’s a denial for the entire segment of the ‘surplus population.’ This section of the workforce represents the ‘hunters and gatherer’ of the present phase of capitalism who are willing (rather compelled) to sell their labor power at every possible node of production, circulation, and consumption. The expansion of platform economy presents a specific form of nodal points for these ‘hunters and gatherers.’

The manner in which platforms operate in the urban spaces is directly linked to the manner in which capital shapes the urban space and allocates specific segments for the specific purpose. Hence, we have islands of prosperity (gated societies, malls) surrounded by concentric seas of relative gentrification. Workers in the platform economy who are fashionable termed as gig workers criss-cross within this maze depending on the data points generated and controlled by big capital and dictated by the algorithms controlled by the platforms.

The *Right to City* in such a scenario wherein the ‘gig workers’ are reduced as automated, individuated entities waiting to spend their labor platforms at the diktats of the algorithms isn’t at all an individual question. Rather, it’s an expression of the sum total of capitalist processes (not limited to the particular urban space, but also encompassing data centers and algorithm-generating processes elsewhere) and the social processes as an outcome of it. This is where the question of giving organizational

form to this aspect arises—the organizational form which can encompass, shape, and mold the surplus population in ways which can resist and fight back the various visible and invisible forms of denial of the basic rights.

4 MIGRANT LABOR, PLATFORM CAPITALISM, AND THE DIGITAL PRECARIZATION OF WORK FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

These vignettes shed light on some of the effects of the ongoing process of profound global transformations of work that has unfolded over the past forty years, that is since the end of organization of production by the so-called Taylorist-Fordist criteria and the beginning of the neoliberal revolution (Antunes, 2015; De Stefano, 2015). These transformations have been driven by key changes in production and its organization, such as the increasing externalization of production phases, along with the consequent—enormous—growth of the service economy, and the rapid development of digital technologies (Perocco et al., 2021).

More recently, a key role has been played by the development of so-called platform capitalism and the gig economy as a way of organizing work and providing services (Antunes, 2020). As it has been introduced, some of the most important global companies, such as Uber, Amazon, Deliveroo, Helpling, operate in this booming sector, which received a further boost during the Covid-19 pandemic (Antunes, 2021). These companies supply a variety of key services such as ride-hailing, domestic and care work, food delivery, and many others, which are provided by a diverse workforce in terms of gender, nationality, and age, and in very different working conditions. One of the main effects of the expansion of the gig economy has been a further reduction of workplace rights and the growth of precarious labor. While reduced security for workers was already happening because of the financialization of the economy, which counterposed shareholders' and workers' interests, the intrinsic complexity of the service economy, and the impact of information technology, the gig economy has accelerated this process.

There are no comprehensive data on the precise number of people employed across this sector and even less on migrant and foreign workers (Berg et al., 2018; Pirina et al., 2024). However, even in countries with high unemployment or with a huge supply of unskilled labor, it is widely documented that migrant workers provide a large share of the labor power

behind a range of gig economy services. They constitute a vital infrastructure for these platforms, which can rely on a perpetual influx of migrant workers in sectors, such as logistics, deliveries, care, and cleaning. On the one hand, occupations in the gig economy are often degraded, as they imply longer working hours at lower salaries, and therefore find migrant workers who can fill them. On the other hand, they also offer migrants much-needed income opportunities, particularly for those who lack skills and are not easily employable or those whose legal status is less secure.

The labor dynamics of the gig economy, as analyzed in the previous section, frequently intersect with class, gender, and racial inequalities (Van Doorn, 2017). Within this framework, racialization operates within the broader nexus of digital society, platform capitalism, and racial capitalism, conceptualizing Internet technologies not merely as instruments of interaction but as sociopolitical regimes in their own right. While digital technologies have expanded and reshaped social relations, they are also embedded within a racialized social hierarchy. According to McMillan Cottom (2020), this dynamic is articulated through a mechanism of ‘predatory inclusion,’ whereby organizational strategies and techniques are deployed to incorporate marginalized individuals into mobility pathways that, while seemingly democratizing, function according to extractive logics.

Recent authors (Altenried, 2021; Piasna et al., 2022; Van Doorn, 2023; Van Doorn et al., 2023) have begun to define the concept of ‘platform-based migrant digital labor,’ highlighting the close relationship between migrant workers and low-skilled platform-based employment, particularly in urban contexts. Within these forms of employment, temporal dynamics are shaped by bureaucratic constraints embedded in national regulatory frameworks, which, in turn, condition migrant labor mobility according to specific ‘temporal migration regime’ (Maury, 2022). Additionally, job precarity and stability fluctuate in relation to legal status, entry and residency requirements, political dynamics, age, and physical abilities (Chacko & Price, 2021). A central aspect of this relationship between migration and platform labor is the capitalist regulation of migrant labor mobility. In this context, digital platforms function as infrastructures that absorb migrant labor through stratification and racialization mechanisms, relegating these workers to the lower and least remunerated segments of the labor market (Orth, 2024; Van Doorn & Vijay, 2021).

Against this backdrop, platform labor represents one of the few immediate employment opportunities for many migrants, regardless of their

level of social integration or access to support networks (Van Doorn & Vijay, 2021). It serves as a crucial resource, particularly for individuals in extreme vulnerability, those with precarious legal status, limited professional experience, or an urgent need for income (Saucedo, 2018; Van Doorn et al., 2023). As previously noted, the ‘appeal’ of platform-based work stems from its formal flexibility, low linguistic and bureaucratic barriers, and relatively swift selection processes compared to other sectors.

Finally, platform-based digital labor reproduces—albeit with some variations—the structural characteristics of migrant labor, marked by internal stratification along racial, gendered, and legal status lines. These structural conditions are accompanied by phenomena of labor exploitation, discrimination, and irregular recruitment. Within this framework, forms of digitalized labor intermediation emerge, adapting to the racialized dynamics of digital capitalism and manifesting through technocratic mechanisms that perpetuate conditions of subordination and marginalization.

While there is growing academic interest in the platform economy, its technological aspects, its business model and working conditions, very little research has focused on the role of migrant labor and its governance at the intersection of labor market regulation, social welfare, international migration, and migration policies. Some research has recently focused on struggles in the logistics sector in Italy—mostly engaged in by migrant workers (Borraccino, 2021; Cillo & Pradella, 2016; SiCobas, 2017). However, there are still huge gaps in research on how platform-mediated gig work impacts the structural vulnerability of migrant workers and how this can be addressed by welfare policies. This volume aims to fill, at least partially, this gap.

5 STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME

The volume consists of two sections: the first section focuses on vulnerability and inherent precarity of migrant workers in gig economy and the second one presents some empirical cases and some forms of resistance implemented by workers all over the world.

In the first chapter of the first sections, Lefteris Kretsos and Vassilis Charitsis seek to scrutinize the potential avenues for workers to resist prevailing mechanisms of labor value extraction inherent in the Greek gig economy. In particular, emphasis is placed on individuals engaged in food delivery roles within digital platforms, complemented by an exploration of pertinent cancel campaigns within the realm of social media. The analysis

draws from various published statistical data, a review of earlier surveys examining the working and living conditions in Greece and interview findings with key informants in trade unions and gig workers.

Subsequently, Gianmarco Peterlongo highlights how gig economy is intertwined with informal and illegal forms of labor intermediation, especially affecting the migrant portion of the workforce, focusing on two case studies: Uber drivers in Argentina and delivery riders in Italy. Rules of engagement in the gig economy lead to a parallel labor market characterized by job uncertainty and lack of formal employment regulations. In addition, platform companies take full advantage of the vulnerabilities of individuals and the global migration flows that feed this workforce by intertwining with informal labor markets and illicit working practices. Fieldwork in both case studies reveals a peculiar form of labor exploitation and abuse that we already called ‘digital caporalato,’ which disproportionately affects migrant workers. Starting from empirical cases, the contribution presents and analyzes three different forms of gangmastering that take place inside or outside the boundaries of the apps and that involve different organizational practices. These findings point to a process of refeudalization of labor, which some authors have previously identified with the resurgence of premodern patterns of labor organization.

In his chapter, Giorgio Pirina analyzes the constant assembling of working and non-working times by platform-mediated food delivery workers and the contradictory outcomes of the algorithmic managerial model of work. This service (but more in general the platform economy) is framed as a time-space-energy field: it is an energy-intensive because of mechanism such as rating, ranking and is based (mostly) on the fast-paced piecework; the space variable is central, as the urban contextual specificities (overcrowded streets, geo-localization failure, public transportation issues, etc.), channel the work performance and increase the couriers’ energy expenditure; the time variable is longitudinal, as couriers must be constantly on-time (and online) to ensure the best orders assignment. Regarding migrant labor, it is also necessary to consider another temporality that is the residence permit, which, for example, determines how much time migrants can work. Against this background, the ‘binding-flexibility’ is defined as follows: the flexibility that formally gives to the workers the possibility to decide when and how much work, but, according to the time-space-energy dynamic, the inherent logic of digital platforms’ algorithm channels their possibilities of choice regarding the

organization of working and non-working times. In order to investigate this topic, he carried out qualitative-ethnographic research in the historic center of Venice between January and September 2022, using participant observation, shadowing, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations with research participants. His fieldwork highlights features, and tendencies of the food delivery sector in Venice and to sketch a picture of the migrant couriers, in particular their living and working conditions.

Suddhabrata Deb Roy focuses on migrant gig delivery workers in three Indian cities: Delhi, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad. It analyzes their everyday lives and brings out their struggles for sustenance in light of the growing digitalization of the overall urban experiential lived space. The author focuses on thirty interviews conducted with migrant delivery workers, and brings forward the choices that these gig workers have to make in the cities to sustain and get cared for, which again are dominated by the implications of the entire labor process involved in delivery work along with the effects that it has on their *Right to the City*.

Finally, Isabel Roque analyzes forms of resistance and the consequences of precarious work on the lives of digital workers in Portugal, especially in terms of psychosocial and occupational risks. Specifically, she focuses on risk of social vulnerability, precariousness, insecurity, poverty, and social exclusion. In fact, during the Covid-19 pandemic, class inequalities were accentuated through the demarcation between second line and first line essential workers, who were exposed to the virus.

Paolo Borghi and Annalisa Murgia open the second section of the book with a chapter that analyzes the intersection between agency, collective resistance, and trends toward self-exploitation of migrant and BAME platform workers involved in specific protests supported by the Independent Workers' union of Great Britain—IWGB. Drawing from an ethnographic study conducted in 2022, they discuss the construction of collective forms of resistance as the result of processes of continuous negotiation with migrant and BAME workers. In doing so, they focus on the perspective of both workers and unionists supporting the protests and show how the observed forms of resistance are affected by both workers' trajectories, including trends toward self-exploitation, and their collective (and political) claims denouncing the racialized exploitation perpetuated by platforms. At the theoretical level, their chapter contributes to the debate that investigates the ways in which migrant workers mobilize and organize autonomously or supported by independent and well-established unions. In particular, on the one hand, the chapter sheds the lights on formal and

informal mechanisms of union voice; on the other, they investigate how the community organizing, and the intertwining of class and ethnicity, can facilitate forms of collective resistance.

Then, Yang Zhou examines the relationship between migration and precarity in the gig economy in the non-Western context of China. Experiences of China's gig workers promise rich insights into this relationship because most of them were rural-to-urban migrant factory and service workers before they 'migrate' to platform-based gig work. Drawing on ethnographic and interview data, the author argues that migrant gig workers in China are trapped in the platform by China's state-led, tech-driven economic restructuring project, through a new mode of migrant labor differentiation comprising three factors, including changes in the labor market, hegemonic gender norms, and the reformed hukou system. Yet in the meantime, being migrants also contributes to 'cultures of solidarity' they develop among themselves, which provides the micro-foundation of solidarity for frequent yet often small-scale collective actions. The nature and strengths of this culture of solidarity will be examined, so do its potential to forge cross city/region solidarity and for institutionalization.

Finally, Dipsita Dhar, Soham Bhattacharya, and Ashique Ali T. focus migrant digital platform workers within the process of rapid urbanization or metropolitization that has gifted India. With the replication of the Silicon Valley model, India too started building Tech cities that pulled a large number of workers from outside. Along with a pool of white-collar IT professionals, it brought in people who were required to fulfill the newly developed demand for domestic labor, transportation workers, and sanitation workers. Interestingly, these socially dispersed population of migrants were distinctive in their skill endowment, nature of occupation and social location. But there were two things common among them, their identity as outsiders and their exploitation on the hand of capital. The Karnataka IT employee Union, All India Gig Workers Union, and Inter-State Migration Federation of Karnataka are three unions affiliated to Centre for Trade unions that showed an exceptional trajectory of collaboration, solidarity, and what can be called a collective inter-union reciprocal relation. A large number of unskilled Bengali Muslims came to Bangalore as waste pickers, but their religio-linguistic identity have easily exposed them to different kind of racial and communal targeting, where they are called Bangladeshis, arrested by police and even their huts being demolished. The working-class vulnerabilities are coupled up with the

question of citizenry, of being illegal, infiltrators (*ghuspetia*). The CITU used the leading Bengali workers from the IT unions to go and mobilize among these migrants on the basis of their linguistic commonality to form union. The network of the migrant union was then further used to track down the workers engaging in the digital labor platform and registering them with the gig union. The informal connection based on their cultural identity of migrant, enabled them in forming cross-occupation solidarity and a range of joint initiatives. Their collective actions ranged from providing aid during the calamities, protest against the harassment of police, and so on so forth. Specifically, the authors explore what made this reciprocal relation work, how they bring resolution to a conflict of interest, and whether this model can be an ideal to be replicated elsewhere.

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PART I

Vulnerability and Inherent Precarity
of Migrant Workers in Gig Economy



Migrant Labour in the Greek Gig Economy

Lefteris Kretsos  and *Vassilis Charitsis*

1 INTRODUCTION

Numerous scholars have analysed migrant labour within the gig economy, as it remains to be a topical theme of scholarly research (Urzi Brancati et al., 2020; van Doorn et al., 2023; Katta et al., 2024; Lenaerts et al., 2018; Piasna et al., 2022). Other scholars have also highlighted a significant intersection between the gig economy and labour migration (Zwysen & Piasna, 2024). Migrant labour influences the gig economy, and, conversely, the gig economy affects migrant labour. This dynamic encompasses both quantitative and qualitative aspects of migrant work on digital platforms. Notably, migrant workers make up the majority of individuals working on digital platforms (Urzi Brancati et al., 2020; ILO,

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2021; Kowalik et al., 2023; Piasna et al., 2022; van Doorn & Vijay, 2024).

According to relevant studies, this significant migrants' presence in the gig economy may either contribute to the further precarization of working conditions including the entrapment of migrant workers in a vicious cycle of exploitation and vulnerability (Goods et al., 2019; Kowalik et al., 2023; Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2024). In the opposite vein, digital platforms may offer significant employment opportunities for many migrants. Within a politicized framework of migration policy driven by anti-migration sentiments and xenophobic media narratives emphasizing the need for stricter controls of migration flows, the significance of such employment opportunities becomes increasingly critical (Fekete, 2018; Fouskas et al., 2022; Lucassen, 2018; Trimikliniotis, 2019).

Nevertheless, the lack of data complicates the full understanding and exploration of the dynamic relationship between migrant labour and work on digital labour platforms. Additionally, this lack of absolute documentation in both statistical and qualitative terms exacerbates the difficulty of comparing the working and living conditions of migrant gig workers with those of other workers and non-migrant groups. These challenges, already highlighted in previous studies, are likely exacerbated in disorganized capitalist settings and socio-economic environments, where labour law violations, lack of opportunities to unionize, unfavourable dispute resolution systems for workers, and an increased likelihood of managerial dominance (Urzi Brancati et al., 2020; Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2024).

The current analysis delves into the complex dynamics where migrant labour and digital work converge within Greece's unstructured socio-economic and employment landscape. The objective is to investigate whether gig work could be considered a preferable employment option for migrant labour within Greece's landscape of deregulation, shaped by the ongoing neoliberal trajectory. The analysis draws from various resources, such as statistical data from the Labour Force Survey, a review of earlier surveys examining the working and living conditions in both rural and urban environments of Greece, as well as other studies that focus on the interplay between precarity, individualism, and collective agency. Finally, the contribution uses interview findings with digital platform delivery workers and key informants in the Greek trade union movement regarding aspects of resistance and exploitation in platform work.

The analysis is structured as follows. The description of the Greek gig economy, including its peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, establishes the

knowledge gap on the issue. We begin with a rigorous analysis, synthesizing earlier studies on the position of migrants in the Greek labour market. Then, in the next part, we elaborate on the dynamics of gig work and migrant labour. Findings are based on data collection and analysis that include in-depth interviews with union leaders, rank-and-file activists, and gig workers in transport, delivery, and courier services, as well as on the analysis of available statistical data from the Labour Force Survey and other secondary data including policy documents and recent labour law acts. The final section includes conclusions and a critical reflection on the current situation.

2 GIG JOBS, AUSTERITY, AND MIGRATION POLICY

Over the past decade, the gig economy has transformed traditional markets with flexible job opportunities and app-based services (Chen et al., 2019). Ride-hailing platforms like Uber and Bolt have revolutionized personal transportation, while AirBnB has changed hospitality, and Deliveroo has impacted food delivery, while other platforms like TaskRabbit and Upwork have reshaped other service sectors and the way work is organized and regulated (Lehdonvirta, 2018; Mulcahy, 2016; Schor, 2020; Wood et al, 2018). However, this rapid growth comes with challenges, particularly regarding fair compensation and privacy, as gig workers are paid per task, lacking income guarantees, sick pay, and other benefits typical of regular jobs (Cook et al., 2021; Elliott et al., 2022).

In this context, platforms pose challenges for workers and potential issues with discrimination and fairness, as well as other behavioural effects in labour supply (Crawford & Meng, 2011; Mejia & Parker, 2021). For example, an interviewed driver, who is rank-and-file activist in the Athens Taxi Drivers Association, argued that: *“Since 2012, with the liberalization of the taxi industry under law 4093, things have changed dramatically. Many colleagues now face significant debts due to over-taxation and the economic crisis. Working 12 hours a day makes me feel like part of the working class. Then Uber entered the ride-hailing market, and it was a nightmare, as we watched private cars take our jobs”*. And he continues: *“We are moving towards market cartelization, and a substantial portion of our income will be automatically redirected to platforms”*.

In Greece, knowledge about the gig economy’s scope, trends, and potential is limited. As Mexi (2019) notes, in contrast to the situation in other European countries, the gig economy and gig work are poorly

understood in Greece, particularly about labour issues. Greek policy-makers and regulators have primarily shown interest in the gig economy from the standpoint of tax avoidance by digital platforms and the consequent loss of public revenue. To some extent, this is related to the domination of AirBnB in the tourism industry, and to the contention between the Greek government and taxi drivers with Uber in 2018, as well as the relatively small size of the gig economy workforce compared to the general workforce (Mexi, 2019).

The reasons behind the prevalence of AirBnB in the Greek gig or sharing economy are explained by specific socio-economic reasons. Homeowners, turned to digital platforms like AirBnB to generate income or supplement their earnings as a response to rising unemployment, shrinking incomes, and over-taxation of private property imposed by foreign creditors (Goranitis, 2016). Nevertheless, digital platforms are also integral to other economic sectors, including transportation, courier and delivery services, tourism, dating, and socializing services.

Other prominent platforms in Greece include the case of Uber (which suspended most of its service after a dispute with the Greek government in 2018), FreeNow, e-food, Wolt, Blueground, Workable, and Doctoranytime. According to Αγγελάκης and Θανόπουλος (2022), 10% of businesses in the food, beverage, and catering industry in Greece use digital platforms in the delivery of their services, with 20% engaging with two platforms and 10% with more than three. The study highlights that these partnerships contribute approximately 23.1% of total revenues in this sector. This trend has had notable implications for employment.

For example, Table 1 shows a significant increase in delivery and courier workers, highlighted in the findings section. These workers are classified under the NACE system as drivers and mobile equipment operators in postal, courier, and delivery services. According to a union leader interviewed, the actual number of delivery and hire drivers is much higher, estimated to exceed 100.000, because many people work without proper documentation and use delivery jobs as a secondary source of income.

The employee turnover rate reflects the dynamism and deregulation prevalent in those occupations and industries. As shown in the Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5, despite the high turnover rate, the net result in job vacancies and recruitment is positive.

Despite the significantly high number of resignations and dismissals, workers who leave their jobs appear to be re-entering the industry. This rapid turnover rate suggests a dynamic labour market, though it does not

Table 1 Drivers and mobile equipment operators/motorcycle drivers, 2015–2023

<i>Year</i>	<i>Wage employment (total number)</i>	<i>Economic Sector NACE 53 (postal and courier activities)</i>	<i>Economic Sector NACE 56 (hospitality, food, and beverage service activities)</i>	<i>Other postal and courier services</i>
2023	13.637	1.316	9.490	2.831
2022	15.089	1.785	10.444	2.860
2021	18.390	2.402	11.876	4.112
2020	15.893	1.024	11.376	3.493
2019	12.337	303	9.501	2.533
2018	11.502	236	8.911	2.355
2017	10.040	209	7.769	2.062
2016	8.604	183	6.591	1.830
2015	6.751	161	5.361	1.229

Source ΔΥΠΙΑ/ΕΙΕΑΔ Μηχανισμός Διάγνωσης Αναγκών Αγοράς Εργασίας

* The NACE53 division is composed of two groups:

– Postal activities under universal service obligation (Group 53.1)

– Other postal and courier activities (Group 53.2)

** Data for NACE53 refers to Drivers and mobile equipment operators

*** Data for NACE56 refers to Hospitality services activities / 88 Drivers of vehicles and mobile equipment operators / 8821 Motorcycle drivers

Table 2 Turnover rate for drivers of vehicles and mobile equipment operators (NACE 56 Activities of accommodation and food service activities) in Greece, 2018–2021

<i>Year</i>	<i>Recruitment</i>	<i>Resignations and dismissals</i>	<i>New vacancies</i>
2021	22.266	22.255	11
2020	18.190	15.815	2.375
2019	20.446	19.482	964
2018	17.746	16.428	1.318
2018–2021	78.648	73.980	4.668
2019–2021	60.902	57.552	3.350

Source ΔΥΠΙΑ/ΕΙΕΑΔ Μηχανισμός Διάγνωσης Αναγκών Αγοράς Εργασίας

necessarily signify a shift in bargaining power towards employees, as we will explain next. Also, the current interview data analysis indicates that this dynamism in the labour market has not resulted in increased wages

Table 3 Turnover rate for drivers of transport and mobile equipment operators/motorcycle drivers (NACE 56 Hospitality services activities) in Greece, 2018–2021

<i>Year</i>	<i>Recruitment</i>	<i>Resignations and dismissals</i>	<i>New vacancies</i>
2021	20.622	20.640	–18
2020	16.804	14.380	2.424
2019	17.722	16.811	911
2018	3.908	3.885	23
2018–2021	59.056	55.716	3.340
2019–2021	55.148	51.831	3.317

Source ΔΥΠΙΑ/ΕΙΕΑΔ Μηχανισμός Διάγνωσης Αναγκών Αγοράς Εργασίας

Table 4 Turnover rate for drivers of transport vehicles and mobile equipment operators/motorcycle drivers (NACE 53 Postal and courier activities) in Greece, 2018–2021

<i>Year</i>	<i>Recruitment</i>	<i>Resignations and dismissals</i>	<i>New vacancies</i>
2021	4.401	2.412	1.989
2020	2.459	2.227	232
2019	1.159	1.037	122
2018	925	900	25
2018–2021	8.944	6.576	2.368
2019–2021	8.019	5.676	2.343

Source ΔΥΠΙΑ/ΕΙΕΑΔ Μηχανισμός Διάγνωσης Αναγκών Αγοράς Εργασίας

Table 5 Drivers of transport vehicles and mobile equipment operators/motorcycle drivers (NACE 53 postal and courier activities) in Greece, 2018–2021

<i>Year</i>	<i>Recruitment</i>	<i>Resignations and dismissals</i>	<i>New vacancies</i>
2021	2.358	553	1.805
2020	575	343	232
2019	367	245	122
2018	74	49	25
2018–2021	3.374	1.190	2.184
2019–2021	3.300	1.141	2.159

Source ΔΥΠΙΑ/ΕΙΕΑΔ Μηχανισμός Διάγνωσης Αναγκών Αγοράς Εργασίας

or better working conditions for delivery workers in digital platforms. Instead, the statistical evidence on recruitment and turnover underscores the transient and precarious nature of gig work in the delivery and hospitality industries, as well as on working on digital platforms.

To some extent, this is reflected in the Eurobarometer data and other media reports, which indicate that the gig economy in Greece is still emerging (Koutantou & Maltezou, 2019; Τζωτζής, 2024). According to Vrikki and Lekakis (2024), while the platform economy in the USA, China, and the UK grew rapidly in the early 2000s, the rise of the platform economy in Greece took off since the first austerity measures were adopted in 2010.

Greece played an unfortunate pioneering role in the course of the economic crisis that surged almost 15 years ago and had its roots in the collapse of Lehman Brothers' financial crisis in the USA a few years earlier (Koukiadaki & Kretsos, 2012; Lekakis & Kousis, 2013). Successive governments facing a serious threat of bankruptcy signed the so-called memorandum agreements with the Troika of international lenders consisting of the European Commission (EC), European Central Bank (ECB), and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Those agreements were based on the rule of conditionality.

The Greek government was compelled to implement various reforms. Otherwise, it was not possible to get financial support from its lenders. Typical examples of such reforms include the modernization of the public sector, as well as regulations aimed to make product and labour markets more efficient, such as the dismantling of the collective bargaining system, and the introduction of increased employment and wage flexibility (Gialis et al., 2017; Tourtouri et al., 2020). Privatization of public assets was also considered a necessary step to guarantee the above objectives.

In this context, Greece became a byword of modern internal devaluation policies with significant political implications for both the national and the global accounts (Armingeon & Baccaro, 2012; Mexi, 2019). The unpopular fiscal adjustment measures (tax hikes, salary cuts, pension cuts, etc.) along with rising trends in unemployment and the prolonged recession of more than 25% of GDP in five years fuelled the Greek citizens' sense of frustration, uncertainty, fear, and anger (Kretsos, 2015). Greece became repeatedly the site of running demonstrations and sometimes violent confrontations between police and (mainly) young people including migrants (Mason, 2012).

The problematic effects of the crisis were not only being felt by an ‘underclass’ or specific sub-groups within the workforce, such as migrants. Instead, the crisis has been impacting wider groups across the lower and middle classes (Kretsos, 2012). Nevertheless, it is accurate to state that the economic crisis impacting the Greek economy had significant and varied effects on migrants’ livelihoods (Fratsea, 2019; Fratsea & Papadopoulos, 2020; Papadopoulos & Fratsea, 2022).

The crisis further skyrocketed the notion of coercive geographies that significantly shape the living conditions of documented and especially undocumented migrants (Cheliotis, 2017; Kasimis et al., 2015). For example, xenophobia against migrants increased, while the systematic detaining of all irregular immigrants became official policy (UN Human Rights Council, 2013). To sum up, the gig economy in Greece emerged in a heavily politicized and polarized context embedded in and shaped by the modern political economy and the transformation dynamics of Greek capitalism after a massive in-scale and depth austerity policy. Further, the precariousness of migrant labour is not merely a consequence of economic crises or the gig economy, but rather a result of specific policy decisions by the Greek state in the last three decades (Triandafyllidou, 2015).

The emergence of the gig economy in Greece and its impact on migrant labour cannot be examined without those historical and contextual elements. Certain scholars like Huliaras and Sotiropoulos (2021) perceive the rise of the gig economy as an opportunity for the Greek economy and the younger generations that have long suffered from comparatively higher than the EU accounts levels of unemployment and intermittent work. In an opposite vein, in the current analysis, we argue that the gig economy serves as a new force that exacerbates the existing disorganization within Greek capitalism, resulting in more temporary and contingent contracts and work arrangements. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the case of migrants working in the Greek labour market, as will be discussed later.

It is also reflected in the mobilization of e-food delivery workers in 2001, which made visible that things are not always rosy for gig workers in Greece. More specifically, in September 2021 the management of the e-food platform, part of the German-owned company Delivery Hero, sent a letter to its 1.000 delivery workers that the company is planning to offer jobs only on a freelance basis. Those workers who disagreed with this decision had no choice other than to stop working with the company from next month. A massive mobilization by the company’s trade union

followed against this decision. Such mobilization though was met with growing support by social media activists, individual consumers, and the opposition political parties (Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024). Finally, and under conditions of growing social pressure and media attention, the management decided to accept the union's claims and offer jobs to all delivery workers under full-time and indefinite contracts.

The victory of e-food workers represents an emblematic case of effective resistance in the so-called Greek gig economy, as it effectively articulated trade union interventions and strategies with modern versions of consumer and digital activism. Nevertheless, the effects of that victory were short-lived and limited in scope. This is partly related to the deeply ingrained tradition of informality and frequent violations of labour law in the Greek labour market, as well as Greece's compelled shift towards neoliberalism following the economic crisis (Tourtouri et al., 2020). All the above factors resulted in the gradual institutional decomposition of democratic institutions, such as the collective bargaining system (Tourtouri et al., 2020), which, in turn, affects migration policy.

Besides, migration policy should not be analysed in isolation from employment policies, labour conditions, and welfare institutions, as these elements are deeply interconnected (Anderson, 2010). Both traditional and emerging actors—employers, workers, trade unions, the state, employer organizations, and migrant communities—shape and are influenced by migration regulations and outcomes (Alberti & Cutter, 2022; MacKenzie & Martinez Lucio, 2019).

This multifaceted interplay highlights the complexity of migration policies and their effects on the labour market and migrant experiences. As such understanding the complexities of migration policy requires a comprehensive approach that considers how these various factors interact and influence one another. The influx of refugees and migrants after 2015 and the recent pandemic have further exposed this dark side of power imbalance in the Greek labour market (Theofanidis et al., 2019). In addition to this, there is a clear orientation towards more restrictive policies on migration in the form of an optimization of the existing migrant labour force into the domestic labour markets (Martín et al., 2015).

The above characteristics of the Greek context are important to consider when searching to acknowledge the characteristics and the position of migrant labour in the Greek gig economy. Migrants in Greece, like in other countries, often face less favourable employment conditions in the labour market (Floros & Jørgensen, 2020; Kapsalis, 2018; Kapsalis

et al, 2020). The next part of the analysis will delve deeper into these issues, exploring the nuanced relationship between migration policies and broader socio-economic frameworks.

3 MIGRANTS IN THE GREEK LABOUR MARKET

Scholarly research on migrant labour in Greece has predominantly concentrated on two principal domains. The first domain entails an analysis of the legal framework regulating the mobility and integration of third-country nationals. For example, Triandafyllidou (2009) asserted that Greek immigration policy remained for more than decades incomplete and short-sighted, dealing with immigration as a necessary evil and not as an opportunity, for the simple reason that full integration of migrants into Greek society may have affected the election outcomes.

The second domain addresses the historical migration patterns, emphasizing Greece's evolution from a country of emigration to one of immigration (King & Black, 1997; Mavrommatis, 2022; Triandafyllidou, 2015; Triandafyllidou & Maroukis, 2012; Χολέζας, 2017). Greece's geographical position makes the country a primary European entry point for many African and Asian immigrants and a crucial transit route for undocumented immigrants (Papadopoulou, 2004).

On the other hand, policy reforms, such as Law 3838/2010, which granted the automatic right to acquire Greek citizenship for migrant children born or educated in Greece, along with the two regularization programmes between 1997 and 2007 and the lifting of mobility restrictions within the Schengen area, created new opportunity structures for migration and mobility patterns, particularly in industries like tourism and agriculture (Fratsea & Papadopoulos, 2020). For instance, nationals from Romania and Bulgaria no longer face restrictions on residence and employment in Greece since both countries joined the EU in the mid-2000s. Meanwhile, for immigrants from Albania without a valid residence permit, border crossing has been made easier by the abolition of the visa requirement in 2010.

Nevertheless, many migrant workers in Greece continue to be less visible because they engage in seasonal and informal work, while many migrants and refugees have to wait in Greece for months or even years often living in extreme conditions, as has been highlighted in relevant studies both in the agricultural context (Kasimis et al., 2015;

Papadopoulos et al., 2018), as well as in the hospitality industry (Maroukis, 2016) and care sector (Maroukis, 2017).

In other words, the Greek case is not that different from other national cases, especially other Southern European countries that share similar characteristics and challenges in the regulation of work and industrial relations, such as strong clientelism, low levels of policy coordination, a history of adversarial industrial relations, and trade union fragmentation (Rodríguez & Lucio, 2023; Zambarloukou, 2006).

In Greece, as in other countries, migrants' jobs are typically temporary offering minimal welfare benefits, and the societal integration of migrants is limited and inadequately addressed by the government, welfare services, and trade unions (Kapsalis, 2010). The position of migrants in the Greek society and economy aligns with the broader trends identified in the international sociological literature on labour migration (Afouxenidis et al., 2012; Anderson, 2010; Kalleberg, 2009; Phizacklea & Miles, 1980).

As elsewhere, immigrants in Greece continue to form a flexible, segmented workforce reserve due to their usual detachment from specializations, networks, and trade unions (Burawoy, 1972; Behtoui & Neergaard, 2012; Portes et al., 2007). This marginalization includes practices such as employers withholding wages and failing to pay workers on time, which is commonly documented in the literature as a typical method of controlling migrant labour (Ortiz, 2002; Papadopoulos et al., 2018). Further, this development is shaped by specific economic factors, as well as historical contexts and legacies in both migration policy and labour regulation in Greece.

More specifically, during the 1990s and mid-2000s, migrant workers from Africa and Asia were disproportionately employed in the booming construction and agriculture sectors (Mexi, 2019). At that time, Greece had one of the highest rates of international migrants among European nations and one of the highest gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates in Europe (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004). Nevertheless, the disorganized nature of immigration primarily benefited employers, as migrants lacked union voice and representation, while in certain cases employers exerted direct and even violent control over workers.

This was well-illustrated by the events at the Manolada strawberry fields, where indigenous farmers fired upon Bangladeshi migrants protesting against months of unpaid wages and inhumane living and working conditions (Kapsalis et al., 2020). Work in Manolada has been characterized by severe exploitation and inhuman living conditions for

migrant workers (Papadopoulos et al., 2018). In general, almost all relevant migration studies highlight significant peculiarities of migrant labour in the Greek economy including the pronounced role of the family in welfare and employment provision, coupled with the informal nature of the labour market.

For Maroukis (2013) both familistic welfare regimes and work informality create an opportunity structure that facilitates both geographical and socio-economic mobility for migrants. In an opposite vein, other scholars (Floros & Jørgensen, 2020; Kapsalis et al., 2020) talk about the dominance of coercive geographies, where localized and spatialized intersections between labour regulations and migration policies result in restricted spaces that create a lack of freedom and immobility.

Such spaces have already been mentioned in earlier studies. For example, Fouskas's (2014) study of Egyptian immigrants found that their employment and financial position was determined by insecure and low-status jobs with poor working conditions. This situation hindered their participation in trade union organizations. To counterbalance this incapacity, Egyptian immigrants adopted and followed individualistic behaviours and heavily relied on informal networks and religion for support, rather than collective action.

A similar situation of the absence of formal labour market integration was also detected in an earlier study by the same scholar regarding Bangladeshi and other migrants in Athens (Fouskas, 2012, 2013). Again, the centrality of precarious working conditions represented an insurmountable obstacle to the full integration of migrants into Greek society. As a result, the community of Bangladeshi migrants in Athens developed social networks to cope with the precarity and the absence of a full citizenry and stable employment, which kills the prospects of unionization. As mentioned in the study, Bangladeshis in Greece avoided joining Greek trade unions, believing Greek members would not be able to understand or solve their unique issues, such as obtaining legal documents (Fouskas, 2012). In contrast, the Bangladeshi Immigrant Workers' Union of Greece assists its members in finding employment and resolving individual workplace issues.

Papadopoulos et al. (2018) also discovered that many Bangladeshi migrant workers in the agricultural area of Manolada use a wide range of social practices to improve their precarious lives and working conditions in their locality. Likewise, in various rural regions of Greece, Indian and Pakistani Punjabi men assert their agency against the violence of their

illegal status by publicly playing the sport of Kabaddi. Kabaddi tournaments have become a form of resistance and a celebration of South Asian male migrants' diverse cultural identities, serving as a strategy to gain masculine capital and reclaim respect for their unique cultural identities (Kukreja, 2023).

Certain studies also highlighted the gendered and cultural experience of precarity and resistance. For example, Xhaho et al. (2021) focused on the strategies Albanian migrants use to cope with the needs of reconciling work and family duties. The challenges of managing childcare responsibilities are exacerbated by deficiencies in welfare and care provisions, particularly for individuals with regular and even more so for those with irregular migrant status.

Structural barriers like the illegal status, informal employment, excessively long hours of work, and the lack of access to family-friendly policies make necessary the search for individualized solutions, such as the delegation of care to older children and the reliance on social and family networks or even leaving the children (under the age seven) alone in the house to care for themselves. Other studies on migrants' agency also highlight the influential dynamics of social networks and the "irregular-migration-chain" (Tahir et al., 2018; Wissink et al., 2020) in determining unpredictable and non-linear trajectories of migrant groups due to policy constraints and experience of critical events.

As such, alongside traditional labour market segmentation and labour process theoretical approaches, social capital theory is valuable for capturing the norms within and between groups (employers, recruiters, and employees), resulting in segmented outcomes, as informal network-based arrangements facilitate, build, and reinforce the segmented labour market structure (Groutsis, 2009). This is evident in the body of literature that examines the working and living conditions of migrants in Greece, focusing on themes such as individualism, collective agency, employer strategies towards migrant labour, and the roles of labour market intermediaries and networks established by trade unions and migrants (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014).

The common denominator of those studies is that migrants are not emerging as passive subjects of exploitation in the disorganized capitalist setting of Greece, but instead, as active agents of social and political mobilization. As such, the relationship between precarity and agency creates patterns and mechanisms of self-organizing and resistance, survival, and adaptability. Nevertheless, such mechanisms do not minimize the ongoing

risk recognized in the traditional Marxist theory of subordinating workers' initiative and creative agency to a production process designed by and for capital (Umney, 2018).

According to Marx, there is always a necessity for some form of supervision over workers due to the inherent conflict of interest between labour and capital. This explains why even well-organized migrant protests like those in Manolada in 2008 and 2013 or in the mobilization of workers in the e-food, which both managed to draw media and political attention and support from various solidarity movements, anti-racist collectives, and political parties had short-lived and minimal improvements in migrant labour conditions (Papadopoulos et al., 2018). Similarly, the Bangladeshi Immigrant Workers' Union of Greece was unable to reduce the risk of their members being marginalized in Athens (Fouskas, 2012). Likewise, the impact of Kabaddi tournaments in Greece was limited in providing a broader sense of migrants' emancipation and citizenship, as they are very localized and confined to this subgroup of migrant men (Kukreja, 2023).

Consequently, the struggle against migrants' precariousness, adverse institutional frameworks, and hostile policies remains increasingly challenging in the disorganized capitalist setting of Greece. To fully understand the position of migrants in the Greek labour market, it is crucial to examine the structure and actions of employers, as well as the ability of management to enforce norms and rules governing the labour process. In this context of exploitation and marketization, the algorithmic control of work in the Greek gig economy introduces new risks and insecurities for migrants and other workers significantly reducing their ability to influence their employment terms (Greer & Umney, 2022; Riemann et al., 2024; Shapiro, 2018; Waldkirch et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the successful mobilizations of e-food delivery workers and agricultural workers in Manolada may indicate the potential rise of a new social movement, with migrants at its core. This movement could provide a new avenue to overcome the precarity of migrant communities in both urban and rural areas of Greece (Papadopoulos et al., 2018; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024). The potential emergence of a new social movement, with migrants playing a central role, does not undermine or dismiss trade unions' crucial role in advocating for migrant labour rights in Greece.

Nevertheless, such potential demands a strategic reorientation of Greek trade unions in dealing with the problems of both migrants and gig workers, including a stronger emphasis on organizing strategies. As noted

in Mexi's study (2019), Greek unions have not actively pursued engagement with gig worker groups as part of their revitalization strategy to broaden representation among non-standard workers, a trend documented internationally in other countries.

In a similar vein, earlier studies consistently show that unionization rates among migrants remain exceptionally low, even in sectors where they constitute a substantial portion of the workforce (Fouskas & Tsevrenis, 2014; Hatziprokopiou & Markova, 2015; Kambouri et al., 2014). For example, in the garment sector in Attica, only 4% of migrants were unionized according to union estimates (Καυάλης, 2020). These findings underscore the need for Greek trade unions to intensify their efforts to engage and support the migrant workforce and address their specific concerns more effectively.

In a climate of reduced confidence in political reforms and limited institutional support, trade unions in Greece may revise their strategic approaches emphasizing more on targeting hard-to-organize workers, such as migrants who encounter substantial barriers to entering the labour market or securing well-paid, permanent jobs (Hyman, 2001). This strategic shift is expected to lead to more grassroots campaigns and mobilizations in the future, embodying a proactive and confrontational approach.

4 METHODOLOGY

Estimating the precise number of migrants in Greece is challenging due to transient populations, insufficient verifiable records, and the intentional avoidance of declaring their presence by individuals aiming to migrate to preferred Northern European countries. For example, according to Kukreja (2023), the estimated number of South Asian men alone does not exceed 200,000. Nevertheless, the official data from the national labour force survey indicate that the number of all non-EU citizens in the Greek labour market in 2023 is something less than 252,300, while according to Κόντης (2017) most migrants in Greece are coming from South Eastern European countries.

To help the current analysis gain a more holistic understanding of the dynamics within the Greek gig economy, particularly regarding the role of migrants, a multifaceted and interpretivist research approach was employed. This approach facilitated the collection of life narratives alongside semi-structured interviews with a purposefully selected, albeit limited,

participant pool. This approach yielded valuable insights into the subjective interpretations and lived experiences of gig work within the Greek context. Thematic analysis was subsequently conducted on the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were collected from 25 individual participants.

To achieve perspectival triangulation, participants were chosen from different seniority levels and held various roles within the transport and delivery industry, the trade union movement, and the Greek economy. The research utilized the snowball sampling method, continuing interviews until data saturation was achieved (Kapitan et al., 2022; Kvale, 1996; Saunders et al., 2018). The detailed profiles of participants are provided in Table 6. The data were collected between June 2022 and May 2023 (approved research ethical form 33747-LR-Apr/2022-39151-2). Some interviews were conducted online due to time constraints and the preferences of the participants.

To bolster the robustness of the qualitative data obtained from the interviews, a triangulation approach was implemented. This involved integrating the findings with statistical data analysis derived from multiple sources: the Greek Labour Force Survey, the labour statistics system maintained by the Greek Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, and relevant population census survey data, as well as an archival search of delivery workers' unions' announcements and press releases.

5 FINDINGS: STATISTICAL DATA

Selecting a migration destination is a complex decision-making process influenced by various factors. These include the geographical proximity of the destination country to the origin country, cultural ties, the presence of an ethnic community in the destination country, the economic conditions of the destination country, employment opportunities for foreigners, and the immigration policies of the host country. For example, before the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, Greece was a highly attractive destination for migrants, particularly from neighbouring countries such as Albania and Bulgaria, as well as from various Asian nations (Χολέζας, 2017).

However, since then, significant changes in economic prospects have occurred, which likely influence the migration choices of prospective migrants and those already residing in the country. Consequently, not all

Table 6 Sample distribution and participant data

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Participant position</i>	<i>Relationship with Trade Union</i>	<i>Working for/ with digital platform</i>	<i>Working in the delivery for/ with other employer (e.g. fast-food store, courier services, taxi, etc.)</i>
1	Delivery worker	Rank-and-file activist in anarchist oriented collective		X
2	Delivery worker (Freelancer)	Inactive now	X	
3	Delivery worker (Freelancer)	Union Leader in professional association of freelance workers in delivery	X	
4	Delivery worker	None		X
5	Delivery worker	None		X
6	Delivery worker	None		X
7	Ex-Union Leader of delivery workers	Inactive now	X	
8	Taxi driver	Union Leader		X
9	Taxi driver	Rank-and-file activist in professional association of taxi drivers		X
10	Delivery worker	Union Leader in Sectoral Union Organisation		X
11	Manager	Senior Manager in agricultural cooperative		X

(continued)

Table 6 (continued)

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Participant position</i>	<i>Relationship with Trade Union</i>	<i>Working for/ with digital platform</i>	<i>Working in the delivery for/ with other employer (e.g. fast-food store, courier services, taxi, etc.)</i>
12	Industry expert	Consultancy/policy making in agricultural cooperatives association		X
13	Industrial relations expert	Consultancy/policy making in trade unions		X
14	Journalist covering industrial relations	Media coverage of platform work		X
15	Manager	Senior Manager in agricultural cooperative		X
16	Delivery worker (Migrant)	None	X	
17	Delivery worker (Migrant)	None	X	
18	Delivery worker (Migrant)	None	X	
19	Delivery worker (Migrant)	None	X	
20	Delivery worker (Migrant)	None	X	
21	Delivery worker (Migrant)	None	X	
22	Delivery worker (Migrant)	None	X	

(continued)

Table 6 (continued)

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Participant position</i>	<i>Relationship with Trade Union</i>	<i>Working for/ with digital platform</i>	<i>Working in the delivery for/ with other employer (e.g. fast-food store, courier services, taxi, etc.)</i>
23	Delivery worker (Migrant)	None	X	
24	Delivery worker (Migrant)	None	X	
25	Delivery worker (Migrant)	None	X	

countries are equally attractive to migrants, and they do not receive migratory flows to the same extent (European Commission, 2023; Triandafyllidou, 2023). The case of Greece is not significantly different from what is happening in other European countries. Specifically, the proportion of foreigners residing in the country over the past decade barely exceeds 8.3% (European Commission, 2023).

According to the analysis by Κόντης (2017), migrants represent something like 8% to 10% of the population in Greece during the last two decades, which is by no means higher than the majority of other EU member states. As Eurostat underlines, the number of immigrants per 1.000 inhabitants in Greece is not significantly higher than in most other EU member states.

Nevertheless, Greece presents a unique case in several other respects. For instance, while the population aged 15 to 64 years old across the EU-28 countries increased by 5 million between 2008 and 2017, Greece experienced a reduction in this age group by 210.000 even if the country remains one of the main entry points for African and Asian migrants to Europe. Furthermore, the workforce in Greece has decreased since 2009, a year before the economic crisis intensified, primarily due to the combined effects of an ageing population and a significant brain drain effect (Groutsis et al., 2020; Labrianidis & Sykas, 2021). In 2012, a decrease in the foreign population of the country was recorded for the

Table 7 Population with non-Greek citizenship, 1971–2001, Population Census

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total population</i>	<i>Non-Greek residents (number)</i>	<i>Non-Greek residents (number)</i>
1971	8,768,641	92,528	1.05%
1981	9,740,417	171,424	1.76%
1991	10,259,900	167,276	1.65
2001	10,964,080	797,093	7.27%
2011*	10,939,727	911,929	8.43

Source Population Census data; Καψάλης (2020)

*In the 2001 and 2011 censuses, concerning the number of non-Greek citizens, the Greek Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) processed data only for the permanent population, not the actual population. The number includes both EU and third-country nationals

first time since 1989 (Χαρίσης, 2017). Table 7 presents the population with non-Greek citizenship according to the Population Census surveys since 1971.

Over the past four decades, non-EU migrants have consistently experienced higher rates of temporary and part-time employment compared to the local population. Research from 1987 to 2017 shows that these rates, along with migrant unemployment, initially increased significantly but later declined, influenced by economic crises and other factors (Καψάλης, 2020). For example, in 2008, Greece had one of the lowest unemployment rates for non-native population in the EU at 7.2%. However, by 2013, this rate had surged to 40.3%, the highest among member states (Δρεττάκης, 2013).

Despite these challenges, the rate of self-employment among migrants has historically been low. Nevertheless, there has been a steady rise in migrant entrepreneurship, which indicates its potential for fostering social integration. Self-employment not only helps ensure family financial stability by potentially increasing household income and employment rates within families (Liargovas & Skandalis, 2012), but also strengthens connections with both immigrant and local communities. This dual benefit highlights migrant entrepreneurship as not just an economic strategy, but also a means of enhancing social cohesion and boosting local economies in Greece (Table 8).

Table 8 Employment share of migrants in Greece, 1987–2023

Year	Employed (%)	Self-employed (%)	Family workers (%)	Employees (%)	Permanent job (%)	Temporary job (%)	Full-time employed (%)	Part-time employed (%)	Unemployed (%)	Inactive (%)
<i>Non-EU nationals</i>										
1987	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.4	0.4	1.1	0.5
1997	1.9	0.5	0.4	3.1	2.4	8.8	1.9	3.5	2.6	0.8
2007	5.9	1.7	1.1	8.2	7.7	12.5	5.8	8.0	5.3	2.5
2017	5.1	1.6	1.4	6.9	6.2	12.9	4.6	10.1	7.1	2.2
2023	3.4	1.8	2.5	4.1	0.3	4.3	3.2	6.2	5.2	1.9
<i>EU and non-EU nationals</i>										
1987	0.5	0.3	0.1	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.5	0.7	1.2	0.7
1997	2.1	0.7	0.5	3.3	2.6	9.0	2.0	3.9	2.9	1.0
2007	7.2	2.2	1.8	10.0	9.4	14.8	7.1	9.2	6.4	3.3
2017	5.6	1.9	1.8	7.6	6.8	13.8	5.1	10.5	7.9	2.9
2023	3.8	2.1	3.1	4.6	0.3	4.7	3.6	6.9	6.0	2.3
<i>Greek native population</i>										
1987	99.5	99.7	99.9	99.3	99.3	99.3	99.5	99.3	98.8	99.3
1997	97.9	99.3	99.5	96.7	97.4	91.0	98.0	96.1	97.1	99.0
2007	92.8	97.8	98.2	90.0	90.6	85.2	92.9	90.8	93.6	94.7
2017	94.4	98.1	98.2	92.4	93.2	86.2	94.9	89.5	92.1	97.1
2023	96.2	97.9	96.9	95.4	99.7	95.3	96.4	93.1	94.0	97.7

Source: Labour Force Survey

6 FINDINGS: INTERVIEWS

This section is based on in-depth interviews with delivery workers, union leaders, grassroots activists, industry/ media experts, and senior managers. The analysis focused mainly on food delivery workers because the mobilization in e-food is a notable example of successful resistance within the gig economy and, perhaps, the most emblematic victory of trade unions and other grassroots initiatives by gig economy workers to secure effective representation and build collective agency.

As previously mentioned, in September 2021, e-food, the largest food delivery platform in Greece, informed its delivery workers, who were temporary employees, that their contracts would not be renewed. Instead, they were asked to work as freelancers. This decision sparked a massive union response, accompanied by consumer outrage and solidarity through various forms of platform activism (Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024). Facing increasing social pressure and damage to its brand, e-food's management ultimately agreed to the union's demands, offering full-time and indefinite contracts to all delivery workers. However, most workers in the food delivery services are now working as freelancers, as initially intended by the management of e-food.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the union victory and its short-term effects, it is necessary to examine the background of the mobilization, the interplay between social and institutional contexts, as well as the employer strategies within the ongoing transformation of Greek capitalism, and the emergence of the gig economy. An initial observation to note is that the market structure in the Greek food delivery services industry is gradually dominated by two major digital platforms (e-food and Wolt), alongside thousands of small businesses primarily operating as cafeterias, pizza, and souvlaki restaurants. Those online platforms have acted as significant disruptors in the industry.

An interviewed union leader of gig workers in the industry provided a good example of this: *“Just before the pandemic the fee for a delivery guy in the market was 4 euros/ hour, but you usually had no insurance at all and you had to say yes to multiple errands and to accept various irrelevant to delivery duties. E-food started to offer jobs with 4 euros per hour net, insurance coverage, voucher tickets to restaurants, and the notion that you do not have a boss over your head. You have just mobile and you just need to download an application. Their target was to seduce all delivery workers*

from working in other fast food, dining, and eating stores. After a while, the fast food stores suddenly ran out of delivery workers”.

This should not be particularly surprising, given that the working conditions for delivery workers in most fast-food stores and restaurants are far from ideal. An interviewed delivery worker who works in a local restaurant explained, *“Labour law violations occur very often. Right now, 50% of delivery workers are uninsured. The recent death of a young worker, who didn’t even have a driving license, is a good example. Employers never ask for a driving license before hiring you”.*

Such narratives underscore the absence of labour inspection mechanisms that are necessary to provide employment conditions of health and safety. Further, they indicate the lack of job security and the strong capacity of employers to control the labour process. As an interviewed worker mentioned: *“When you report a violation to the authorities (SEPE), they arrange a meeting with a representative from the employer within 15–30 days. After reporting, you either lose your job immediately or are pressured to resign by being assigned to clean toilets and given undesirable shift schedules, such as working both morning and night shifts on the same day”.* He continued by saying that: *“You can’t find justice. If you approach SEPE, you end up on a blacklist, making it difficult to secure employment in the industry”.*

In a similar vein, an interviewed motorbike delivery driver mentioned that employers can become extremely upset when receiving official complaints from the labour inspectors: *“Some employers might hire bodyguards and bouncers. They could set up a fake order, and you may never return”.* He also mentioned a recent violent incident, where: *“The employer got angry with a delivery person in the area of Anoixi, hit him, and ran over his motorcycle with his jeep”.*

In a similar vein, Alexandros, who has been a delivery worker for more than 20 years, highlighted the already-mentioned inability of workers to claim their rights by saying that *“a Pakistani guy was beaten up asking for his salary”.*

Apart from the risk of harassment and bullying behaviour from employers reported for misconduct, the courts are also not a very effective way for workers to resolve disputes. According to a delivery worker: *“As a worker, it’s not feasible to pay for a lawyer and wait for two years to see what will happen in court”.*

It should be noted that most of these workplaces are not unionized because Greek law requires a minimum of 21 members to establish a

union, a threshold that is challenging to meet given that 99% of such workplaces have fewer employees. As a rank-and-file activist mentioned: *"We have established Worker Committees because the environment is very hostile to unionism. The Committee functions like a trade union, but it is better to have it because it is anonymized. If you plan to engage in formal unionism when most workers are undocumented and unregistered, there is no chance. For example, if you have people from Bulgaria or Georgia working in a pizzeria or grill house under very oppressive conditions, a trade unionist can not survive. He would be laid off the next day"*.

Another interviewed worker highlighted the dark side of employment in food delivery: *"In small businesses, they don't offer bonuses or provide access to leave entitlements. At times, they even deduct a portion of our tips. We feel disposable, and undervalued, and frequently find ourselves doing tasks unrelated to our jobs, such as cleaning or shopping. There's also pressure to work long hours. If you refuse, you risk being fired"*.

In some interviews, the term *"neighbourhood capitalists"* was employed to characterize the harsh working conditions in fast-food stores, grill houses, and restaurants. Those conditions helped digital platforms attract delivery workers to establish their hegemonic position in the Greek market. Currently, many food restaurants use digital platforms (mainly those of e-food and Wolt) to expand their customer base. A freelance delivery worker, who also works in the Greek army as his main job, mentioned: *"If the platform requires me in the future to maintain logistical records, I'll return to working at local stores. I don't want to do that because the working conditions with the neighbourhood capitalists are tougher than with e-food"*.

Similarly, a union leader in a big trade union working in the postal and courier services mentioned: *"The working conditions in thousands of coffee shops, tavernas, and pizzerias are chaotic. Most people working there perceive this job as a secondary income source. Because of this, most delivery workers do not see the reason to unionise. At courier and postal services, work is more intensified, but this is a more regulated working environment with a more established workers' union. For example, there is less violation of health and safety rules in courier services in comparison to food delivery. Platforms also offer motorbike couriers the opportunity to earn extra income by freelancing after completing their primary job shift"*.

According to a union leader in a big trade union: *"it is better to be employed as a food delivery worker in a platform than a small restaurant and coffee shop"*. Similarly, as it was argued by a union leader of freelance

delivery workers: *“In food restaurants and coffee shops today, you often find older, undeclared delivery workers who are not familiar with digital apps. Employers take advantage of state regulation, essentially operating without any limits and restrictions”*.

Not surprisingly under such conditions, digital platforms have gradually become the primary employers for motorbike food delivery riders and couriers in the industry. Nevertheless, platforms have not addressed the entrenched macho and informal work regulations in postal and courier services, and especially in fast-food stores, delivery restaurants, and grill houses. In other words, despite the disrupting effect on employment, digital platforms have not significantly impacted the working conditions across the industry. This happens for the simple reason that emphatically mentioned an interviewed delivery worker with more than 20 years of experience: *“Platforms have not changed how small restaurants operate”*.

In other words, digital platforms broke their initial promises as soon as they established a strong foothold in the market. Nevertheless, it should be noted that such broken promises and management control of the labour process by the platforms were made possible with policy incapacity and specific regulations taken by the government in 2021. As one participant in the interview highlighted: *“The mobilization in the e-food sector began in September, but legislation under Article 69, initiated in July, laid the groundwork for freelancing. This legislative move was influenced by lobbying efforts from Delivery Hero”*.

In a similar vein, a participant made the following critical comment on digital platforms: *“They manipulated the entire delivery market, and the Competition Commission didn’t create any obstacles for them. We only have two digital platforms, creating a cartel-like environment and manipulating not just the ready-to-eat food market but also retail trade”*.

Another delivery worker, who works for both platforms (Wolt and e-food) as a freelancer provided an indicative aspect of this market hegemony: *“Over the past two years, platforms have reduced their fees to riders. I believe that in the future, they will pay us the same amount as small food and coffee shops, or possibly even less while requiring us to cover our own social security, VAT, and taxes”*.

To sum up, many participants noted that digital platforms offered better working conditions, and pay to attract the necessary workforce to dominate the market in comparison with courier services and fast-food restaurants. However, reduction of fees and instances of exploitation, similar to those seen with “neighbourhood capitalists”, soon began to

escalate. The first such big change was related to the status of employment and the contractual arrangements. *“The performance evaluation system used by the platform was advertised as a reward tool for workers. It turned out to be it was used by the platform as a tool for laying off delivery workers to have only freelancers. Currently, 85% of delivery people are working as freelancers, which was not the case at all at first”*.

Furthermore, platforms often do not provide adequate personal protective equipment, forcing workers to operate in adverse weather conditions with increased accident risks. As it was argued by a participant working in a platform: *“You can’t complete a 150-kilometer ride in central Athens with just a regular biker’s helmet; a full-face helmet is necessary. In 2022, we tragically lost three freelancers to facial skull injuries. Shouldn’t delivery shifts include breaks to prevent accidents?”*.

In addition, management unilaterally sets work schedules and pay rates, or performance evaluations without negotiating or consulting with motorbike delivery drivers and their unions. A freelancer delivery worker, who dislikes working in local fast-food stores, argued: *“Small shops are having trouble finding delivery workers without papers because e-food pays better. But this might not last long. We’ve already seen our earnings drop, and they might go down even more in the future”*.

A motorcycle courier involved in an anarchist-leaning union focused on delivery and courier services, which has been active for nearly two decades, stated: *“Working in delivery feels like navigating through hell. Finding someone who pays 4 euros and provides insurance makes you feel like a king. Most food delivery workers are migrants”*.

As such, for migrant delivery workers, the dominant business model especially in food delivery creates even tougher working conditions and rules of exploitation. As an interviewed participant mentioned: *“We are seeing instances of trafficking. A big digital platform provides ID codes not just to freelancers, but also to subcontractors. It’s like a slave market—they give 100 mobile phones to these subcontractors, who then rent them out to economic migrants. For example, they might give 100 codes to a popular person from Pakistan, who then distributes them to 100 fellow countrymen. Someone else from Bangladesh does the same with another 100 Bangladeshis. Another one does this with Albanians. A mobile phone might be shared with four Pakistanis living in a small apartment in the area of Kypseli. In this way, a single phone is being used 24 hours a day. The platform faces no risk because the subcontractors bear all the responsibility. Last year, there was a fatal accident that we reported. However, even if an accident occurs, it’s not*

considered a workplace accident because the individual is not an employee but a freelancer”.

According to an interviewed union leader: *“Subcontractors serve as a parasitic mechanism to reduce platform fees for food delivery workers, leading to competition between freelancers and subcontracted delivery workers, who are typically migrants”.*

Subcontracting practices and undeclared work are not restricted to food delivery services. Such employer strategies are also emerging in other industries and professions in both urban and rural areas. In this context, migrant work in the Greek gig economy does not differentiate much from traditional employer practices in the conventional economy. This situation is related to the broader deregulation of industrial relations and the opening up of competition by the entry of platforms in the market. For example, changes in the legislation of holding occupational licences and the rise of platforms like Uber in the Greek market gave many migrants the option to be employed as taxi drivers without the necessary credentials and controls for doing this job.

As a rank-and-file activist of the biggest taxi drivers’ association explained: *“On platforms, many migrants can’t even speak Greek, unlike in radio taxis where taxi drivers know each other”.* He went on to argue: *“95% or even 100% of all migrants working as taxi drivers collaborate with digital platforms because most of them are not taxi owners but independent contractors working with taxi owners. Platforms have also led to the rise of unlicensed taxi ride-sharing in the tourism sector. Both Greeks and migrants are involved in taxi piracy through the use of ride-hailing platforms, often finding these jobs by word of mouth”.*

Loopholes in legislation and a disorganized market create job opportunities for migrants, but they also risk increasing precarity and informality in work regulation. In some cases, they result in severe exploitation, as we discussed earlier with the subcontracted food delivery workers.

As an interviewed senior manager of a big agricultural cooperative mentioned: *“In the beginning, we had Polish agricultural workers, who eventually moved to Australia. Then came Albanian workers, followed by Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants, most of whom went to Germany and the UK. Now, most of our migrant workers are undocumented Pakistanis, who often move on to places like Italy because they can get visas more easily there. Their living conditions are extreme, with bad employers and numerous criminal networks within their communities exploiting them. The average daily compensation for farming workers is between 35 to 45*

euros, but they usually end up with no more than 20 euros in their hands". And he continues: "Labor authorities conduct intensive inspections in agricultural cooperatives, but they rarely visit food processing factories, despite numerous labour law violations and undeclared work occurring there".

7 CONCLUSIONS

The standard employment relationship is a historically contingent and geographically specific construct, built on preconditions that no longer exist. Modern pressures such as financialization and digitalization especially in Europe and the USA contribute to the fragmentation of employment structures, increasing differentiation and inequality (Weil, 2014). Consequently, the once 'standard' model of employment is now exceptional, underscoring the evolving dynamics of contemporary labour markets. Nevertheless, context still matters.

In the case of Greece, austerity memorandum agreements throughout the 2010s resulted in the recommodification of labour and the further erosion of collective bargaining structures along with a profound job crisis. Therefore, the potential for new job opportunities arising from the expansion of the gig economy should not be underestimated, particularly for a country with one of Europe's highest unemployment rates. This partly explains why recent legal interventions and discussions on the gig economy have focused mainly on tax-related matters while overlooking pressing labour issues (Mexi, 2019).

In this context, migrants, alongside other vulnerable workforce groups such as women and young workers, have historically constituted the foundation of zones marked by vulnerability and marginalization in Greece. As explained in the analysis, research on migrant labour within the Greek labour market reveals a prevalent trend of collective inaction and reliance on individual coping strategies to manage precarity and insecurity. Migrant labour has not integrated into broader progressive movements nor developed a distinct resistance project against precarity. Despite certain efforts, collective actors such as trade unions and political parties have failed to provide adequate spaces and mechanisms for organizing and representing migrant workers' interests.

In this increasingly precarious environment, the rise of the gig economy in Greece may provide an alternative employment option for migrant workers. However, gig work does not eliminate the ongoing social and employment disadvantages faced by migrant workers. In

the current chapter, relevant statistical evidence and interview data for delivery workers were analysed to testify to this. Similar to other contexts (Wood et al., 2018), the gig economy in Greece does not provide a fertile ground for collective organizing.

Even the most notable examples of effective resistance from digital platform workers, such as the e-food campaign, have experienced short-lived and limited impacts, much like other mobilizations such as the migrants' demonstrations in the strawberry fields of Manolada. Additionally, the individual strategies employed by migrants to cope with precarity have had similarly limited effects in terms of providing access to full citizenship. Migrant workers consistently serve as a reserve army of labour without union representation, which subjects them to direct employer control and workplace exploitation.

This takes us to two main conclusions. First, the employment disadvantages of migrants in Greece both before and after the emergence of the gig economy should be understood both as part of the historical interplay between social, cultural, and economic forces, and as a power issue involving the complex interplay of managerial practices, state incapacity, and the agency of individual migrants and their associations. Second, jobs in the gig economy, which are frequently evangelized in the media as providing greater flexibility and choice (Chen et al., 2019; Fleming, 2017; Zwick, 2018), can also conceal the decline of workers' rights and the harsh exploitation of already politically and economically vulnerable groups, such as migrant workers. Such conclusions indicate the urgent need for more inclusive policies for migrant workers by the state and the Greek trade union movement.

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Digital Caporalato and Migrant Labour in the Gig Economy

Gianmarco Peterlongo 

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, a growing number of scholars have questioned the role of digital platforms in economic markets and labour organisation of our societies. According to an extensive literature, gig economy platforms can be conceptualised as both technological and economic infrastructures (Marrone & Peterlongo, 2020; Plantin et al., 2016). They are technical systems based on a hierarchical configuration of the work process, governed by information asymmetries and opaque evaluation standards set by algorithms. But they also function as economic intermediary organisations, reshaping the power structures of the economy and exploiting a surplus of workers and their misclassification as independent contractors. The debate sparked by the rise and expansion of the platform model has so far mostly focused on the implications and consequences for society. How have work and social relations changed? Are we in a radically new

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era compared to the usual structures of capitalism? Are we living in a moment of revolutionary technological innovation, or are we instead returning to premodern mechanisms of economic coordination? What kind of new and/or old dynamics of labour exploitation does platform capitalism unveil? The idea behind this contribution is to enter this debate and to seek answers in a critical way, through an empirical exploration of some of the consequences that platforms have brought to the world of work today.

The paper first looks at the phenomenology of platform work through the theoretical lens of refeudalisation. In the first part of the paper, this concept is critically discussed with reference to the theoretical debate surrounding it. The perspective it offers constitutes a fruitful starting point not to highlight a phantom return to the past, but to underline how the expressions of contemporary capitalism—especially digital and platform capitalism—are innervated by contradictions and mixtures of heterogeneous elements in its global development. Subsequently, the paper examines the dynamics of inclusion of platform labour, noting how this has become the privileged space for the migrant workforce and highlighting the modes of adverse incorporation that underlie it. Finally, in support of these theoretical interpretations, the paper presents the case of digital *caporalato* as an emblematic and particularly illuminating expression of the forms of refeudalisation of work and predatory inclusion of migrant labour in the gig economy.

2 REFEUDALISATION OF WORK

In recent years, a debate has been sparked among social scientists as to whether or not the idea of *refeudalisation* is an appropriate way to capture the current transformations of work and society. This idea should not be interpreted as a mere mechanical return to premodern patterns or a simplistic comparison with feudal Europe. At the heart of the refeudalisation concept lies a paradoxical modernity where the rapid global advancement of certain social processes, such as digitisation or platform capitalism, coincides with an escalation in the intensity of labour exploitation along global value chains. This juxtaposition often points to shocking outcomes, especially considering the fact that there are now more slaves and forced labourers than at any other point in human history (Bodei, 2019; Neckel, 2020; Volscho & Kelly, 2012). This

process is to be conceived as paradoxical in nature, as it entails the resurgence of premodern social models as a consequence of modernisation (Chakrabarty, 2007; Neckel, 2020). The concept of refeudalisation, as elucidated by the scholars who employ it, serves primarily as a means to escape the limitations of a linear understanding of history and the univocal trajectory of socioeconomic processes, thereby emphasising their inherent contradictions. In that sense, it represents an insightful metaphor to avoid the so-called trajectorism trap, that is the idea that history and modernity have a unique direction and an ineluctable telos (Appadurai, 2013; Borghi & Peterlongo, 2023).

Notably, although, some scholars have also criticised the use of refeudalisation as an oversimplified and inadequate way of looking at the dynamics of contemporary capitalism. In a recent article, for instance, Morozov (2022) sharply criticised and rejected the most common positions supporting the return of feudal mechanisms into capitalism. Many today, from both the political right and the left, argue that we are in an era often described as neo-feudalism or techno-feudalism. Among the liberal thinkers, such as in the case of Posner and Weyl (2018), the return to a feudal realm is the cause of a stuck economy incapable of innovation because corroded by politics, in the same way feudalism was unable to promote the good development of societies (and they claim consequently for an even more radical and free spirit of the market). On the left, it is possible to find many more thinkers arguing for a feudal resurgence. From Mazzucato (2019) to Varoufakis (2023) and Streeck (2017), many of those leftist scholars argue that economic and political social relations have gradually eroded, moving backwards towards a mechanism more akin to the feudal one between servants and lords than the capitalist one between capital and labour. While Varoufakis (2023) focuses more on the perverse mechanisms of global finance and the role of international economic organisations in strangling the growth of countries, Mazzucato (2019), with the idea of digital feudalism, criticises the immense profits of tech companies that dominate the global economy and hold national governments hostage, even though their growth was made possible by public investment (Mazzucato, 2018). Of course, these discussions also raise important questions, such as what kind of wealth creation underlies the Amazon or Uber model, whether it is purely rentier or also productive and innovative. None of them, indeed, goes so far as to say that the economy has returned to aspects of the Middle Ages, but the arguments they use still draw on some correspondences with

the past. This, according to Morozov (2022), does not help to understand the real extent of the transformations taking place and leads to underestimating the elements of continuity that some aspects considered feudal have always had in the development of capitalism, as well as to ignoring the elements of complexity that always permeate global development processes with contradictions. In his conclusions, he therefore distances himself from these interpretations, arguing that, refeudalisation or not, the features highlighted by the proponents of the feudal reason are still attributable to capitalism as such.

However, among the most interesting advocates of the refeudalisation argument, it is worth noting that the idea is used as a metaphor rather than an equivalence with the past, and that it can contain a strong and useful sociological perspective (Arvidsson, 2020; Borghi & Peterlongo, 2023; Neckel, 2020; Supiot, 2013). According to Neckel (2020), refeudalisation represents a social metamorphosis that characterises various aspects of our contemporary capitalist societies: from the oligopolistic concentration of wealth to the growth of inequalities, from the restructuring of welfare in the Global North to the reorganisation of economic processes dominated by speculative-financial logics, up to the reaffirmation of new and old forms of forced labour along the global value chains. This process deeply impacts the entire sphere of labour, where first and foremost a refeudalisation of the public-private relationship and workers' rights is observed, as argued also by Supiot (2013) or by Volscho and Kelly (2012). In the realm of platform capitalism, this paper argues, some of the characteristics of the refeudalisation come to the fore. Today, gig economy platforms reflect a refeudalisation process for at least two reasons. On the one hand, the hegemony of the platform business model reveals a (re)feudalisation of capitalism itself, in the sense that the processes of accumulation and operations of capital increasingly turn towards speculative, extractive and predatory activities. Indeed, following Arrighi (1994), refeudalisation is a symptom of the crisis in every cycle of capitalist accumulation, as also occurred during the late Middle Ages in many parts of Italy “*when capital withdrew from the risky market activity to be invested instead in land ownership or other secure assets*” (Arvidsson, 2020, p. 50). Today, we see certain markets dominated by global companies run by a handful of managers who focus more on lobbying and financial speculations than purely productive activities; consider, for instance, the striking case of the Uber Files that surfaced in 2022 revealing the fraudulent and abusive practices employed by Uber

managers to secure the endorsement of economic lobbies and governments worldwide. The Uber files, a trove of over 124.000 documents leaked to The Guardian by a whistleblower, has thus ignited a global firestorm of outrage and scrutiny against the Californian company. These revelations have exposed a dark underbelly of Uber's operations, spanning from flouting laws to duping local authorities, exploiting violence against drivers and engaging in secretive lobbying efforts during its aggressive global expansion (Davies, 2022). In addition, platform companies rely on a restructuring of previous existing markets more than in the creation of new ones, leveraging upon their role as economic intermediaries (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2024). Moreover, on the second hand, as we will delve into in the empirical analysis, platforms promote a refeudalisation and informalisation of working conditions, as old expressions of feudal relations are reintroduced into the digital organisation of work—foremost among them, piecework (Supiot, 2020), which however has never disappeared along capitalism global value chains—but also the permeability to informal mechanisms—such as digital *caporalato* (gangmastering) and other industrious and informal circuits of labour—that develop behind the scenes of the gig economy (Arvidsson, 2020; Peterlongo, 2023). But it is above all the mixture of contradictory and seemingly irreconcilable elements that characterise the model of refeudalisation, rather than an illusory return to old organisational patterns.

3 MIGRANT LABOUR AND ITS PREDATORY INCLUSION IN THE GIG ECONOMY

Another noteworthy aspect which is partly related to the idea of refeudalisation concerns the composition of the platform workforce and its relentless and gradual racialisation over the years. To see how the world of digital labour platforms has rapidly become a 'stronghold' of migrant labour, one need only look at any of the many metropolises around the world where on-demand platforms are present (Altenried, 2021). Extensive analyses, both focusing on the digital crowdwork sphere and those concerning place-based urban service platforms, have highlighted how the labour markets offered by these platforms have become a preferred terrain for migrant workers, sometimes evolving into an infrastructure of mobility in migration, often reproducing and crystallising past colonial trajectories and disparities (Bernard, 2023; Casilli, 2017). In the case of online crowdwork, for example, an ILO 2021 report even argues that

platforms can be a suitable space to ‘train’ and put to work the masses of asylum seekers in refugee camps across Africa (Hackl, 2021). Regarding on-demand work, as Van Doorn and Vijay (2021) suggest, it is increasingly evident that the availability of migrant labour pools constitutes a crucial resource for platform growth, as significant as financial investments and permissive regulatory environments. As Bernard (2023) points out in her recent research about Uber drivers in Paris, London and Montreal, racialised workers constitute a valuable reserve army for the platform, providing it with a docile and available workforce. However, this is not always and necessarily the case, as platforms can also see a strong presence of indigenous workers, especially in smaller urban areas or in peripheral areas of economic development (where labour markets are commonly insufficient to ensure the reproduction of the workforce and where unemployment rates are high).

In studies on domestic work, ride-hailing and food delivery in Europe (Altenried, 2021; Altenried et al., 2021; Bernard, 2023; Huws, 2014; Doorn, 2022), as well as research on ride-hailing in China (Zhao, 2019) and the United States (Cottom, 2020; Ge et al., 2016), in India (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020) or Latin America (Abílio, 2020; Cordero & Salazar Daza, 2020; Del Nido, 2021), many scholars recognise that *“the movement of people within and across borders in search of work and a better future thus seems to constitute a critical condition ensuring the existence of urban gig economies”* (Doorn & Vijay, 2021, p. 2). The reason many migrants enrol in digital platforms lies in the simplicity of access to employment amid the structural difficulty of entering the formal job market and also, perhaps primarily, in the adverse conditions of labour force inclusion. In other words, according to the empirical analysis contained in this contribution, the engagement rules of the gig economy offer a deliberately crafted race to the bottom specifically designed to include the migrant component of the workforce in its political economy, unveiling a novel model of labour entrapment (Boutang, 2002). This evidence comes not only indirectly from the observation of working conditions, but also explicitly from the words of the platform managers themselves, who, as we will see, consciously aim to build a downgraded labour market in order to ensure the availability of a constrained workforce and constant access to a mass of potential workers to be activated according to platforms’ needs.

All of this is clearly in line with the company's strategy of minimising labour costs by guaranteeing a kind of flexible availability for underemployment, i.e. what Mezzadra (2023) calls potential labour. The condition of employment insecurity and the coercion of unemployment, however, are not peculiar consequences of the platform era; instead, they result from a long historical and political process of definitively archiving the wage society model in the Global North and the informalisation of economies and labour relations more generally (Bremán & Linden, 2014). In this regard, revisiting the three trends identified by Robert Castel (1997, 2011) as salient features of the end of the wage society is helpful. These trends include the destabilisation of stability, the establishment of precariousness and the reappearance of surplus populations. The gig economy platforms provide compelling arguments for all three trends, which are seen by many scholars as symptoms of a global informalisation of the capitalist economy that seems to be reversing conventional development trajectories, leading to an increasing heterogeneity of economic worlds, with the West looking more and more like the Rest, rather than vice versa. (Beck, 2000; Bremán & Linden, 2014; Routh & Borghi, 2016).

However, what I particularly want to emphasise here is the resurgence of a surplus labour force population experiencing conditions of instability and coercion in labour markets, tracing the entrapment of migrant labour in digital capitalism. Without any doubts, platforms have settled into the process of chronicling precarity and uncertainty, inscribing themselves into the professional paths of individuals already accustomed to living day by day. This is especially relevant in countries where the regime of precarious, informal and intermittent work is the norm, and standard employment is the exception (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). However, my primary focus is on the increase and reappearance of a "surplus population", as defined by Castel (1997), which has stabilised over time and is now being incorporated into gig economy labour markets. The key difference from thirty years ago, as noted by Castel, is that while this population was composed of individuals unable to integrate into labour markets then—long-term unemployed and beneficiaries of welfare policies—today, in the face of the definitive crumbling of welfare forms, the surplus population is reintroduced into productive circuits and is immanent to platform labour markets. This reintroduction follows a peculiar form of adverse incorporation (or predatory inclusion), often in the form

of a ‘potential’ labour army rather than a reserve army as Marx explained about the industrial era (Mezzadra, 2023).

This consideration brings us in the direction suggested by Castel (1997) to reframe the terms typically dualistically distinguished in the opposition between the ‘in’ and ‘out’ in post-wage society. For instance, the concept of adverse incorporation originates from social exclusion studies, offering a diametrically opposed perspective to residualist conceptions of poverty. It emphasises that social marginalisation phenomena primarily result from power relations, not just the consequence of more or less ascribed socioeconomic and identity characteristics (Hickey et al., 2007; Phillips, 2011; Wood, 2000). In essence, this school of thought criticises approaches that have sought to replace the concept of exploitation with that of social exclusion to explain the causes of poverty, at times indirectly legitimising the expansion of the market and financialisation as solutions (Hickey et al., 2007). As Phillips (2011, p. 390) succinctly puts it, the concept of adverse incorporation “*leads us to focus not on a condition of socioeconomic exclusion as the principal determinant of poverty and marginalization, but rather on the terms on which different social groups are included and incorporated into global economic activity*”. Phillips then highlights how well this concept fits the condition of informal workers and migrants. Rather than being excluded from economic processes, they are included in accumulation processes along global value chains through old and new disciplinary instruments and value extraction apparatuses. Those who have analysed the processes of differential inclusion of migrant labour have done so by looking in particular at work in detention centres or at the geographical mobility of some labour flows, not only at the transnational level but also within the same territory, for example along the urban/rural axis (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). However, these differential and adverse conditions of the inclusion of migrant labour are historically present in many sectors of the informal economy and are now inscribed in platform capitalism. What they have in common is that they are forms of employment that offer no prospect of savings and often condemn workers to living from day to day, managing their vulnerability by relying on short-term investments and tactics to meet practical and immediate needs. This is instead of focusing on broader strategies that support medium to long-term projected needs (Wood, 2000). As many professional biographies of subjects highlight, adverse incorporation, which in turn produces entrapment, of platform workers into the labour market, “*acts to reinforce the*

limits on workers' prospects for longer-term security and accumulation and perpetuate their vulnerability" (Phillips, 2011, p. 391). Other authors, with a similar perspective, see today the centrality of algorithmic technologies in enabling and obscuring these processes of predatory inclusion of workers in the gig economy—forms of inclusion through exclusion that mainly affect migrant populations (Cottom, 2020). Whether we are talking about differential inclusion, predatory inclusion or the adverse incorporation of migrant labour, the result of this complex hybridisation between processes of inclusion and exclusion, as scholars have often emphasised, is to produce disempowerment of labour. However, it often also generates a series of tensions between the movement of migratory flows and the apparatuses designed to govern them (Cottom, 2020; Hickey et al., 2007; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Phillips, 2011).

4 DIGITAL CAPORALATO

By delving into the materiality and everyday reality of the work performed by riders and drivers for platform-based services, a phenomenon known as digital *caporalato* comes to the fore, providing a particularly revealing empirical illustration of the ongoing refeudalisation of the economy and the predatory conditions of inclusion of the migrant workforce in the gig economy. The term '*caporalato*' (gangmastering) generally refers to a parasitic intermediation between labour demand and supply for the purpose of exploitation, commonly found in specific productive sectors such as agriculture and construction (Perrotta, 2015). In the context of platforms, as elaborated in the following paragraphs, similar mechanisms resurface, particularly affecting the migrant portion of the workforce. Drawing on the work of labour law experts in Italy (Cassano, 2020; Inversi, 2021; Merlo, 2020; Sartori, 2022), the Italian Penal Code (art. 603-bis c.p.) and international organisations (Corbanese & Rosas, 2021; ILO, 2005, 2009), digital caporalato can be defined as an organised intermediation activity taking place through, by means of, or outside but related to the digital platform. It is characterised by conditions of exploitation, taking advantage of the workers' state of need and their vulnerability. In the last years, the Italian "Parliamentary Inquiry Commission on working conditions, exploitation and safety in public and private workplaces", set up in 2019, has drawn a dramatic picture of the forms of gangmastering, highlighting in particular the new forms of caporalato

affecting the world of digital work. The data that emerges about caporalato, from which apparently no region is exempt, refers to it as a “*plague unworthy of a civilised country*” (Parliamentary Inquiry Commission, 2022, p. 8). The government reports specifically point to some aspects of platform-mediated work as areas easily associated with these forms of exploitation, given that “*the increasingly evanescent figure of the employer often constitutes a favourable opportunity for the emergence of new phenomena of labour exploitation such as digital caporalato where gig economy workers have replaced farm labourers*” (ivi: 31). At international level, the ILO, which supported the creation of the Italian Commission against caporalato, has intervened on several occasions over the years with actions and guidelines to tackle forms of exploitation, human trafficking and illegal labour intermediation (Corbanese & Rosas, 2021; ILO, 2005, 2009).

In the following paragraphs, we will examine some expressions of digital caporalato present in the gig economy that outline a situation of exploitation. The empirical material has been gathered within the framework of a broader multi-sited research on last-mile logistics platforms between Italy and Argentina carried out between 2019 and 2022. Data has been collected through an ethnography of work in the two contexts of study; more than 60 interviews were conducted with platform workers, in addition to long periods of participant observation (in the case of Italy, I was employed as a rider for one of the biggest food delivery companies present in the country, while in Argentina I approached the ride-hailing sector mainly as a passenger) and online ethnography through social media and collective chats among workers. An important part of the data also comes from secondary sources, such as court documents and newspaper articles. In the context of food delivery, Italy has unveiled through judicial investigations an illicit network of intermediation operated by a small company subcontracting services to Uber. In the case of ride-hailing, as revealed in the Buenos Aires scenario, a mechanism of digital caporalato finds space within the Uber Driver app itself and can be implemented by the drivers themselves, exposing their colleagues to scams and the risk of compromising their own accounts. In addition to these practices that immediately evoke the concept of a gangmaster, there are more discreet forms of illicit labour intermediation and exploitation of vulnerability, such as the use of bots by riders to enhance their work performance.

The Uber Eats Trial

The phenomenon of digital caporalato has made headlines in Italy due to various legal cases, revealing its multifaceted presence in the platform work environment. In May 2020, several newspapers in Italy exposed the scandal of digital labour exploitation among UberEats riders following an investigation by the Milan Prosecutor's Office into Uber managers and a company acting as an intermediary named Flash Road City (FRC). Essentially, FRC managed around 750 UberEats riders across Italy using unorthodox and criminally prosecutable methods. The investigations led the Court to place the Italian branch of the Californian company under receivership following convictions for illicit intermediation and labour exploitation (ex-art. 630-bis of the Italian Penal Code), setting a precedent in labour jurisprudence—alongside another case of the so-called new caporalato involving labour through fictitious cooperatives at Ceva Logistic (Merlo, 2020). The term digital caporalato aptly described the situation uncovered by investigators: compelling evidence painted a grim picture where managers recruited couriers, particularly asylum seekers residing in reception centres, coerced them to sign presumed agreements in unfamiliar spaces, withheld tips and a portion of each delivery's earnings (amounting to around €20.000 in tips alone in 2019), enforced non-refusal of rides by riders and imposed arbitrary financial penalties. The most distressing aspect of the investigation pertained to the oppressive conditions imposed on Uber Eats riders. Phone intercepts revealed a semi-slave-like treatment by FRC executives towards riders: arbitrary disciplinary measures for alleged infractions, threats to suspend accounts for perceived misbehaviour or complaints, and tones that not only undermined work dignity but also exhibited clear racist undertones. In several cases reported in the investigation by the Court of Milan, racist and denigrating language was used towards the riders, who were often suspended for trivial reasons. For example, one of FRC's best-known managers, according to testimonies reported to the court, referred to the sub-Saharan riders by saying that "*they stink because, being dark-skinned, they normally stink*".¹ Several Uber Italy managers are also implicated in the investigation because they were aware of the methods used by FRC and because they were the only ones who could effectively block the riders'

¹ Available at: https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2023/05/24/news/caporalato_processo_rider_ricusazione_giudice_uber-401586108/ (Last access 13/03/2024).

accounts. The facade of apparent legality that characterises the FRC has allowed them to recruit, in the 2018–2020 period, a growing workforce made up of numerous asylum-seeking migrants, mostly living in temporary reception centres. As the Court’s report explains:

Suffice it to say that a search carried out on some of the names that emerged from the investigations revealed that a large proportion of the riders recruited by Flash Road City came from conflict areas of the planet (Mali, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Guinea, Pakistan, Bangladesh and others). [...] The strong social isolation in which these migrant workers live provides an opportunity to find work at very low cost, as these are people who are willing to do anything to have the money to survive, who are exploited and discriminated against by unscrupulous employers who feel they have no choice but to work in order not to see their migratory dream fail, and who are therefore willing not only to do the less qualified and harder jobs, but also to be paid little and badly (Court of Milan, 2020, p. 8).

As labour law expert Merlo (2020) points out, the prosecutor’s report highlights a working situation that is far from self-employment and can be fully associated with a framework of gangmastering for the purposes of exploitation. Finally, in addition to the crime of illicit intermediation and exploitation of labour (ex-art. 630-bis), the Court of Milan (2020) accused some managers of FRC and Uber of the crime of aggravated fraud, criminal association, crimes of extortion, usury, laundering and use of goods and money of illicit origin. A first part of the trial ended in February 2022 with the conviction of some managers and the obligation to pay compensation of around half a million euros to the UberEats riders who were civil parties. In conclusion, that of FRC and UberEats outlines a form of top-down gangmastering, with a parasitic interposition that operates within an institutional labour regime. In effect, this form of illegal labour intermediation exploits the immunity of gig economy companies that characterise the independent contractor employment regime of platform workers.

Platform Caporalato Among Uber Fleets and Other Informal Circuits of Illicit Intermediation of Labour

If the Milan trial against UberEats outlines a form of gangmastering that is embedded in the institutional mechanisms of the forms of employment and makes use of intermediary companies such as FRC, other

forms of digital caporalato operate behind the scenes of official organisational mechanisms and take place in a bottom-up form. One of the most revealing examples of this second level of illicit labour intermediation comes from the case of Uber drivers, observed during the fieldwork in Buenos Aires in 2020, which takes place through the app extension of UberFleet. Before explaining in detail how this informal and bottom-up form of caporalato works, it is necessary to make a brief reference to the situation of the Californian company in the Argentine capital. Since its arrival in 2016, Uber has been operating in the city in a grey zone beyond the limits of legality, according to the capital's authorities, as it violates the local transport legislation (however, in other urban areas, such as Mendoza, it operates legally thanks to agreements that have since been immediately signed with local federal institutions) (Del Nido, 2021). This means that drivers are exposed to further risks and vulnerabilities, since they can be fined if caught by the police to transport passengers on behalf of Uber. Nevertheless, the ride-hailing service has continued to grow over time and become a logistical infrastructure for local transport, despite institutional attempts to block the company and persistent protests from taxi drivers. On the other hand, Uber drivers have been able to continue working without paying commissions to the company (as there was initially no way for drivers to pay money to Uber), until the company introduced payment mechanisms (via prepaid cards) to try to collect at least part of the debts accumulated by drivers over the years. For this reason, the 'minimum payment' has been introduced to make drivers gradually pay part of their debt and avoid a mass flight to the competition (such as Didi, Cabify and Beat). Basically, starting in 2019, Uber asks drivers to pay a portion of their debt each month to keep their account active. In addition, a massive informal market for fake accounts has emerged, given the high number of Uber driver accounts that have been suspended or permanently blocked for non-payment of debts.

In this situation, a fraud mechanism of digital caporalato against drivers has rapidly flourished through the official extension of the app called UberFleet. In short, thanks to UberFleet, an owner of several cars can become a platform-based micro-entrepreneur, making them profitable and renting them out to other Uber drivers via the dedicated app. Through his smartphone, the owner can monitor the fleet and has a commanding position over the drivers: he can follow their movements, check when and how they are working, and he is also the one who pays the commissions of the different drivers to Uber and collects a fee for

himself. In a nutshell, it acts as an intermediary between the company and drivers who lack a vehicle of their own. But what happens, according to several drivers, is that the fleet owner often exempts himself from paying the full share of commissions and only pays the ‘minimum payment’ allowed by Uber in Argentina. In this way, he can pocket the difference in unpaid commissions on top of the percentage he is entitled to. This mechanism is therefore very similar to fraud because, as one expert driver explains, the drivers are not aware of what the owner of the fleet is doing, but it also outlines another kind of illicit and fraudulent intermediation of labour. It may also happen that Uber then decides to block the fleet due to insolvency, in which case unsuspecting drivers will find their account blocked without knowing exactly why (deactivation notices generally contain a generic reference to a breach of the ToS). Often, as one driver explains:

When the fleet stops working because Uber tells you that if you don’t pay me your debt, I won’t activate the fleet for you, the owner cancels the registration of the fleet and creates another one with a different name or a fake account” (D., Uber driver).

Furthermore, fleet owners typically try to attract drivers through messages posted on WhatsApp groups or social media message boards, announcing better rates, or even promising not to pay commissions. On Facebook in 2020, countless posts were published in Uber driver groups saying: “*stop paying commissions and join my fleet!*”. In the same social groups, many drivers denounce the inappropriate behaviour of fleet owners by reporting their own experiences: “*I was in a fleet and yesterday they suspended my account, the owner disappeared, it seems he didn’t pay any commission and so Uber blocked the fleet!*” (source: Facebook Public Group). In most cases, it is migrant workers from other countries who fall into this kind of trap. In the case of Uber in Buenos Aires, for example, it is mainly drivers from Venezuela, Paraguay and Bolivia who end up in these informal digital gangmaster mechanisms. Parasitic and fraudulent fleet intermediation therefore mainly affects the migrants, less experienced drivers or more vulnerable components of the workforce and represents another form of caporalato. Furthermore, in the world of Uber in Buenos Aires, there are countless other forms of intermediation between drivers and the platform that are not entirely transparent. One of the most common and widespread is the use of fake accounts, known as ‘*cuentas truchas*’. These accounts are sold mainly on social media and often have a short-term guarantee, even a few weeks or months. However,

these services allow those whose accounts have been blocked or irregular migrants present in the country to work. Finally, other forms of informal labour intermediation involve renting out one's account to third parties—again, this trading market generally takes place on social media.

In the case of food delivery in Italy, one of the mechanisms of illegal labour intermediation that finds a place in the environment of official apps concerns the self-booking mechanism of work slots. During the pandemic and up to the present day, illegal services have proliferated that allow the acquisition of greater work opportunities and that operate through specific software, known as pirate bots. Bots are a shortcut to work for those with low rankings and unable to get enough work slots. However, bots are also a burden on the shoulders of the workers themselves, increasing unfair competition and forcing those who use them to pay large sums of money each week. As a rider in Turin explains:

Using bots is stupid, and most of all, it hurts your colleagues. Bots are made to enslave us and blackmail us even more, you pay to get them, if they were for free, it would be different. To use them, you must spend a certain amount per week, it's a system to make bastards rich, who profit from the competition of underclasses like the riders (A., Glovo rider).

As another rider from Turin explains, platform companies are more or less directly responsible of this kind of racket:

Between the accounts that are for sale and now the hours that can be bought by these bots, we are immersed in a Wild West labour system. We should publicly denounce the companies because they favour the black market, they have created a working environment without rules, a war of all against all, where the smartest or most ruthless wins (D., Glovo rider).

In sum, the bot market represents a further form of illicit labour intermediation and, therefore, can be understood as an informal expression of digital caporalato. Of course, there are even more discreet forms of parasitic interposition of riders' work that take place face to face; but it is also possible that the informal exchange, sharing or transfer of riders' accounts takes place simply on the basis of solidarity, acquaintance and personal friendship—without any form of exploitation involved.

5 CONCLUSION

Over the last decade, the gig economy has proven to be a particularly favourable arena for migrant labour. This is happening not only in Europe, with massive extra-continental labour flows, but also in other

global regions, as in the case of Argentina, where labour flows are predominantly—but not exclusively—intra-continental Latin American. The paper confirmed this hypothesis, which has been widely discussed in the literature, but also revealed some hidden aspects of platforms as migration labour infrastructures. If it is true that easy access to platforms, represented by low entry barriers (mainly easy registration and no need to know the native language), allows migrants to quickly find employment in host countries, the working conditions offered can often be a trap rather than an opportunity for them. The flourishing of forms of digital *caporalato* within the gig economy demonstrates that the gig economy offers a deliberately crafted race to the bottom specifically designed to include the migrant component of the workforce in its political economy, revealing a model of labour entrapment with little chance of escape. The recruitment policies of managers (as in the case of FRC and UberEats) as well as the informal circuits of illicit labour intermediation (such as Uber's fleets) seem in fact designed specifically to differentially and predatorily include the migrant portion of the workforce in platforms. But more than a negative spillover effect, the phenomenon of digital *caporalato* is the consequence of the same organisational design that structures platform work. As also argued, for instance, by the Italian Commission on gangmasterism, the evanescent figure of the employer in platform work constitutes a favourable opportunity for the emergence of these phenomena of labour exploitation. The political need to stop the unbridled use of forms of independent subcontracting is therefore an issue that is not only related to the labour protections won through decades of struggle and progress, but also to the need to stop forms of racism that operate on the basis of a second-class labour market built specifically for migrant workers.

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Delivering in the Lagoon. Critical Reflections on the Flexibility of Platformised Food Delivery in Venice

Giorgio Pirina 

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the gig economy has emerged as a transformative force in urban labour markets, driven by digital platforms that promise flexibility and autonomy for workers. The concept of “uberisation”, which involves breaking down work into small, discrete tasks using digital platforms, has emerged in this context. This paper investigates the intricate dynamics of gig work, focusing on the experiences of migrant students employed as walkers for food delivery services like Glovo in Venice, Italy. Central to this exploration are the concepts of “algochronos” and “binding-flexibility”, which together illuminate the nuanced realities of algorithmically managed work. The notion of algochronos integrates

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F. Della Puppa et al. (eds.), *Migrant Labour in the Gig Economy*, Dynamics of Virtual Work,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-91262-7_4

algorithmic management with the temporal aspects of gig work, highlighting how digital platforms exert control over workers' schedules, tasks and performance metrics. This concept draws on Thompson's (1967) reflections on time and work discipline, Lefebvrian's rhythmanalysis (2004), as well as contemporary studies on the impact of algorithmic management on labour practices.

Parallel to this, the concept of binding-flexibility examines the dual nature of flexibility in gig work. While platforms like Glovo advertise the freedom to choose work hours and manage schedules, underlying constraints—imposed by algorithms, market demands, and regulatory frameworks—limit this flexibility. Migrant students, in particular, encounter additional layers of restriction due to visa regulations and language barriers, which funnel them into specific types of gig work with stringent operational conditions.

Building on the wider discussion about precarity in the gig work, this article delves into the working conditions and daily routines of migrants' workers in the food delivery via apps in Venice. In the context of Venice, the entanglement of binding-flexibility and algochronos captures the unique challenges faced by walkers navigating the city's complex urban environment, where geolocation systems often falter, and the physical landscape complicates efficient delivery routes. This assertion is corroborated by the analysis of empirical data, which reveals a close intertwining between the organisation of daily activities, job performance, academic pursuits, and the acquisition of Italian language skills. In addition, when examining the relationship between the work and living conditions of migrants in the urban gig economy, it is imperative to consider the legal and regulatory frameworks that shape these arrangements. Such factors may include labour laws that facilitate non-traditional employment arrangements. Temporality and *rhythms* (Lefebvre, 2004) are crucial aspects, as couriers must be constantly on time (and online) to ensure the best order assignments. Regarding migrant labour, it is also necessary to consider another temporality: the residence permit, which, for example, determines how much time migrants can work and can exacerbate their vulnerability or restrict their opportunities.

Venice constitutes a novel and compelling subject for the investigation of food delivery work, owing to its bifurcation between the mainland, consisting of Mestre and Marghera with a conventional urban framework, and the historic centre, where mobility is restricted to pedestrian. This unique urban configuration profoundly impacts the execution of

food delivery work. Consequently, delivery workers in this context are designated as “walkers” and “runners”, rather than riders.

The findings presented here stem from a qualitative research conducted between January and June 2022. The empirical data were collected with a participant observation as *walker*, supported by 12 semi-structured interviews with couriers, and several informal conversations.

2 GIG WORK AS A NEW STEP OF THE CASUALISATION OF LABOUR

The de-qualification, degradation, fragmentation, and casualisation of labour are not unique to the platform economy but rather have been present throughout the evolution of the capitalist labour process, with acceleration during its neoliberal phase. It is now recognised that the term “gig” did not originate with the platform economy but rather in a sector characterised by occasional work performance and connotations of creativity, particularly in the music industry (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). The process of impoverishment of labour has been reinforced by regulatory frameworks promoting the proliferation of contractual typologies and job relationships that have allowed for the spread of temporary work. This is due to the widening of the modalities of labour supply and the reduction of labour costs by enterprises (Kalleberg, 2009), making temporary staffing an infrastructural element of the job market (Peck & Theodore, 2012). In the academic literature, there is now a consensus on defining precarious employment as the result of the loss of work or the fear of losing it, in which there is a shortage of alternative employment in the market, with the risk of losing acquired skills (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2014). One of the principal consequences of this phenomenon is an increase in insecurity, instability, and economic inequalities.

A substantial body of literature has sought to elucidate the factors motivating temporary workers to work as hard as they do. At least three reasons have been identified: consensus, coercion, and surveillance (Kojima, 2015). Buroway (1979) was one of the first scholars to delve deeper into this topic, identifying external incentives that motivate individuals to produce more. The pressure exerted by management on workers to be more productive, for example, using piecework, is resisted by workers who adopt game mechanisms to obtain economic and cultural rewards. These gamification dynamics also form the basis of platform work. Buroway (1979) framed these dynamics as creative agency, due to

the conscious choice of the workers. Other motivations are coercive and surveillance-related, related to management's power to exert a form of (in)direct control over workers, where the fear of dismissal and unemployment comes into play. At the root of these motivations is the power asymmetry between worker and employer, linked to entrance surveillance, i.e. the evaluation of the worker's (still potential) profile and work performance, which induces workers to self-discipline and work hard (Kojima, 2015).

The aforementioned dynamics apply to platform work, with different nuances due to algorithmic management, increased isolation, and the nature of the workplace. The core narrative of platform economy firms involves the entanglement of flexibility and autonomy of the workers, and a more horizontal organisational model. This narrative is informed by the self-entrepreneurial view and the individual capacity to succeed. However, the literature on labour process theory applied to gig work has debunked this narrative by analysing the concrete dynamics of this work and the lived experiences of the workers. It has been foregrounded how the algorithmic management of digital labour platforms, under a techno-solutionist umbrella, increases the polarisation of power between labour and capital, in favour of the latter, and tends to reduce the workers' room for agency. This polarisation is achieved through an asymmetrical distribution of information (Rosenblat, 2018; Tassinari & Maccarone, 2020) and by black-boxing the algorithm.

It is widely agreed that the "misrecognition of digital labour plays a crucial role in the platform business model, making labour cheaper, exiting traditional IR systems, and managing a wide workforce that operates with high levels of turnover. By using self-employment, platforms avoid the recognition of social rights associated with wage labour" (Quondamatteo & Marrone, 2023, p. 257). The (mis)classification of workers as self-employed or independent contractors instead of employees cannot be separated from the algorithmic management of work on-demand via apps, as it allows digital platforms to disguise the de facto employment relationship by discharging digital platforms from employment responsibilities. In this regard, "Algorithmic management and worker (mis)classification are therefore key to making the platform workforce cheap, precarious and interchangeable – and therefore, 'on-demand'" (Gebrial, 2022, p. 5).

This organisation aims to make an increasing share of the "relative surplus population" (*Ivi*) disposable on-demand in a technocratic way.

This group includes *peripheral workers*, as defined by Castel (2003), who lack sufficient cultural and economic capital and are therefore more vulnerable and precarious, including women, elders, and migrant people. In line with platform urbanism scholars, the power of digital platforms derives from the “strategic deployment of ‘conjunctural geographies’ – a way of being simultaneously embedded and disembedded from the space-times they mediate. These geographies ultimately allow platforms to concentrate and exert power” (Graham, 2020, p. 454). This means that their place of operation may differ from their fiscal headquarters and, together with the rhetoric of being mere technology companies, the conjunctural geography provides digital platforms with significant room for manoeuvre across normative frameworks. Yet, digital platforms do not move in a flat space; they have to deal with the *frictions* (Tsing, 2004) of the local socio-institutional arrangements.

3 MIGRANT GIG WORK(FORCE)

The general trend briefly outlined above should be tied with the dynamics involving migrant workforce. Some scholars have tied the general dynamics of racialisation in capitalism in the platform economy’s rationale, claiming that worker (mis)classification is a racial process (Gebrial, 2022). It is now recognised the co-constitutive relationship between urban gig economy and migrants (Abkhezr & McMahon, 2022; Altenried, 2021; Piasna et al., 2022; van Doorn, 2023). The nexus between migrant workers and low-skilled platform-based work is underscored by the control exerted by capitalist mechanisms over the migratory workforce. As pointed out by van Doorn, the gig economy become «active ‘infrastructural’ agents in the reconstitution of labour relations and the nature of work» (2023, p. 902). Indeed, digital platforms function as pivotal infrastructures, assimilating migrant work through stratified and racialised modalities, thereby relegating them to low-wage labour markets (Orth, 2023; van Doorn & Vijay, 2021).

A major explicatory factor of the intersection between migrants and gig work is linked to the low entry-barrier of the latter. For example, the literature on the relationship between temporal borders and border regimes has emphasised how temporary residence permits punctuate migrants’ experiences and how they contribute to the momentary inclusion of migrant work in capital’s productive structure. This punctuated temporality «differentiates temporary migrants from migrants with continuous

permits and even more so from nondeportable citizens» (Maury, 2020, p. 101). The topic of temporality and visa/residence permits is crucial also on the grounds that «temporary migrant workers provide the lion's share of the labour power in the platform economy across the world» (Baratt et al., 2020; Lata et al., 2023, p. 3). Moreover, precarious migrants may be undocumented, vulnerable or forced (Nedelcu & Soysüren, 2022), and they can use self-employment or independent contractor work relationships to circumvent visa or residence permit restrictions (Abkhezr & McMahon, 2022; Lata et al., 2023). In this context, Animento (2024), gig work reduces the entry barriers of the local (urban) market, making migration smoother, affording migrant workers immediate engagement and a supplementary income, notwithstanding their constrained social assimilation and paucity of social capital (Animento, 2024; Saucedo, 2018; van Doorn et al., 2023; van Doorn & Vijay, 2021). Evidently, the allure of platform employment emanates from its formal work flexibility, minimal linguistic and bureaucratic impediments, and expeditious selection protocols *vis-à-vis* alternative sectors.

Against this background should be considered the mobility of extra Eu student. More specifically, the temporary student permit represents «an extension of the global border and visa regime and focuses on the temporal effects rooted in the student permit that materialise in the student-migrants' everyday lives» (*Ivi*, p. 102). Visa or residence permits not only limit the time one can spend in a particular territorial entity, but also limit one's opportunities to find a job.

4 FROM THE "MYTHICAL AUTONOMY" TO A "BINDING-FLEXIBILITY"

The literature has problematised «the on-screen representation of the perfect meeting of supply and demand through the platform (...) focusing on the material practices through which goods are constituted via contingent arrangements of buyer and seller» (Richardson, 2020, p. 620). According to this research, putting the spotlight on the material practices of the marketisation allows to foreground «the algorithm's role in building contingency by putting specific demands on space and time, which paradoxically allow for and indeed enable flexibility» (*Ibid.*). This arrangement, which encompasses a variety of contingent calculations that couriers need to do in relation to the algorithm's decision-making process, has been frame as *coercive flexibility* (*Ivi*).

Against this background, we put forth the concept of “binding-flexibility” as an alternative to “coercive flexibility”. The latter risks overshadowing the subjectivity of workers in the decision-making process. In accordance with Burawoy (1979), contemporary management is dedicated to achieving consensus among workers to enhance productivity using gamification, rather than resorting to coercive measures. This condition appears to be well-suited to addressing the app-based food delivery sector, particularly in consideration of the “illusion of choice” that algorithmic management provides in the performance of the job. In other words, the range of choices available to couriers is constrained by (bound to) the possibilities offered by the digital platform. Furthermore, the term “binding” allows for a more comprehensive and diverse range of elements to be included in the analysis. While the term coercive flexibility effectively identifies the concrete forms of app-based food delivery work and the asymmetrical power relationships between the actors involved, binding-flexibility helps binding together aspects that, at first glance, appear to be unrelated to food delivery work and couriers’ decision-making processes.

However, gig workers can use *tactics* to partially reduce the digital platforms’ disciplinary control, which involve trade-offs: «Temporal trade-offs help the workers make time better fit their needs and to construct meanings around their temporality without posing structural challenges to the dominant temporal order» (Chen & Sun, 2020, p. 1564).

The concept of “binding-flexibility” can be understood in relation to the *idealistic discourse* of the sharing economy (Schor, 2020), that is, the narrative promoted by digital platforms regarding horizontal organisational relationships and the possibility of working as a self-entrepreneur, according to a *mythical autonomy* (Lata et al., 2023). The categorisation of workers as either *supplementary earners* or *platform-dependent earners* (Schor, 2020) is useful to comprehend the concept of binding-flexibility as well. The former refers to those who embrace the idealistic discourse because they are not directly dependent on the activities associated with it and are more satisfied by this “independence”. The latter group, on the other hand, derives most of their earnings from the sharing economy and is subject to the performance pressure resulting from rankings and the need to constantly search for tasks to perform. Additionally, there are those who fall somewhere in between these two groups. Besides, a full deployment of binding-flexibility can be reached tying it to the concept of “sticky labour”, as it emphasises the subjugation of the workers to the digital platforms’ managerial model of control (Sun et al., 2021). This

encompasses the constant monitoring of workers through data produced while being logged and online with the smartphone, the induced necessity to work in the so-called diamond hours.

5 THE PLATFORMISED FOOD DELIVERY IN VENICE

The City of Venice comprises three main areas, with a population of over 253.000 residents: the coastal area, the mainland (which includes Marghera and Mestre), and the old town, which is recognised worldwide as the historical, political, administrative, cultural, and symbolic heart of the city. The mainland is the most populated area, with almost 177.000 residents and has a lower cost of living than the old town. According to the statistical office of the Municipality,¹ in 2023 the City of Venice hosts 40.777 immigrants, distributed as follows: 34.611 in the mainland, 4.670 in the old town, and 1.489 in the coastal area. Since 2002, the proportion of migrants in the total population has increased from 2.5% to 16%, with a peak of incidence in Mestre (26.4%) and Marghera (27.5%).² Previous research (Cillo & Perocco, 2016; Fabrucci & Della Puppa, 2022; Iannuzzi, 2023) suggests that the attractiveness of Venice for migrants is linked to its complex economic and productive fabric, which revolves around two main industries: tourism and shipbuilding, although the latter has been facing a decline. Both tourism and shipbuilding, as well as construction industry, attract contingent and just-in-time workforce employed with a-typical labour contract. However, while both these sectors have unstable working conditions, on the other hand, they can be attractive to vulnerable workers, such as migrant workers who experience difficulties in entering the labour market. In this regard, there are similarities with food delivery platform work.

These data, together with the urban peculiarities of the old town where the mobility is allowed only by foot and by boat, explain why the food delivery sector landed in the mainland and only recently, more precisely in 2021 during the lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in the historical city.

¹ <https://www.comune.venezia.it/it/content/statistica-statistiche-popolazione-0>. Accessed: 06/04/2024.

² <https://www.ripensarevenezia.it/mercato-lavoro-crescita-stranieri-rischio-zonizzazi-one/>. Accessed: 06/04/2024.

The app-based food delivery work in Venice is an emblematic case of *errand economy*, that is «the process of transforming all workers, regardless of skill level, into people who do the footwork, gruntwork, legwork, and odd jobs under a newly formed working regime» (Demir, 2024). The main traits that characterised the food delivery in Venice and distinguish it from other case are two. One, immediately visible, is that couriers in the old town are “walker” rather than rider. This is due to the specific conditions of this part of the city, where the mobility is allowed only by foot and by boat. The uniqueness of Venice old town is also reflected in the geolocalisation system such as Google Maps, which may not work properly in some cases as it is designed for standard urban settings. Walker working conditions may be inconvenienced by the mismatch between the assigned orders and the location of collection and delivery points, reflecting an element of uncertainty. Although kilometres travelled are between the variables considered by the Glovo’ algorithm for remuneration, there are sometimes discrepancies between the route length indicated by the app and the actual distance travelled. For instance, this issue arises from the assumption made by Google Maps that the “vaporetto” (the water bus service) will be used to cross the Grand Canal. This is an issue because Glovo specifies that the kilometres multiplier is based on the shortest route recommended by Maps. Therefore, if a longer route is taken, the payment will not reflect this change. Additionally, tourists also use Google Maps, which can cause walkers to be slowed down by the tourist traffic crowding the calli in the historic centre.

The second characteristic is the contrived distinction operated by Glovo between the mainland and the old town, so that walkers can’t work with the same profile as rider. As a result, couriers who live in the mainland and work in the historic centre must make an unpaid commute, as they are moving between two different cities. This has important impacts. On weekdays, walkers typically work during the “diamond hours” from 6 to 11 pm, as well as during the morning and lunch slots from 11 am to 3 pm. During the first four months after Glovo entered the old town urban market, walkers were guaranteed a payment of 7 euros per hour as per the National Collective Labour Agreement of the category (CCNL Rider). This had a positive impact on their working experience as their average earnings were not solely dependent on piecework.

As the next paragraphs will show, this specific arrangement of app-based food delivery work, far from guaranteeing complete autonomy to the couriers, results in a “binding-flexibility”.

(Apparent) Flexibility: A Recurring Theme in Walkers' Narratives

Flexibility emerged as a recurring theme in the narratives of interviewees regarding their job:

My feeling now is only studying and working. I only have morning classes from Monday to Thursday. I decided to study and doing other stuff from morning until afternoon and in the evening I always work from 6 pm until 10 pm. Then, in the weekend I also take afternoon hours for work. I move to the historic centre by tram or bus, and it takes around 20 minutes (one way). It is not a problem (Walker Ari).

In some cases, the job provided an opportunity to disconnect from academic responsibilities and explore Venice. As Ari noted, «I appreciate the flexibility of this job. I can schedule and cancel hours at my convenience; if I am not feeling well or in the mood to work, I simply cancel my slots. Walking around this beautiful city is enjoyable and refreshing». In other cases, health benefits were emphasised: «I sought this type of job because it fits into my spare time. Walking around Venice is healthy, and I am losing weight while exploring different places» (student-walker Gul).

Despite these positive aspects, it is essential to consider the formal restrictions influencing migrants to work as walkers. These constraints arise from various administrative factors, including EU and national migration policies that restrict mobility, thus making migrants more vulnerable.

Besides, proficiency in Italian was a pivotal factor in the decision to become a walker. For instance. For example,

Honestly, if I was in my country, I wouldn't do this kind of job (courier). But I don't know Italian and it is important to know it if you want to work. In relation to my current job (waiter in a pub), earning is more in my current job and with Glovo sometimes you can't work (for example depending on the weather) and sometimes is not easy to find pick-up point or destination. I choose to move to another work for earning, because everyday I know I have a specific amount of earning, but in Glovo you don't know. So, I change job because of the certainty of gain. For example, it doesn't depend on weather, or the days, or not just walking. Glovo doesn't have the certainty of customers for every day (Walker Ham).

The language barrier limits entry into the local labour market, making multinational digital platforms like Glovo more attractive. This limitation is reinforced by local platform providers, such as Cocaixpress, which

require proficiency in Italian. One Cocaexpress owner stated, “The only barrier is for people who don’t speak Italian, due to internal logistical reasons, as we do not have an English application form” (Cocaexpress owner 2). Recognising this gap, Cocaexpress initiated a language project:

since not speaking Italian makes it impossible [to work] we have set up the “English project”, which is a phrasebook that they should study and then come here and talk to us to see if they can understand the minimum needed to do the job. So, they commit to coming once a week to our space and using Italian to show us that they are serious and that they are interested in immersing themselves in the local community, becoming part of our group (Cocaexpress’ owner 1).

Gul highlighted the advantages of Glovo’s inclusive language policy: «I applied to Glovo because I can use English and my limited Italian. They understand me despite my mistakes, which is why I prefer Glovo over Cocaexpress». However, this inclusiveness comes with a double-edged sword. Glovo’s algorithmic management can discriminate based on performance scores and the internal logic of the algorithm. Yet, its automated procedures and user-friendly interface, aligned with the *predatory inclusion* logic (McMillan Cottom, 2020), do not explicitly exclude vulnerable migrants who lack Italian proficiency or proper documentation.

The dual roles of students and walkers shape their schedules significantly. The following excerpt illustrates this:

I wake up in the morning and I go for classes: usually I have four or three days of classes during the week and most of my classes are in San Giobbe campus. Then I go to the “mensa” because I am a scholarship student, so I eat food there, then I go back home in Mestre like around 12/13 to take my bag and I come back to Venice by bus, and I start working until 15 (more or less two hours). Then I go back home and sometimes I go the library in the Mestre centro to study until the evening, when I go to my house to arrange stuff and cooking something. Then more or less at 18 I pick up my Glovo bag and I move again to Venice to work from 19 until 21 (sometimes 22) and I finished my work. So, this is my routine (student-walker Sha).

Commuting is a crucial aspect of the binding-flexibility, as Glovo doesn’t consider Venice as unique entity, but the algorithm divides it between Mestre and Marghera (the mainland) and the old city. So, couriers cannot use the same Glovo profile across these regions, which is a significant constraint, especially since all the migrant walkers interviewed

live on the mainland. This formal division imposed by Glovo strictly influences the walkers' organisation. For example, «I log-in in Marghera 30 minutes before the slot begin, I have to take a bus to go to the historic centre. I have to be there before the slot starts. It is important because if you come late and you can't get an order, the order is reassigned and if you reassign order to much time, you receive [pay] adjustment» (student-walker Aza).

Things changed after the elimination of the hourly guaranteed payment:

it used to be very good in Mestre, but the number of riders exponentially increased in Mestre since last two months. Then Glovo started its operations in Venice and people was earning a good amount of money because of the hourly guaranteed payment whether you get order or not, but now is getting a bit of problem... It was good in Venice, but it's no good now because Glovo quitted the guaranteed payment and there are not orders especially in the morning hours (student-walker Sha).

The binding-flexibility mechanism is particularly evident during "diamond hours", peak demand periods on the weekends. These hours are non-negotiable, and opting out results in reduced work slots and performance ratings. As one interviewee explained, «Slot management restricts working according to personal schedules. Avoiding weekend work, even for rest, reduces slot availability» (Student-Walker Alh). This condition has been perceived as stressful by some student-walker, especially in initial phase:

I find the initial phase stressful because of the need to constantly monitor the app for slot availability. However, once accustomed to the weekly slot selection process, the stress diminishes. Nonetheless, missing out on slots translates to missed opportunities for orders, and absence during weekends leads to a decline in performance ratings (student-walker Aza).

Despite this condition, Aza remarked on the facilitative aspect of Glovo in enabling a balance between work and study commitments, contrasting with the rigidity of fixed-hour jobs where such balance would be more challenging to attain.

At the beginning, receiving work tools (the bag, powerbank, etc.) free of charge and a 7-euro guaranteed hourly wage were a positive factor for walkers for two reasons: first, the initial cost of the tools was not passed onto them; second, thanks to the minimum hourly wage, workers were less exposed to the performance logic of piecework. The elimination of

the guaranteed payment, however, increased the reliance on piecework, reducing earnings and autonomy. As Aza noted, «With the 7-euro hourly rate, I earned 1.000 euros monthly by working five hours daily. Now, I earn a maximum of 700 euros». Another student-walker expressed dissatisfaction: «We sacrifice our social lives, missing out on time with friends and communal meals. Arriving home late means eating alone, which is a significant drawback. Dedication to Glovo without adequate financial return and missing out on social activities makes the job less worthwhile» (Student-Walker Sha).

“Algochronos”: A Hypothesis

To fully grasp the binding-flexibility in the app-based food delivery a step further is needed, including in the analysis a variety of elements beyond the labour process *strictu* sensu. In this regard, the *rhythmanalysis* (Lefebvre, 2004) is insightful approach. As a matter of fact, the analysis of empirical data outlines what can be termed “algochronos”. This concept refers to the intricate interplay between algorithmic management and temporal aspects of gig work, particularly in the context of food delivery services like Glovo in Venice. Algochronos blends the terms algorithm and *chronos* (Greek for time), reflecting how algorithmic systems shape and dictate the temporal organisation of gig workers’ lives. Algochronos is informed by three key elements:

- algorithmic time management: refers to how digital platforms (like glovo) use algorithms to manage and allocate work schedules, tasks, and performance metrics. This includes determining peak hours, assigning orders, and evaluating worker performance.
- temporal boundaries and constraints: highlights the constraints imposed by algorithmic management on the personal time and flexibility of gig workers. This includes mandatory peak hours (like “diamond hours”), inflexible scheduling, and the impact on work-life balance.
- impact on everyday life: describes how algorithmic decisions affect the daily routines and activities of gig workers, such as commuting patterns, availability for work slots, and overall work-life integration.

Algochronos takes inspiration from concepts such as *algorhythmic city* (Zampoukos et al., 2024), which shed light on the tension between the indispensable role of gig workers in the city infrastructure and the reduced possibilities to reproduce themselves. It also dialogues with the *temporal borders* notion as used by scholars such as Olivia Maury and colleagues (2024), highlighting the administrative dimension of time constraints inscribed in migrants' permits that strictly channel their everyday life, what they can (not) do, which kind of job, etc. While considering the aforementioned insights, the term algochronos, echoing Thompson's reflection on time and work discipline (1967) focuses more on the algorithmic time and managerial model as a tool to discipline gig workers (in this case, couriers), that contribute to punctuate, directly and indirectly, their everyday lives.

In the case of Venice's app-based food delivery, algochronos illuminates how the unique urban and logistical challenges (e.g. navigating canals, specific geolocation issues, non-standard urban configurations, overcrowding, etc.) intersect with algorithmic management, which is blind with regard to this contextual. This intersection often leads to discrepancies in workload distribution, pay calculations, and worker evaluations based on factors beyond their control (e.g. technical glitches in navigation systems) overcrowding. These contingencies adversely impact the organisation of workers' lives, consequently disrupting the balance between work and personal life.

Technical contingencies, which are beyond the control of the walker, manifest during the execution of the job. These contingencies are associated with two primary aspects of algorithmic management: first, the contingencies and fallibility of applications and geolocation systems, and second, the order allocation mechanism that operates along the trajectory from the pick-up point to the delivery destination. In certain instances, geolocation systems such as Google Maps have proven inadequate for the unique urban context of Venice. This inadequacy arises due to the city's specific urban and architectural characteristics, which diverge from the "standard" urban model for which geolocation systems are designed. These technical contingencies adversely affect workers in ways that are not reflective of their performance. For example, the ratings of walker are influenced by customer evaluations, where delays in delivery can result in negative assessments. Furthermore, the algorithmic management of remuneration considers the distance travelled. However, the distance indicated by the application may be underestimated as it does not precisely

locate the exact destination. Additionally, the application often considers the use of the waterbus to traverse the canals, such as the “Grand Canal”. Nevertheless, it is improbable that a walker would opt to take the waterbus, as it does not significantly reduce travel time due to waiting times for the vehicle and queues. Consequently, they may take longer routes than those indicated, without receiving appropriate remuneration. This discrepancy arises because remuneration is based on map calculations that consider only the shortest route marked by the maps, as expressly stated in the Glovo application.

Although binding-flexibility potentially affects all platform workers, migrants face additional burdens due to the *temporal borders* imposed by visa and residence permits. As Gul. stated, «[with my student visa] I can’t do any work I like, so Glovo is the best job for students». As a matter of fact, in Italy residence permits for studying impose a weekly working limit of 20 hours for standard employment. The binding aspect of the student visa appeared also within the food delivery sector, channelling the working possibility of extra-EU students: «Deliveroo doesn’t give students an account because I am not from Italy. I am a resident in Pakistan, and my “permesso di soggiorno” is only for “studio”. Glovo is the only company that gives students an account and offers the chance to work. Deliveroo, on the other hand, prefers people who have a “permesso di soggiorno per lavoro”. This is why I applied for Glovo, and they accepted me» (student-walker Sha). This was a factor that pushed many students to work as walker in the old town, instead of in the mainland.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The case study of Venice’s old town served as a unique focal point for an in-depth examination of the digitalised food delivery service, particularly as it has recently entered this part of the city with distinct features, notably the use of walkers or runners instead of riders. While platform work presents an opportunity for marginalised individuals and migrants to supplement their income due to its low entry barriers, closer scrutiny reveals several limitations on the autonomy of walkers in managing their work and personal schedules. This tension arises from several factors: the absence of a free log-in option, the formal segregation imposed by Glovo between the mainland and the historic centre, which restricts walkers from working as riders, the elimination of the guaranteed payment of 7 euros per hour, and the language barrier in Italian. This has led to varied

outcomes concerning the perceived flexibility of the work, leaning more towards a notion of “binding-flexibility”.

The combined status of being both a student and a migrant carried significant formal and practical consequences. Due to restrictions imposed by their student residence permits, they were only permitted to engage in occasional work, with strict limits on their weekly working hours. Consequently, they turned to digital platforms like Glovo, which offered low barriers to entry, as the most expedient means of supplementing their income. Despite the prevalent notion of flexibility associated with app-based food delivery jobs, our research uncovered certain inflexibilities. For instance, Glovo couriers registered as walkers in the historic centre were prohibited from working as riders in the mainland of Venice. This circumstance significantly impacted the lives of those couriers compelled to operate solely in the historic centre, forcing them to account for the (uncompensated) time spent commuting to work and reshaping their daily routines accordingly. Some of the student-walkers we interviewed emphasised that their primary focus was on studying, yet they also highlighted the challenges of striking a balance between their academic commitments and the imperative for additional income.

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Migrant Gig Workers of India's Consumerist Cities: The Contradictions of Platform Economy and Delivery Work in Neoliberal India

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1 INTRODUCTION

The world today that human beings inhabit is one that has grown to accept urbanism as a distinct way of life. Urbanism has triumphed over all other pre-existing ways of life, with urban spaces becoming the representative forms of the capitalist way of life in most societies. In India as well—a country historically known for harbouring a multitude of social and financial shortages (Sau, 1984)—urban spaces have come to be deemed as one of the most important markers and drivers of progress and development along with technology (Lefebvre, 1991; Stewart, 1977). The interconnectedness of space, nature and capitalist production and

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exchange relations produces the contemporary fabric of capitalist development (Smith, 2008). Cities, in this context in India, are not only important economic drivers but are also critical to the sustenance of the country's international commitments to issues such as sustainability, climate change and social justice (NITI Aayog, 2021). Under neoliberalism, these issues are related to factors such as economic development, environmental policies and other allied services in the urban spaces which are mostly mediated through the market (Brenner & Theodore, 2005) within the much discussed Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) guided by platform-based digital technologies providing easier access to urban spaces for both the workers and service providers (de Ruyter et al., 2018).

The 4IR is mostly sustained by urban spaces and gig work is an important part of this new form of economic restructuring. Approximately, around 56 per cent new jobs in the Indian market are being created within the gig economy.¹ These new jobs mostly depend upon mediation performed by the market that encourages open employment relations and which tend to (or desire to) replace administrative rules and social policies with market dynamics, job outcomes and profit-oriented policies (Kalleberg, 2011). In a country such as India, the basic challenge in terms of workforce creation that confronts the economy is the creation of a skilled workforce, which can cater to the demands placed by the market amidst such socio-economic changes.² At a national level, this becomes extremely difficult in a country such as India, which is plagued by extreme levels of uneven geographical development, where '[most] of India's economic development in the past four decades has come from the southern and western states ... which have become hubs for manufacturing and high-tech industries [while] the heartland states ... have shown little sign of catching up'.³ Unequal public spending on some regions—such as Bihar—have been the key cause of such a disparity, which has been

¹ See Sarkar, K. (2021). Why UK Supreme Court's Uber Driver Verdict Can Impact Indian Gig Workers. *The Leaflet*, March 10, <https://theleaflet.in/why-uk-supreme-courts-uber-driver-verdict-can-impact-indian-gig-workers/> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

² See Narayan, K. (2024). A Budget solution to India's skilled workforce challenge: Unleash the Gig contingent. *The Economic Times*, January 21, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/a-budget-solution-to-indias-skilled-workforce-challenge-unleash-the-gig-contingent/articleshow/107027315.cms> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

³ See Para 5 of The Economist. (2022). India's regional inequality could be politically explosive. October 27. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/10/27/indias-regional-inequality-could-be-politically-explosive> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

the major driving force behind unequal development in India (De Haan, 1997; Prasad, 1988).

Uneven geographical development is an essential part of capitalist development, as Harvey (2006) had argued, which produces the avenues of spatial exploitation that capitalism can use for its own benefits. The growth of uneven development has an intrinsic connection with the rise of gentrification as a social ideology in the society, which gets reflected within the local and regional levels (Smith, 1982). Gentrification under contemporary capitalism, as Stein (2019) shows, has become an important part of capitalist reimagination of urban spaces based on the exclusion—either materially or ideologically or both—of the marginalised from these spaces. This manifests itself in the way different services and commodities are provided to the urban populace of the country, including certain services deemed essential for sustenance, which are based on the exploitation of the working class driving them towards states of heightened precarity and exclusion. This occurs despite certain platform workers being accorded the status of essential workers (de Neve et al., 2023). Under contemporary capitalism, the platform-based gig economy has come to occupy an important position in this regard. The gig economy refers to the economic structure created out of the usage of digital platforms and technology in certain jobs (Woodcock & Graham, 2019).

The gig economy that has grown through the platforms has reshaped cities and the socio-economic relations of production therein (Huws, 2014). The growth of urban infrastructures globally has resulted in a change in the dynamics of global labour processes in such a way that labouring has become synonymous with high productivity, flexibility and a sense of 'alienated' autonomy for the workers. Most of these changes have come in the wake of an increased presence of digital technologies in the urban spaces which have ushered in a new era of capitalist domination and networking in the society. The gig economy has emerged as a key term in most of the contemporary employment practices with it being practised increasingly in the domains of ride hailing (passenger transport), delivery work, services and freight transport. Taylor et al. (2017) define the gig workers to be those workers who use phones and digital applications—commonly known as platforms—to sell their labour power. That being said, it is also important to note, as Huws et al. (2016) have argued, that the gig economy does not survive purely through digital interactions and also requires significant physical interactions. These interactions are often managed through algorithmic management-based processes based on soft controlling structures gaining prominence within the labour process

(Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). It extends a company's customer management strategies in such a way that 'customer, rather than managers, are [...] the ones who must be pleased, whose orders must be followed, whose ideas, whims and desires appear to dictate how work is performed' (Fuller & Smith, 1991, p. 11). The growth of such structures has proved to be 'fatal' for migrant workers in the gig economy who remain the most easily accessible source of cheap labour power for the platforms in urban spaces across the globe (Alyanak et al., 2023; Kowalik et al., 2023). Migrant workers get attracted towards platform-based gig workers because they provide them with an easier access to urban spaces, quick and lesser bureaucratic gatekeeping (Altenried, 2024). At the same time, some workers also prefer working as gig workers because it gives them a sense of empowerment and social status that places them at a higher pedestal than other informal workers. This is despite the fact that working for platforms in India, as De Neve et al. (2023) argue, consists of working conditions very similar to the informal economy.

The preference for migrant workers for the platforms rests from the belief that migrant workers are usually more likely to accept precarious forms of employment often agreeing to work for lower wages than local workers (Altenried, 2024; Ness, 2023). India accounts for around 24 per cent of the global online gig workers.⁴ Around 25 per cent of the global workforce today work in the gig economy which is mostly based on the requirements focused on flexibility and a certain amount of locational autonomy (Watson et al., 2021). The development of technology and its associated devices and processes creates a condition where certain products become essential parts of the everyday ways of life for most people (Stewart, 1977). According to the NITI Aayog, there are a total of 7.7 million gig workers in India, who comprise around 1.5 per cent of the total workforce in the country and which is expected to grow to around 23.5 million by 2029–2030.⁵ The Oxford Internet Institute contrastingly argued that in 2018 itself, the total number of gig workers

⁴ See Raman, S., & Rizvi, S. (2021). Gender pay gap and occupational segregation have followed Indian women into gig economy. *Scroll*, January 12, <https://scroll.in/article/983727/gender-pay-gap-and-occupational-segregation-have-followed-indian-women-into-gig-economy> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

⁵ See Times of India. (2022). Gig workers in India to top 23 million by 2029–30: Niti Aayog. June 27. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/gig-workers-in-india-to-top-23-mn-by-29-30-niti-aayog/articleshow/92493751.cms> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

in India was around 15 million, far exceeding the estimates of the NITI Aayog.⁶ A large number of these workers work as delivery workers⁷ for various commodity provisioning platforms such as Amazon, Flipkart, Swiggy and Zomato.⁸ The growth of such delivery platforms globally—from 46 in 2010 to around 383 in 2020 as per the International Labour Organisation—⁹ has been constructed through the aggressive marketing, discounts and promotional techniques used by them that convert the services provided by them to an everyday practice rather than simply being lifestyle choices or a luxury for the middle class (Rani et al., 2022; Narayan, 2024).

Migrants have been an important part of the platforms focused on delivery of services and commodities because migrants help them in lowering the costs of production as most migrants remain willing to work under precarious conditions. However, the inclusion of migrants within the gig economy has complicated the analysis of gig workers in general in the country, most of whom already suffer from the lack of any socio-cultural and economic structures to fall back on.¹⁰ Migrants get attracted to the gig economy because the gig economy provides them with increased incomes, a break from traditional or routine jobs and often allows them to work flexibly (Alyanak et al., 2023). Most of these factors become extremely relevant to migrant gig workers because most of their native places suffer from massive underdevelopment. Underdevelopment can be said to be a situation where a reigning social system is unable to bear the cost of a decent standard of living (Sagasti, 1973). As a country,

⁶ See Raman and Rizvi *ibid*.

⁷ The chapter uses the term 'delivery workers' instead of the commonly used 'delivery partners' so as to highlight the working-class belongingness of these workers.

⁸ Courier and delivery companies such as DTDC, *Shiprocket*, and *XpressBees* also use gig workers, but in the current chapter, only those delivery workers working for platform-based retail or service companies offering direct delivery services have been considered.

⁹ See ILO. (2021). *World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work*. Geneva: International Labour Organisation. Available at: <http://onlinelabourobservatory.org/paper/ilo-weso-report-2021/> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

¹⁰ See Yasmin, S., & Bannerjee, P. (2023). *Gig Economy – The Indian Picture So Far*. KREA University, <https://ifmrlead.org/gig-economy-the-indian-picture-so-far/> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

India suffers from a massive underdevelopment, and some regions suffer from it more than others.¹¹ The ones that suffer the most become the sources of migrant workers for the developed areas. Certain key regions which have been fulfilling this role for Indian megacities can be said to have been the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Assam and other north-eastern states.¹²

The extremes of uneven development that characterise modern India have created the conditions under which urban spaces in India have been witnessing a large-scale migration of marginalised populace from the country's underdeveloped areas to the relatively more developed ones. Capitalism creates uneven development in such a way so that a constant supply of cheap and exploitable labour force can be rendered perennially available. For platforms, it becomes very important because uneven development creates the basis for rural-to-urban migration in India, which contributes to the normalisation of capitalist social processes within the gig economy despite the income of many gig workers suffering after Covid-19 pandemic, especially in the domain of delivery work where income has almost halved with increased job insecurity and high attrition rates.¹³ Immigrant working-class individuals continue to face the dual exploitation exerted upon them by capitalism both at the local level and at the global level because while their exploitation takes place concretely at the local level, the mechanisms devised for the purpose and the effects of the same are felt globally.¹⁴

¹¹ See The Economist. (2017). The gap between India's richer and poorer states is widening. September 02, <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2017/09/02/the-gap-between-indias-richer-and-poorer-states-is-widening> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

¹² See <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1941077> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

¹³ See Mittal, A., & Mishra, D. (2021). Food delivery workers protest 'exploitation' on Twitter; companies deny charges. *The Economic Times*, August 04, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/technology/food-delivery-workers-protest-exploitation-on-twitter-companies-deny-charges/articleshow/85016422.cms>. Also see Sakunia, S. (2021). Hands that deliver food are struggling to feed themselves. *The Leaflet*, August 27, <https://theleaflet.in/hands-that-deliver-food-are-struggling-to-feed-themselves/> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

¹⁴ It is important to understand that the platform economy remains entrenched within a web of global capital flows where change within one particular context has ramifications across the globe (Amorim & Moda, 2020).

Platforms have provided many of the smaller capitalists—who would otherwise have been characterised by a low potential for financial development in India (Sau, 1984)—with a sincere opportunity to become akin to global capitalists (De Neve et al., 2023). Despite platforms and the gig work associated with them being heralded as a major advancement in the domain of labour market advancements, gig workers are yet to be accorded an equal status as other workers. They remain outside the framework of labour protections and also suffer from issues pertaining to precarious employment and social discrimination.¹⁵ This is because the gig economy, in its entirety, is composed of relations of employment which are characterised by precarious payment models, unstable employment patterns and an exclusion from mainstream frameworks of social protection. Workers who work in the gig economy, especially if they are migrants to the city, suffer more from these issues because they are bereft of the socio-legal protections that administrative mechanisms provide in the country (Deb Roy, 2024b).

This chapter highlights the plight of such migrant gig workers in India focusing on those who work as delivery workers. The chapter outlines certain key aspects of the problems that migrant delivery workers face in their everyday lives in India's major urban centres. The qualitative data presented in the chapter was collected through fieldwork conducted in Delhi (including New Delhi), Bengaluru and Hyderabad from 2022 January until 2023 December. A total of 30 semi-structured interviews—10 in each city—had been conducted with migrant delivery workers with respondents being selected mainly through purposive and convenience sampling methods. The interviews were of 20–30 minutes duration and were mostly conducted in Hindi, Bengali and English. Out of the 30 interviewees, six were from Assam (three in Delhi, three in Bengaluru), eight from Bihar (two in Delhi, three in Bengaluru and three in Hyderabad), five from Uttar Pradesh (two in Delhi, two in Bengaluru, two in Hyderabad) nine from West Bengal (one in Delhi, two in Bengaluru, five in Hyderabad) and two from north-eastern states, one each from Manipur and Nagaland (both in Delhi). The chapter is divided into three sections.

¹⁵ See Sarkar, K. (2021). Why UK Supreme Court's Uber Driver Verdict Can Impact Indian Gig Workers. *The Leaflet*, March 10, <https://theleaflet.in/why-uk-supreme-courts-uber-driver-verdict-can-impact-indian-gig-workers/>. Also see Sakunia, S. (2021). Hands that deliver food are struggling to feed themselves. *The Leaflet*, August 27, <https://theleaflet.in/hands-that-deliver-food-are-struggling-to-feed-themselves/> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

The first section discusses the relationship between technological development and the migrant gig workers, while the second section discusses the effects of algorithmic management of gig workers. The third section discusses the question of migrant belongingness.

2 TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AND MIGRANT GIG WORKERS

The development of capitalism—from mercantile capitalism to industrial capitalism to informational capitalism—has always produced distinct forms of contradictions in the society, which have contributed to the concrete issues faced by the non-capitalist classes during any particular historical epoch. The platform economy—one of the major planks of contemporary capitalist accumulation—is usually composed of digital platforms which enable their users to share, lend or purchase certain goods or services with an increased access to labour markets (Kilhoffer et al., 2017). The development of platforms has led to a change within the nature of the public spaces and has also, as Huws (2020) argues, resulted in a change within the economic and social relations in the society. The newer kinds of management processes that have erupted with the growth of platforms require workers to be *logged in* all throughout the day to earn bringing in administrative processes focused on the mediating role that online platforms play (Huws, 2016a, 2016b). The growth of such structures of employment remains dictated by market dynamics and affect the structures that govern the market, including local administrative models (Huws, 2020), which has been seen as one of the key markers for determining the nature of urbanism in the society (Deb Roy, 2024b). The development and proliferation of online work cannot be analysed without taking into cognisance the relationship that they share with other broader structures that affect the socio-political and cultural fabric in place (Huws, 1984; Huws et al., 1990).

The growth of platform capitalism does not only change the economic fabric of the society but also changes the broader contours of social and political attitudes towards technology and development. The nature of labour market reflects these changes in the society, and the algorithmic management that is practised in platform-based services convert many of these platforms to electronic sweatshops suitable to exploit cheap labour power (Ferne & Metcalf, 1998). Most platforms have hastened the processes of primitive accumulation—the historical process of divorcing

the producer from the product and the means of production and subsistence (Marx, 1867/1976)—and have created the socio-economic circumstances where even within a highly exploitable domain such as gig work, migrant gig workers remain relatively more exploited than native gig workers (Kowalik et al., 2023). A migrant delivery worker from West Bengal who works mostly through 'Dunzo' in Bengaluru states:

The company does not discriminate, it is the local team leader and the other workers who do it. They sometimes intentionally make it difficult for us by creating blockages, sometimes they will just talk uselessly on the road, which delays the deliveries, or at times, they will just say that we have come here and are looting them and their land by earning more than them. Although I can attest for sure that we are earning the same amount, we have more expenses.

Many migrant workers struggle extensively to make entry into the gig economy. Take for example, the issue of getting vehicles. While most delivery workers in general make deliveries on rented vehicles, most migrant workers struggle to get a vehicle because they often do not have local documents or do not have sufficient money. Even if some of them have vehicles at home, as some of them informed, it is too expensive to transport it to their 'work-city'. However, such issues rarely get highlighted. The struggle between migrant workers and local workers on the point of employment is an old one, which goes back to the struggle between English and Irish workers during the times of Marx, and which is kept alive by the manipulation of ideological and popular discourses (Marx, 1870). The struggle between the two sections of the workforce mainly stems from the policies that always favour the developed regions' bourgeoisie more than the underdeveloped regions (Wilson, 2017). To do this, contemporary capitalism has come to rely increasingly on technology to extend its sphere of socio-economic and cultural influence. Technology is an important part of contemporary society. However, technology cannot be viewed as having an autonomous agency in its own right because its usage and the effects of those uses depend upon the dominant dispensation in the society and the trajectory of historical progress (Harvey, 1978).

The effects of science and technology under capitalism always remain restricted by the power that the ruling and powerful classes possess over the financially and socio-culturally deprived sections of the populace. The conditions of neoliberalism, characterised by a shrinking public sector and social welfare, bring forward a massive shift in social policy

which constantly neglects the needs and demands of the marginalised (Brenner & Theodore, 2005; Harvey, 2003). Delivery workers, often coming from marginalised social backgrounds, remain excluded from the mainstream labour markets and protections, the effects of which get accelerated because the practices within the platform economy have wide-ranging effects promoting extreme forms of work organisation (Huws, 2016a). Within such extreme changes, the issues faced by migrant workers become important because the situations faced by migrant workers in the gig economy provide a window into the extent of exploitation that resides within the totality of the gig economy. As Altenried argues:

Looking at the gig economy from the perspective of migrant labour also entails shifting the focus: From this perspective, low pay and precarity are nothing new or exclusive to digital platforms but have been the characterising conditions for migrant and racialized labour for centuries and the history of flexible and contingent labour are closely entwined with this history – and present – of mobile labour. Instead of addressing platforms only as innovative disruptors of standard employment, it becomes necessary to discuss how digital platforms are able to renew and reconfigure forms of contingent labour and how their important, new and specific digital qualities [...] interact with stratified labour markets. Such a perspective allows a contextualised analysis of gig economy platforms in labour markets constituted and stratified by differential migration regimes including multiple vectors such as citizenship, language, visas, or work permits. (Altenried, 2024, p. 1115).

In a highly competitive market-based society, the survival of capitalism requires an extensive production of profits which demands an extension of wage labour relationship (Smith, 1982). This entails within itself the production of space as a corollary of the capitalist production of nature itself which becomes evident within the various contemporary processes of gentrification (Smith, 2011). Gentrification has come to dictate the spatial choices that people make (Deb Roy, 2024a), which in turn drive the preferences for occupying particular spaces drives the residential and employment patterns in the society (Smith, 1982). These preferences in most hyper-urbanised spaces depend upon the labour power that gig workers perform, with coverage by platforms such as Swiggy and Uber becoming a key point for various kinds of extractive processes such as higher rents and more maintenance charges in the form of security and outsider-parking spaces in certain gated societies. Most of these factors are important parts of the discourse focused on smart

and global cities focused on the creation of simultaneously territorial and global processes of spatial accumulation (Sassen, 2005). The data-driven mechanism adopted in such spaces allows the inclusion of both native and migrant workers within the platform economy (Barns, 2020; Van Doorn & Vijay, 2024).

The smart city discourse is a critical inspiration for the development of platforms, because it encourages the conceptual formation of humanity, as Galloway (2017) argues, as an urban species where data-driven structures are used to render urban spaces as more controllable and knowable. It has become an important part of the discourse focused on technologically mediated urban spaces that have come to dominate contemporary forms of neoliberal urbanism (Hlongwa, 2020). With the end of the Second World War, the usage of technology globally proliferated with an increasing number of economies moving towards various forms of capitalist development that depend on the usage of technological artefacts for improving the efficiency of the services provided (Srnicek, 2017). Technology and its implications for the society cannot be neutral or analysed in isolation from the broader socio-economic and political questions that remain relevant or functional in the society. Despite being massively unequal in terms of its socio-economic and geographical distribution, the labour market based on technology has grown in parallel with the expanding usage of technological and digital transformative practices in the society (Huws, 2020). Most of these technological developments take place within specific historical, social and geographic contexts which determine their short-term and long-term effects. Under global neoliberal capitalism, technology has become a tool at the hands of capital to further capitalist accumulation processes. A key role in this regard has been played by various service and commodity-provisioning platforms such as Zomato, Swiggy, Amazon, Flipkart, Urban Company, ChefKart and the like.

The growth of platforms in India has occurred through a gradual dismantling of the traditional structures and massive disruptive mechanisms in the organisation of the means of production. In the context of digital platforms, the major global disruption was brought by the growth of Uber. Abílio (2017) has argued that the growth of Uber has resulted in a situation where the functioning within Uber had become the model for other platforms to follow as well, a major part of which was the standardisation of labouring processes and a constant suppression

of the diversity that works within these platform-based gig work structures (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018). The standardisation of the services that they offer becomes critical because standardisation becomes a critical requirement for the creation of streamlined urban spaces most commonly represented by the burgeoning fetish for smart cities. Standardisation becomes a process through which the accumulation of big data is accelerated which in turn produces an algorithmic governmentality in the society (Kitchin, 2017; Rouvroy et al., 2013). Algorithmic governmentality operates on the basis of standardisation and does not recognise the inequalities that exist subjectively within different working individuals such as the ability to communicate, or one's acquaintance with local roads. The implications of these issues are commonly faced by migrant gig workers in cities, as two migrant workers explain:

It is a 24 × 7 job with no holidays, unless you want to take it. But then nobody wants to take a holiday because once you do, you start getting lesser orders, and then the team leader also often makes you feel unwanted and will curse you with slangs. If you want to earn sufficiently, then you will have to work nights also. I get lot of new boys who come into the sector and say that they do not work nights. For them, I always say that they should not join only. Then there are issues concerning standardisation. We do not know the roads that well as a local worker, neither do we know the local language, so obviously we will need some more time to deliver. But neither the company nor the customer who are migrants themselves understand this.

We are the most important parts of all these hi-tech smart cities. But we ourselves do not get any protection. We are not even considered to be workers. They say we are partners, what partners, we are just disposable entities to them. One goes, hundreds will be queuing up, who are all evaluated equally although the system knows that everybody comes from different social conditions. I come from a village and do not know English, but then some customers and even the team leader do not understand this issue. Speak in broken Hindi, I can understand but I know only a few words of English.

Capitalism underlies, as Smith (2011) and Anderson (2020) argue, most of the processes related to social stratification and also desires to create a homogenised market for better profitability. While uneven development disrupts the homogenising logic of global capitalism (Prudham & Heynen, 2011), algorithmic management helps global capitalism to maintain its drive towards homogeneity that is a key part of capitalist

expansion (Anderson, 2020). Standardisation allows platforms to make better inroads into urban everyday lives because it emphasises reliability, uniqueness and in most cases, ubiquity (Marrone & Peterlongo, 2020; Van Doorn, 2019). The delivery workers fulfil a critical part of the urban infrastructure because they make it easier for the middle class to get access to commodities that make the urban spaces look enticing and promising to them (Banerjee, 2024). Platforms and the rapid growth that they have seen in recent times have changed the associated structures and dynamics of online ordering and servicing providing more convenience and avenues for expressing social privilege (Deb Roy, 2019). The eruption of dark kitchens and dark stores—created for facilitating last mile deliveries from parent restaurants and stores—¹⁶ has brought forward an entire ecosystem focused on catering to urban spaces possessing an upwardly mobile customer base (Huws, 2020).

The rise of algorithmic governmentality creates the ground for people familiar with technological usage to garner an increasing power in the society by controlling governmental mechanism and the state often aided by the private bodies. David Harvey (2005) argues that under neoliberalism, such an enmeshment of the State and the market becomes natural and often necessary with the former aiding the latter; and India was no exception to this general hypothesis (Bhambhri, 2016; Patnaik, 2007). The middle class, amidst these socio-political conditions, becomes one of the greatest assets of the market-based forces because Being middle class in India is related to the ability to consume certain cultural and material commodities in a particular way that exhibits the cultural and social capital that an individual possesses to become a part of 'the new middle-class modernity in urban India' (Ganguly-Scrase, 2022, p. 98). For the middle class, the experience that the platforms provide is an important part of their urban lifestyles, as a middle-class IT worker from Bengaluru states:

These platforms have made life so much easier for many like me. Three-four years ago, it was unthinkable that you could get something within ten fifteen minutes, but today it is so easy. I click and it is there. It is almost like magic. I feel like a king, sometimes.

¹⁶ See Hayward, T. (2019). "Dark kitchens" spell trouble for the restaurant trade. *Financial Times*, March 29, <https://www.ft.com/content/755ddc1c-50bc-11e9-8f44-fe4a86c48b33> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

Such conditions (and expectations) created by the platforms have had an important effect on the labour and employment relations (Zukerfeld, 2022), especially because of the destabilising effects that they have on the formal structures of employment (Huws et al., 2018). The delivery workers fulfil an essential requirement for the domination of the commodity form. Commodities, under capitalism, as Marx (1867/1976) had pointed out, have become the axis within which the society structures itself.¹⁷ Commodities and the ability to consume become the most important part of the middle class ontology that technologically mediated urban spaces create and propagate in the society (Deb Roy, 2021). For most of the middle class, the delivery workers thus play a critical role in providing a sense of belongingness within the urban space because belongingness within the urban space today gets constituted not only through one's ability to possess commodities but also through the processes in which one gets access to the commodities. This produces the ideal circumstances for the schema of expanded reproduction that contributes to the growth of capital accumulation in the society (Marx, 1885/1992, 1973/1993). Logged labour, comprising labour processes where individual skills are broken down into distinct and separate smaller tasks (or units of work), plays a key role in this process of deskilling (Huws, 2016a). One migrant worker from Assam, who was previously an agricultural worker, and now works as an Amazon delivery worker stated:

I used to work in my family's field. Came here to make a life and also thought that with so much technology, I will also get some work after leaning some skill, but after coming here I have realised that things are not so simple. I have been working as a delivery worker only, and now even have forgotten field work. It will take me months to readjust myself. Could not learn any new skills also. I also have a 10,000 rupees debt which I am finding difficult to repay.

Deskilling under capitalism has been an important part of the network of capitalist exploitation. It has been an instrumental force in the creation

¹⁷ Marx had argued that any commodity is '[an] external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference. Nor does it matter here how the thing satisfies man's needs, whether directly as a means of subsistence, i.e. an object of consumption, or indirectly as a means of production' (Marx 1867/1976, p. 125).

of seamless service mechanisms put forward by the platforms.¹⁸ Platforms use a diverse range of tactics to encourage a gradual deskilling of the workforce, whereby a greater task is divided into a multitude of smaller tasks which makes it difficult for workers to gain a control over the larger labour process (Huws, 2020). The growth of network enterprises and platforms that build on networks—both technological and human—have come to dominate the informational phase of capitalism, that characterises the modern phase of capitalism (Castells, 1996). Gig workers in this context provide services to a growing consumer base of informational goods as well as act as mediators of the service delivery systems (Zukerfeld, 2022). These gig workers have increasingly begun to be composed of migrant workers who have been constantly put under the growing financial and social duress that have come to characterise rural India. Rural-to-urban migration has been a key feature of capitalist development since the early 1990s in India. The growth of such migration has mostly rested on the growth of distress migration that has followed the neoliberal economic policies since the late 1980s and more so, since its formal institutionalisation in 1991.

These issues again reiterate the point that the agrarian question in India is a critical part of the development of the capitalism in India because of the disproportionate land holdings within Indian agrarian capitalism (Patnaik, 1986). The present characteristics of capitalism in India, including platform capitalism, draw its most important qualities from the historical trajectory of capitalist development in India determined by colonial exploitation (Bagchi, 1988; Blaut, 1989) which has facilitated a process of capitalist development based on the transplantation of western capitalist modes of production in India and not in accordance with the specific localised contradictions that capital faces in India (Maitra, 1989). Through a constant reduction of welfare schemes, and a growing domination of the market, successive Indian governments have created a state of primitive exploitation for the people in India's hinterlands. The introduction of new technology—the fetish with which had begun most

¹⁸ For example, one of the major reasons for the success of Amazon is its focus on micro-tasking, whereby a very elaborate and detailed division of labor exists between the technical workers, the warehouse workers and the delivery workers, which makes the process faster and more seamless.

prominently during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as the Indian Prime Minister—¹⁹affected the ways in which individuals analysed their possibilities of upward or downward by changing the overall income distribution and the general cost of labour in the society (Harriss-White, 2011) which always has an effect on the socially necessary labour time the key element in the exploitation of labour power and in the social construction of norms surrounding the working day (Marx, 1867/1976).

The growth of technological interventions in the workplaces, most of which are employed to increase the productivity of the workers either through co-operation or coercion under contemporary capitalism cannot be negated, especially after the technological dependence rendered mainstream by the Covid-19 pandemic (Deb Roy, 2024b). With Covid-19, the platforms received a tremendous boost within the country's general psyche, such that many of them—such as Zomato, Swiggy and Amazon—have come to be recognised as bearers of essential commodities, which have furthered their popularity and profitability in the society. Under such circumstances, most of these platforms have come to enjoy a growing profitability, which can be seen in the cases of many of these platform-based companies now actively competing with brick-and-mortar retail giants. Naturally, such platform-based employment to many workers today reflects the possibility of a vertical social mobility. However, with decreasing wages and increased social insecurities, most of these possibilities have relinquished their practical applicability for most migrant gig workers (Katta et al., 2024; Nair, 2022). The International Labour Organisation (n.d.) had noted that decent work has four main pillars: job creation, working rights, social protection and social dialogue.²⁰ The gig workers in India, as many studies show, continue to remain bereft of all these rights.

The introduction of technology often does not affect the wages of the workers lower down the hierarchy in a positive manner (Lee & Clarke, 2019). This is because despite technological innovations often

¹⁹ Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister was instrumental for the growth of technology-based services in India. For more details see <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/5-ways-how-rajiv-gandhi-changed-india-forever-1318979-2018-08-20> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

²⁰ See ILO (n.d.). *Decent work*, Geneva: International Labour Organization. Geneva: International Labour Organisation. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/topics/decent-work> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

being heralded as being autonomous, they remain contingent upon the ruling dispensation in the society which in the case of India has almost always been in favour of a ruling class that focuses on economic nationalism (Ram, 1975; Marx, 1867/1976). Such a characterisation often does not acknowledge the importance that the effects of technological changes bring in as long as those changes increase the overall economic returns enjoyed by the country.

3 ALGORITHMIC MANAGEMENT AND MIGRANT WORKERS

Migrants have become an important part of the socio-economic and political fabric of the country, but without much reliable data regarding its economic and spatial distribution. Migration of marginalised populace in India mainly occurs because of conditions of agrarian crisis, a growing debt crisis and a change in the economic relations in rural (or broadly non-urban) India (Gopalakrishnan & Sreenivasa, 2009; Gopalakrishnan et al., 2018). Most of them work for lower wages and remain unprotected by most labour and social welfare schemes and programmes run by the government. Under global capitalism, migration has become central to the process of capitalist accumulation and exploitation changing the social relations and relationships of production therein (Arnold, 2012). It has become one of the tools by which capitalism ensures a certain biopolitical control over the people (Tazzioli, 2020). In India, migration is often juxtaposed with failed developmental projects, or with failed policies of the state during times of crisis. Writing about the exceptionality of the Indian scenario, historian Chinmay Tumbe writes:

What makes the Indian case unique is the sheer persistence and magnitude of [the phenomenon of migration], one that has lasted for well over a century now. It is also a phenomenon that affects regions covering at least 20 per cent of the Indian population, currently comprising over 200 million people. I call it the 'Great Indian Migration Wave', and it ranks among the largest and longest migration streams for work in documented history. It led to the rise of cities like Kolkata and Mumbai in India and Yangon and Dubai abroad. (Tumbe, 2018, pp. 39–40).

Platformisation on a global level allows for an assetisation of migrant labour and also helps platforms garner more venture capital, a critical part of their pricing policy (Surie, 2020; Van Doorn & Vijay, 2024). The algorithmic management of workers by the platforms is a part and parcel

of the platformisation of everyday life that accompanies the growth of digital platforms. Algorithmic management-based processes are the most important aspect of the domination that platforms have come to inflict on the urban spaces. These strategies have enabled many platforms to compensate the lack of fixed labour with footloose labour²¹ whereby the hypermobility of some workers has been used to replace those who are immobilised due to alterations within the technical division of labour under capitalism (Huws, 2006, 2020). For migrant workers, the question of livelihoods amidst these circumstances gets entwined with a constant devaluation of their self-esteem—which has a deteriorating effect on their performance (Baumeister et al., 2003)—which also affects the workers' job satisfaction and organisational commitments (Watson et al., 2021).

The rapid digitalisation of the society has enabled the development of a wide range of platforms which have served the cause of the growing service class and new middle class providing them with more comfort and convenience. Most of them come from the middle classes because the middle classes are more capable of taking benefits of the opportunities that neoliberalism provides (Jha & Pankaj, 2021). The growth of the service sector has been a crucial factor in the development of the Indian middle class (Dickey, 2016; Fernandes, 2006), which has been an instrumental force in the creation of the social circumstances necessary for the decline of the welfare state, which was in synchronisation with the western bourgeois values, that the middle class adhered to in urban India (Chakrabarti, 2010; Chattopadhyay, 2022). The development of the middle class in India was characterised by its growing support for market-driven policies replacing the welfare state which has led to a massive growth of a new kind of middle class. Jha and Pushpendra note:

The post-Liberalisation period [witnessed] the highest rise in the middle segment of the new middle-class households ... mainly from the professional and managerial white-collar job holders placed at the mid-level salary brackets, or [from] the business class, have considerable income, mostly [having] more than one earner, are conscious consumerists, and spend a part of their money on maintaining a lifestyle

²¹ Footloose labor here refers to those workers who remain unprotected from mainstream labor laws and reforms (such as sick leave, job security, and various forms of social security) and are highly likely to be migrants and/or from marginalized communities (Huws, 2006).

... informed and influenced by advertisements and images of the glitterati (Jha & Pushpendra, 2022, p. 4).

Digital platforms have played a critical role in the maintenance of the 'images of the glitterati' not only because of the convenience that they offer, but also because of the sense of belongingness and satisfaction that they invoke among the customers often becoming a part of their idea of citizenship itself. They have become a critical part of urban kinship networks and have been important parts of the urban development-based social imagination that the middle class prides itself in. Two customers of platforms, one from Bengaluru and one from Hyderabad, stated:

They have helped so much in allowing me to be a part of family functions and celebrations. Some years ago, it was a very difficult job to get something to someone's birthday or a celebration, but these days, you just need a [credit] card, and you can get something. The greatest thing is that you can know exactly when and how it will be delivered.

Without these apps, it is impossible to live these days. The neighbourhood shops have shut down, and all across you only have malls which often take a lot of time to get to. Moreover, price is also an issue. The ones that they sell on those apps are cheaper and you do not have to go out also.

That pricing, reliability and convenience are an important of these platforms' positioning in the society has been noted by scholars such as Huws (2016a, 2016b) and then Surie (2020) in the Indian context. These factors help to generate a sense of belongingness for middle-class consumer and contribute to the development of a middle-class consumer base for the platforms in urban spaces (Banerjee, 2024). Such a sense of belongingness however is absent in the case of the workers who make these experiences possible, and who suffer because of the algorithmic management techniques that are used by the platforms. These kinds of management strategies contribute to a gradual dehumanisation of the workers and make them a part of the production process creating impoverishment and converting the individual worker 'into a mere cog in the machine' (Dunayevskaya, 1958, p. 94).

Algorithmic management processes dictating online platform-based employment structures and digitally mediated jobs have a great effect on the everyday lives of people creating distinct consumer behavioural models that are designed to further capitalist power and its influence in shaping social reality (Chen, 2018; Sun, 2019). These algorithmic management processes make the workers' subjectivity a redundant

element within the labour process—much like typical industrial capitalism—where the objective idea of them being ‘delivery partners’ dominates over their subjective selves within which many of them consider themselves to be employees of the company that they work for. For migrant gig workers, algorithmic management comes to mean an increase in the extent of alienation that they face. The introduction of technology alters the production mechanisms and creates the conditions under which new and low-skilled workers suffer considerably, especially if they need to provide for other facilities such as housing and health (Lee & Clarke, 2019). Such circumstances compel many gig workers to work multiple jobs. Such kind of gig workers who simultaneously work different kinds of jobs for different platforms are usually referred to as being platform amphibians or slashers (Ichino, 2018).

Working as platform amphibians becomes an attractive terrain of gig employment for migrants because most of them come to cities with the hope of increasing their familial income. These workers do not only earn for themselves but rather have to earn sufficiently enough to provide for their lives in the cities, as well as provide for the lives of their families back in their native places. Two migrant workers, Raman from West Bengal and Ashraf from rural Bihar²² who now work in Delhi and Bengaluru, respectively, narrate:

The amount of money that I get on Swiggy—I work mainly on Swiggy only—is not sufficient at all. It rarely covers the expenses. Now I also work on Urban Company as an electrician. It is a difficult life. Sometimes, I feel that staying back in Bihar would have been better. These fancy roads were not there, but at least food and other sustenance goods was there in plenty.

I have been working on Dunzo for more than 2 years now, but I have not yet received more than 15,000 rupees in a month. When I came here, I thought I would send money home, but now I am finding it difficult to even survive myself. Returning home is also not an option because there are no avenues for employment there. I would have to work maybe as a daily wage worker. Here at least I have some dignity.

A key aspect that the worker has highlighted above is the lack of developmental initiative present in the country’s poorer regions. The growing

²² Names changed due to privacy concerns.

uneven development in the country, with the country's hinterlands—the major source of migrant gig workers—suffering the most due to the lack of developmental initiatives and geopolitical backwardness (Deb Roy, 2024c). This was accompanied in India in the early 1990s with a constant decrease in the funds allocated to programmes which used to directly benefit the poor and the marginalised, along with reduced public expenditure, rural development funds and employment generation programmes. Following this, the state in India promoted the formation of 'primitive accumulation in an *anticipatory* sense as compared to actual dispossession' (Adnan, 2014, p. 32). Primitive accumulation in India has produced the basis for the transition of the agrarian economy to a neoliberal one, and as such has decimated the agrarian relations of production in the country resulting in a growing reserve army of labour for capital in the urban spaces to exploit (Gopalakrishnan, 2009). The growth of gig work through these methods reflects the constant relevance of primitive accumulation as an important part of capitalist exploitation even today. The capitalist social structure demands that the workers are completely separated from all forms of property which makes them completely subservient to the means to which they can realise their labour. Capitalism thrives by actively reinforcing this distinction, and '... the so-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as primitive, because it forms the prehistoric stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it' (Godelier, 1967, p. 99). However, for the migrant platform-based gig workers, this process of separation works within both the material and within the digital ecosystem. Materially, they remain segregated from the products of their labour like all other workers, but they also get ideologically exploited because of the mental stigmatisation that they face. One worker from the north-east recounts:

I have been here for around three years now, but in these three years, very few people have actually bothered to talk to me. I understand when people from local places do not talk. But a few days ago, I had been to an office to deliver food to a person with a Manipuri surname, I was so happy so I greeted him with a big smile, but the person just shrugged me off. It felt humiliating, he even did not speak in Manipuri.

A key role, as the worker above has highlighted, has been brought about by the behaviour that is meted out to them. Though, as the worker above highlights, they get exploited by almost everybody, getting

exploited by somebody who share their social and geographical roots with them becomes more exploitative because that interferes with their notions of authenticity and belongingness. The treatment meted out to them negatively affects their self-esteem and self-worth that determines the extent to which they feel positively about the kind of work that they do and the circumstances under which they work (Stets & Burke, 2014). The algorithmic governmentality, however, that comes with the proliferation of platforms in any society and which emerges as an efficient device for the commodification of social relationships (Huws, 2014), contributes to the domination of money as a community-building element that Marx (1973/1993) had spoken about.

The circumstances of crisis that exist within all capitalist economies play an important role in the creation of the platform amphibians, more so in the case of migrant workers because of them having to accommodate themselves with the effects of uneven development that produces a disproportionate web of power relations and wealth around them (Harvey, 2003). Migrant workers are more likely to work as platform amphibians because of the increasing need of money that characterises their lives. For these workers, innovations in the digital field characterised by platforms have exploited the conditions created out of the domination that commodities exercise over the material selves of human beings. They have hastened the promotion of money as a factor of community-building processes as Marx (1973/1993) had argued to be the case under capitalism, which is evident in the experiences that many migrant gig workers have had when they visit customers who are from their native places. The major transformation which has come is the intense amount of mechanisation of labour through automation that has come to dominate the labour process, which has created a social basis for the production of alienation at a mass scale (Fuchs, 2018). This is because, as Dunayevskaya (1958) argued, the more mechanised the labour process becomes, the less value an individual's labour power generates which then results in an individual worker having to work longer hours to earn equivalent wages. This has great impacts on the workers themselves that interfere with not only their objective situation but also results in a deterioration of the subjective aspects of their identities. Arun, a migrant worker from Delhi coming from Bihar,²³ states:

²³ Name changed due to privacy concerns.

I work for around 10–12 hours every day, during daytime as a security worker and then as a delivery person at night for Swiggy and then Dunzo. Swiggy gets more late night deliveries, that is why I selected it. Earlier I was like okay, the security work pays me enough, but then they started saying that some robots are coming up, so I started searching for an alternative job. With all these new machines in security, the need of security workers is also coming down. Someday, we will become obsolete.

Technology does not operate within a vacuum. The abundance and domination of technology signals the ushering in of an era of '*extreme supply*' where machines become capable of undertaking both cognitive and manual responsibilities of the production process (Bastani, 2019). This gives rise to tendencies that celebrate the ushering in of algorithmic management-based techniques which demand that migrants and locales are treated akin to each other while leaving behind the internal contradictions existing between the people belonging to these categories. Getting a job becomes important for migrants because that creates the avenues for a better acquaintance with the space that they occupy (Abkhezr & McMahon, 2022). The contemporary society is a society where technological apparatuses and their associated networks dominate a significant part of human lives. Migrant gig workers in India continue to suffer from the effects of the dialectical relationship that exists between territorial logic and the logic of capitalist profit expansion (Harvey, 2003, 2014). Gig work does not emerge out of a vacuum but rather gains prominence because of the structural transformation that occurs within markets going through neoliberalisation which encourages individualisation, structural violence and a growing financialisation of human selves. The growth of neoliberalism has affected the very core of capitalism with a greater remodulation of productive and accumulation strategies emphasising market relations and mechanisation (Giroux, 2014; Leonardi & Pirina, 2020). Under such circumstances, the question of belongingness becomes an important part of the urban ontology that migrant workers.

4 MIGRANT BELONGINGNESS AND DELIVERY WORK IN URBAN INDIA

The question of migration in India is intimately related to other aspects of social stratification such as caste and race (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2018). The growth of migrant workers in gig work despite the worsening conditions of work is because gig work provides these workers

with an easier access to employment, something which many of them remain in desperate need of (Katta et al., 2024). Coupled with this, the focus on standardisation reinforces Marx's (1867/1976) proposition that under capitalism, the relationship between human beings is degraded to a relationship between commodities completely dehumanising the worker in the process, as has been shown in the two preceding sections. The commodity form constitutes the basic fulcrum around which the capitalist society is constructed. Every major restructuring that capitalism has attempted to institutionalise in the society has revolved around the potential benefits that it can provide to the domination and circulation of the commodity form in the society. These modes of restructuring have benefitted from the growth of technological interventions because technological developments have come to replace the erstwhile dominance of service-based models and have become major drivers of economic growth (Zukin, 1987).

Cities, as Van Doorn (2019) and then Marrone and Peterlongo (2020) have argued, are extremely important for platform capitalism because cities provide platforms with an ideal base for customers and remain in a mutually dependent symbiotic relationship with each other. Both platforms and cities get mutual benefits from each other in the form of increased customer base and more avenues for profit accumulation. Because of such interconnections between platforms and cities, urban spaces have begun to be characterised by a growing predominance of data-driven structures that have been shaping urban infrastructures (Barns, 2020). It is popularly assumed that gig workers have control over the conditions of their work, but it is rarely emphasised that the control that they have is only tokenistic in nature. They remain, as Wu et al. (2019) and Rachmawati et al. (2021) argue, far from independent and cannot determine the behaviour and work conditions as these are mostly controlled by the platforms.

The integration of the digital ecosystem with the physical 'brick-and-mortar' framework of profit accumulation is essential because digital capitalism today, co-exists with 'finance capitalism, hyper-industrial capitalism, crisis capitalism, authoritarian capitalism, neoliberal capitalism, mobility capitalism, global capitalism, etc.' (Fuchs, 2019, p. 3). Markets have become, in the contemporary digital age, omnipresent in human lives. They have become deregulated and globalised (Castells, 1996; Sassen, 1999), often at the expense of public services (Harvey, 2014) which have caused the emergence of alienation on a mass scale (Fuchs,

2018). The creation of such a mass-scale alienation has resulted in a change within the general consciousness of the society, which results in many migrant gig workers suffering from a lack of authenticity within their subjective selves in the urban spaces due to the lack of adequate positive social referencing points (Stets & Burke, 2014). Such feelings of alienated existence are bolstered by the fact that most contemporary social structures are characterised by a blatant rejection of equality and humane sentiments. Such rejection has been rendered mainstream by the way technology has been used under capitalism. Today, the threat comes from the widespread usage of technological innovations, such as artificial intelligence, neuroscience and information theory, which have reduced the social value attached to a human being (Mason, 2019).

The growth of data-driven structures in the everyday urban lives changes the power relations existing in the society and works in favour of routinising and standardising labouring processes (Ettlinger, 2017) rather than making them more creative (Huws, 2006). This routinisation has a distinct effect on the identity that a worker embraces within oneself. Identity, as Stets and Burke (2014) argue, is a set of meanings that contribute to the definition that an individual possesses of oneself with regard to the social, cultural, political and economic contradictions that one faces in one's everyday life. The identities of migrant workers become a part of the production and consumption networks that constitute, as Tabb (2010) argues, the totality of capital in the society creating the grounds for the expanded reproduction of capital. Social and biological attributes play an important role in ascertaining the role that a working individual can play in the process. Any kind of technology takes shape in the context in which it is developed, both socio-culturally and economically (Mackenzie & Wacjman, 1999). The kind of impact that technological innovations have over the overall shaping of an individual or a community can be immense. The middle-class consumption-based citizenship that has been critical to the growth of neoliberalism in the country, has benefited from the growth of platforms and digital infrastructure because they have brought forward a sense of heightened productivity where they are expected to be productive throughout the duration of their everyday lives (Gregg, 2011). The consumer establishes the basic fulcrum around which the new middle class is created as a universal entity. Neoliberalism attacks the fundamental principles and operating mechanisms in various social contexts attempting to implement its own homogenous value structure aimed at the creation of

the perfect consumer-citizen who represents and practices market values more than traditional social or communitarian social values.

Technological innovations have been instrumental in bringing in many changes within the everyday lives of the people. They have reduced the time that people usually used to spend outdoors, as well as have become instrumental forces in normalising ways of lives that counter the requirement of communitarian bonds and social solidarity. While a utopian view of technology ushers in a sense of gradual opening up of the society in a manner which gives rise to less gatekeeping and more democratic management, a dystopian view argues that technology causes the creation of a more social and cultural inequalities (Leonardi & Pirina, 2020). Technology acts in accordance with the dominant social ideology in place, as Marx (1867/1976) had argued, and does not act as an autonomous institution enabling historical transformation, but rather works in accordance with the broader issues surrounding labouring processes and work organisations. A simplistic understanding of technology can point one towards concluding that they help individuals in gaining a better control of their lives. Some technological innovations help in routinising and regularising certain aspects of individual human lives by interfering with the nature and content of human interactions. Within urban spaces, these processes undergo further modifications because of the existent capitalist valorisation processes, often at the disposal of the upper echelons of the society.

Cities, as Robert Park notes, are the human being's most successful attempt at remaking the world in the image of the actually living individual's thoughts and desires. However, 'if the city is the world which [the individual] created, it is the world in which [the individual] is henceforth condemned to live' (Park, 1967, p. 3). In other words, cities reflect the inhabitants and users therein as 'what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from ... what kind of people we want to be' (Harvey, 2012, p. 4). Everyday life in any city is characterised by a certain mundanity, which often becomes the reason of being overlooked by academics interested only in the spectacular nature of an event or a process (Debord, 1961, 1968). This mundanity of everyday life retains itself—albeit often modifying itself—amidst the waves of migration. Most urban centres today realise that migration, both national and international, is a key aspect of their social fabric and developmental trajectory (Buhr, 2017). Belongingness is an important part of developing a sense of having a right to the city because it provides individuals with a consciousness that allows

them to be active subjects within the processes that they are a part of (MacDonald, 2008). Thus, it also becomes critically important for capitalism to restrict the extent of belongingness that migrant workers possess because it caters to a state of psychological domination and subordination, which constitutes an important role in the process of establishing a state of subsumption in the society. In other words, economic exploitation fulfils only a part of the agenda that capitalism possesses, which only become complete with the complete domination over the human essence of the workers. It becomes easier for capitalism to do that in the case of migrant workers because migrant workers already remain under tremendous pressures of social stigmatisation and structural violence. This becomes an essential part of their everyday lives creating conditions of a 'bad state of social being where they are seen akin to machines' (Migrant Gig Worker from Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, June 2022).

Gig workers are neglected in terms of their job stability and security and are vulnerable to lower customer ratings. Migrant gig workers become a part of neoliberal governmentality whereby they are inculcated within a neoliberal career developmental framework which prefers flexible work rather than secured jobs as they promote leaner systems of production and circulation (Abkhezr & McMahon, 2022; De Neve et al., 2023). The entrenchment of migrant workers within such modes affects their everyday life which becomes constituted by a growing precarity and social insecurity. Everyday life, as Lefebvre (2002, p. 41) had defined is the omnipotent reality within human existence such that 'we are inside it and outside it. No so-called elevated activity can be reduced to it, nor can it be separated from it'. Under capitalism, the everyday life comes to be defined by the production and consumption of commodities that create a consumer-oriented citizenship in the society, whereby the ability to consume becomes the basis of manifesting one's belongingness, both legally and socio-culturally. Any capitalist socio-economic structure is based on the production of commodities through structures and ideologies which convert everything, including emotions, into tradeable commodities (Marx, 1867/1976; Illouz, 2007). The algorithmic management which is used to control the delivery workers, works through surveillance and monitoring and often attempts to dehumanise these decisions concerning their lives and working conditions that workers have to take (Huws et al., 2019).

The satisfaction that is generated with a quick and efficient delivery becomes an important dimension of the middle-class consciousness

surrounding the urban spaces that they come to inhabit. The growth of capitalism has resulted in a general commodification of the society, where entities which had been previously categorised as essential entities have begun to be exploited as profitable entities, like all other commodities. During Covid-19, the profits of these platforms exceeded all limits with many of these platforms deemed essential services and earning huge profits while leaving the workers completely bereft of social and job security.²⁴ Under these circumstances, the belongingness to the urban spaces for migrant gig workers has suffered tremendously because the boundaries between their working day and workplaces have eroded significantly (Risi & Pronzato, 2021) constituting a fractured everyday experience for most of these workers (Huws, 2006). The social existence of these workers gets reduced to the experiences that they bring to the middle class, as one delivery worker from Assam who has been working as a delivery worker for more than five years in Bengaluru explains:

I have got tons of Assamese people while doing this work, but they never speak to me properly. They only see me as a delivery person, nothing more. They see me as a commodity, something which they have ordered on their phones.

One of the main reasons for this transformation of human beings into dehumanised commodities is the constant fetishisation of interactions that a human being has with technology which results in many customers of platform-based services seeing the workers as nothing different from the platforms' user interface (Deb Roy, 2019). This results in a massive dehumanisation of the workers whereby the system completely strips them off their labour and their humanity (Anderson, 2017). This results in the creation of a massively heightened form of hyper-dehumanisation and primitive accumulation (Marx, 1844, 1867/1976).

Primitive accumulation in India has produced the basis for the transition of the agrarian economy to a neoliberal one, and as such has decimated the agrarian relations of production resulting in a growing

²⁴ See Nandi, S. (2020). Covid-19: Uber to offer cabs for essential services. *Mint*, April 05, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/covid-19-uber-to-offer-cabs-for-essential-services-11586077100965.html>. Also see Mawii, Z., Rath, A., & Tandon, A. (2020). From Health and Harassment to Income Security and Loans, India's Gig Workers Need Support. *The Wire*, April 29, <https://thewire.in/business/covid-19-lockdown-delivery-gig-workers> [Accessed 04.07.2024].

reserve army of labour for capital in the urban spaces to exploit (Gopalakrishnan, 2009). The creation of such a workforce makes it possible for capitalism to keep the general wages depressed that contribute a growing social poverty in the society. Migrant workers help capitalists in keeping the wages low and gaining a competitive edge over their competitors (Marx, 1894/1981). This helps them in extracting a greater amount of surplus labour and surplus value from the workers, which in turn, plays a critical role in the generation of profits for platforms. Platform-based capitalist processes in the contemporary society thus, behave akin to most components of global finance capital where migrant workers are treated as being disposable parts of the workforce (Ness, 2023).

For Marx, the industrial revolution provided the material context that the human society needed to strive towards the achievement of freedom (Dunayevskaya, 1958). This is because the industrial revolution produced the basic structure for the formation of class structures in the society by creating a massive wealth inequity and a destruction of pre-capitalist social structures (Marx, 1867/1976). With the industrial revolution, the working class had been exposed to a variety of different issues such as the housing crisis and the crisis of a dignified way of life, as Engels (1845, 1872) had elaborated upon. In India, the workforce—as has already been stated—comprises of more than 90 per cent of informal workers (Sengupta, 2008), who suffer from numerous issues concerning decent work and social security. In most cases, these workers live under conditions where they do not have adequate land space, dwelling area, and are constantly tormented by the structural violence that creates '*the crisis of living*' (Desai, 1991, p. 175, own emphasis), which negatively affects the extent of urban belongingness that migrants possess. Urban belongingness is a critical part of the realisation of the full potential possessed by the inhabitants of an urban society. Migrants usually are characterised by a sense of alienness within the spaces that they come to inhabit, more so if they come from marginalised social backgrounds. People from marginalised social backgrounds are often looked down upon as being outsiders within the spaces that they come to serve. This is not only done by their employers—the platforms in this instance—or the customer, but also by other workers themselves, as two migrant workers explain in detail, one from Bengaluru and the other from Hyderabad, respectively. The first worker, Iqbal comes from Bihar and has been in Bengaluru for around a

year while the second worker, Ashish²⁵ had come to Hyderabad to work as a security guard from West Bengal five years ago (in 2017) but has since Covid-19 unable to find a salary-paying job. They argue:

The native workers rarely treat us as equal. Sometimes, they also threaten us that they will beat us. These are all very difficult circumstances under which we have to work in. In most cases, it is fine financially, there is no difference between payments and all. But when it comes to job satisfaction, the native local workers are more satisfied than us. We have to work long hours, pay rents and all, and it is very difficult with this income.

The team leader in the area speaks in the local language, now although he is also a gig worker like I am, there is an issue of linguistic efficiency. He sees me just as a migrant and says that I should go home and not come here to irritate them. They should inform the company if they do not want migrants, why harass us?

The migrant workers' narration about a struggle between local and migrant workers leads one back to the critical role that Marx (1870) had designated to capitalism, which was to create a rift between local and migrants to suit its own benefits. Marx (1870) had argued that the differences between local and migrant workers are kept alive by capitalist forces to keep the workers segregated among themselves, which dampens their potential to rebel against the system. Migrant workers are often used by capitalism to create a deteriorated standard of living for local workers which enable them to keep the general level of wages low, increase competition and heighten dehumanisation.

Crisis in the lives of the workers has both objective and subjective aspects. The exploitation of migrant gig workers within urban spaces is a manifestation of the ways in which neoliberalism constrains the employment avenues available for the poorest of the poor and produces the requisite conditions of desperation that capital requires to bring in further control in the society. Their subjective experiences make them form their class identity mainly through a combination of their objective financial positioning and their subjective self-identification measures. Such a state of subsumption makes them unable to possess a right to the urban spaces that they occupy. David Harvey noted that the right to the city is a right that allows people to change the urban environment. The right to the city

²⁵ Names changed due to privacy concerns.

is about negating the process in which individuals lose the connection to the urban space which produces a notion of being lost without a community, which results in individuals '[recognising] their areas less clearly, evaluate them less highly, and become less attached to them' (Hunter, 1974, p. 173).

A sense of ontological security can only be realised realistically if the immigrants are granted the right to the city which effectively means having the ability and potential to 'change it after [one's] heart's desire' and not merely a right to public services and access to resources (Harvey, 2008, p. 23). Cities are not created out of thin air but are rather manifestations of the social fabric including the 'lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values' which exists amidst the people who design and live in the city (Harvey, 2008, p. 23). A critical role in this regard in India is played by the middle classes who have been one of the most important actors in the construction of a favourable public perception surrounding the neoliberal restructuring of India (Fernandes, 2006). The growth of the middle class has coincided with the faster growth of inequality, and as such has made the positionality that the middle class enjoys in the society highly complicated. The idea of positionality has come to occupy an important position within contemporary social analysis, because it has enabled individuals to locate themselves in relation to others using ideas such as social location and the social identity that they possess (Washington, 2019). These factors play a critical role in the generation of a social consensus around exclusion, as Iqbal mentions:

First I am a Muslim. Sometimes, people will not let me enter their homes, or apartments. It is difficult to hide also because most of these spaces have open book name policy where all names of entrants are written, and they check your AADHAR card as well and your mobile phone with the code for delivery. There is a wide difference between me on the road and me delivering. While riding, I am a delivery person, while delivering, I am a Muslim worker.

Gig workers like Iqbal are frequently barred from using washrooms, lifts and public spaces within enclosed spaces (Kain, 2024).²⁶ Bhalerao and Kain have argued that a key reason behind such a treatment meted out to the delivery workers is the notion of purity that has continued

²⁶ Also see Bhalerao, M. (2021). The 'Digesting' Discrimination Within The Gig Economy. *Feminism in India*, October, 06, <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/10/06/the-digesting-discrimination-within-the-gig-economy/> [Accessing 04.07.2024].

to remain functional in the Indian society under neoliberal capitalism. Various factors—in addition to class positions—affect one’s positioning in the society while also affecting how one gets affected by the state of crisis under capitalism. Marx (1894/1981) had argued that a crisis under capitalism does not get constituted out of a lack of capital but rather often by the existence of *too much capital* produced by the overproduction of capital. Under capitalism, digital inequalities become explicitly manifested when larger capitalistically organised technological infrastructures come to shape the direction and ideological fabric of science and technology in the society (Risi & Pronzato, 2021). Under contemporary capitalism, technology has frequently been used to routinise certain experiences in such a way that those routines create avenues for profit maximisation and platform-based delivery work is a part of it.

Hence, while it is important to note that delivery workers are frequently exploited based on the kind of work that they do and their socio-economic conditions, it is also equally important to note that they play a critical role in creation of routinised everyday experiences that characterise contemporary urban spaces. Cities are spaces within which a diverse group of people, often abject strangers to each other, come together to form a common cultural norm, even if they are reluctant to do so (Harvey, 2012, p. 67). The dissemination of urban cultural norms and rites, pre-existing ones or newly formed, among immigrant populaces can be immensely helpful to the creation of communities and forms of social justice-based urbanism. The loss of these urban norms gets manifested in the ways in which certain facets of contemporary urban lifestyles get used against workers, as a migrant delivery worker states:

When I visit any apartment or any gated community, I first have to struggle against the security. Then you have all these apps today, where the owner or the customer has to give an approval or something. Then these security guards ask us to park on the road. All of these increase the propensity to get delayed which then results in lower customer ratings and then we get blasted by the managers and team leaders.

Gated communities are an important part of the contemporary urban way of life and coupled with the delivery services provided by numerous platform-based companies have been an integral part of the promise that urban spaces have projected to people in non-urban and semi-urban locations. Middle-class migrants to the city have often come to pride themselves in the kind of social mobility that they come to possess. But, the proportion of middle-class migrants, as Deb Roy (2024a) argues, is

far lesser than those who come from the marginalised social backgrounds. The migrants who come from lower ends of the socio-economic and cultural hierarchy are more likely to be exploited under these circumstances because they are more likely to be affected by the potential precarity of gig work with no recourse to other forms of dignified employment. In a society where traditional occupations based on caste continue to be the most widely practised form of employment (Mosse, 2018), the loss of work within the gig economy means a return to more traditional *and probably more exploitative* forms of exploitative work.

5 CONCLUSION

Karl Marx (1852) had noted that with every epoch of historical progress there arises newer modes of oppression and exploitation. For the workers' movement, it is of critical importance that it takes cognisance of these changes so as to be able to analyse the actual material contradictions that they face. The growth of cities and the rise of technology as a central element within the general social consciousness surrounding development have created a condition where the growth of platforms has come to mean a massive drive towards homogenisation. Urban marginality under contemporary capitalism creates the grounds for the domination of the market over all the different forces of social cohesion. It has become a space where the marginalised are constantly excluded from rights of equal accessibility. Lefebvre () had argued that industrialisation and urbanisation are two of the most important drivers of contemporary capitalist reality and the reproduction of the capitalist relations of production. Contemporary urban spaces, dominated by the growth of cities, have been a space where profits and growth have been privileged above everything else, which has created urban spaces that are highly segmentary and structurally violent in form. It is popularly believed that free trade benefits the regions with lower rates of development but in actuality, free trade mostly results in richer regions getting richer because of them being already well ahead of their less developed counterparts (Dutt, 1992; Harvey, 2006), resulting in a further concentration of capital.

The conditions faced by migrant gig workers prove that underdeveloped regions rarely have the autonomy required to make adequate usage of technological innovations and mostly depend upon highly developed regions to provide for them (D'Costa, 2003; Sagasti, 1973). In contexts such as these—which have remained unchanged for decades—the mere

migration of labour does not mean an improvement in the standards of living for the underdeveloped region, but rather, as Ness (2023) argues, continues to use the underdeveloped regions as extractive sites for cheap labour or raw materials. Under capitalism, migration from underdeveloped regions to developed ones continues to be seen with appreciative eyes because they are seen to be a potential method of destruction of traditional economies, which is seen to be an essential part of capitalist expansion (Parasuraman, 2010). This is particularly evident in contemporary cities which are characterised by a lack of one's right to the urban space and have been evolved as sites of consumption (Lefebvre, 1996).

Platforms and the migrant labour that they employ, in this context, fulfil an important role for capitalism in furthering the material and structural violence that characterises the peripheries in most capitalist societies (Ness, 2023). Like a monument, arguing along the Lefebvre (2003), these platforms bring people close to each other and tend to create a controlled social fabric around themselves through standardisation and routinisation. In the context of the platform economy, algorithmic management has come to play a crucial role in this process producing dehumanised methods to measure work (a starting point for profit expansion), standardise it and bring in forms of invisibilised soft control (Woodcock, 2020). However, as the chapter shows, the attempts at standardisation often have heightened the crisis that these workers face with regard to their belongingness to the urban space. These issues have remained unaddressed because most governments in India, and globally, have adopted a very nuanced and pragmatic approach towards platforms (Lenaerts et al., 2018; Nair, 2023) in such a way that they have remained unable to address the basic issues that these workers face (Parwez & Ranjan, 2021; Nair, 2022). Under these circumstances, the mere *promotion* of these workers as employees only addresses a part of the problem because it does not change the capital-labour relationship within it (Katta et al., 2024). Marx (1843) had argued that in order to counter exploitation one needs to work one's way through the various false imageries that capitalism produces.

Platforms in this context enable a distinction to arise between people working similar kinds of jobs.²⁷ In India, it becomes easier because

²⁷ Gig workers especially who work for physical stores or franchises which have their own delivery fleet such as Dominos and Pizza Hut. These workers are frequently accorded a contradictory status among delivery workers. This is because they are ascribed to a higher

the social construction of the bourgeoisie in India goes beyond mere economic considerations and rests upon other socio-cultural factors—such as caste, race and gender—that gets bolstered by the stagnancy faced by the marginalised populace of the country (Mukherjee & Mukherjee, 1988; Patnaik, 2016). The accumulation structure under capitalism today depends on a two-fold model which engages with the organisation of more productive production processes and a promotion of the extractive logic of capitalism (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019). Platforms and their associated processes of management and control affect the general skill level and working conditions in the society, through which they become a part of the urban social reality affecting the entire society rather than only those who are directly affected by it (Huws, 2020). The analysis of society and its contradictions is a part of the analysis of human society's struggle for the achievement of freedom (Dunayevskaya, 1958). The struggle for freedom of migrant workers cannot take place within a separate realm in itself but has to be analysed as part of the broader class struggle that ensues within the society. The definition of class however, in this context, needs to be broadened that does not remain restricted to the 'industrial' working class, but rather goes beyond the contours of narrow economic definitions.

The problems faced by migrant gig workers rarely get represented adequately in mainstream media and academic discourse because most of these workers remain undocumented (Parasuraman, 2010; Parwez & Ranjan, 2021). The delivery workers need to be seen as subjects—and not mere objects—capable of effecting changes within their own working and personal lives. For Marx, the struggle against capitalism is not only restricted to the working class but also encompasses diverse sections of the non-capitalist classes because all of these classes struggle against the most critical relationship that exists within capitalism, the one between capital and labour (Anderson, 2020). This struggle needs to be treaded along dialectical lines of engagement where a dialectical analysis is to be recreated continuously in light of the 'spontaneously [emerging and developing] Subject', the *Subject* being a more radical and more socialised working class (Dunayevskaya, 1973, p. 73). The role of radical political movements and their relationship with mass movements constitutes a critical part of the ways in which such states of dissatisfaction be countered

social status because of their salaried mode of payment, while simultaneously looked down upon as they are considered to be fast-food workers.

(Gonzalez, 2019). The demands placed by the gig workers in India are often restricted to mere superficial ones where they remain controlled by forms of labour aristocracy because most gig workers do not have any knowledge about the policy changes that are often brought in to make their lives easier because of their lack of education and social awareness.

The struggle of the migrant gig workers cannot be comprehended unless one analyses the problem as being one where the worker, as Marx (1844) had argued, has oneself become the product and is being forced to sell one's human essence for sustenance. Migrant gig workers represent the most destitute conditions imaginable for gig workers in India and as such demand a more introspective and detailed analysis than others. This means that one needs to move towards a reconfiguration of one's ideas surrounding concepts such as class and exploitation and move towards more inclusive ones, that enable the analysis of issues concerning regional disparities, caste, race, gender and other such factors as parts of the totality created by capitalism. However, in doing so, it needs to be emphasised that the exploitation faced by migrant gig workers reflects not only a crisis of the working class, but rather a crisis of humanity itself within the consumerist urban spaces that capitalism has developed, in India and across the globe.

Acknowledgements The author thanks Marcelle Dawson, Simon Barber, Annabel Cooper, Kevin Anderson, Peter Hudis, Sandra Rein and Ursula Huws for their support. The author would also like to thank Dipsita Dhar and Rikta Krishnaswamy for their encouragement and inputs regarding the chapter.

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Vulnerability and Resistance Among Digital and Platform Immigrant Workers in Portugal

Isabel Roque 

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s that the emergence of a new flexible accumulation regime has been leading to a new stage of capitalism production, through financial and technological reorganisation, reconfiguring and dismantling dramatically the labour market, quite distant from the conception of formal work based on human rights and dignity (Harvey, 2013). With the emergence of new social dynamics of work, a metamorphosis of the capital process has led to different forms of partial, precarious, informal and on-demand work, especially through the uberisation and platformisation of work creating economic activities and reinventing pre-existing ones, such as accommodation, transport, logistics, call and contact centres (Antunes, 2018, 2020; Srnicek, 2016).

Call and contact centres were among the first sectors where this process of machinic and algorithmic management has been seen in a

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145

F. Della Puppa et al. (eds.), *Migrant Labour in the Gig Economy*,
Dynamics of Virtual Work,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-91262-7_6

more pronounced way, representing one of the easiest ways for immigrants to enter the labour market and were also the first service to implement digital and platform work. This service emerged not as an industry, but as a business function that crosses several industries and/or sectors in a post-industrial service economy (Roque, 2018), being one of the fastest developing forms of digital work, available all around the clock, and delivered from almost any spot (Paul & Huws, 2002). As in the case of local accommodation (Airbnb), call and contact centres foster an entire local economy and involvement with the neighbourhood, creating bonds of interdependence and job opportunities, especially in cities where job scarcity predominates (Roque, 2023a). Call and contact centre operators are emblematic of digital capitalism, better known in the literature as the cybertariat, infoproletariat and cyberproletariat (Antunes et al., 2009; Dyer-Whiteford, 2015; Huws, 2003, 2014). This is the new service proletariat in the digital era who is expropriated of its working and personal life by global companies, suffering the consequences from the expansion of intermittent and informal work. It is made up, above all, of women, racialised workers and immigrants, who are often made invisible and remain in precarious and penalising working conditions (Antunes, 2020; Roque, 2020, 2023a, 2023b, Festi & Roque, 2025 please insert in the references Festi, R., & Roque, I. (2025). "Representation, regulation and voice of immigrant couriers and platform drivers in Portugal", *Globalizations*, Special Issue-Work time, lifetime and the daily routines of migrant workers on digitalised platforms and services. 1-19.).

The pandemic exposed and accelerated this process of flexibilisation, informalisation, precariousness, and vulnerability of the labour market that platformisation has been implementing in societies in general. In fact, during the first lockdown of the pandemic, class inequality became even more pronounced with a segmentation of the labour market and invisibilisation of workers (Bourdieu, 1998). There was a division between non-essential and essential frontline workers, demarcating those who risk their lives on a daily basis, dealing face to face with the health crisis, subjecting themselves to the virus. According to Antunes (2022), these are situations of pandemic capitalism in which life is disregarded for the sake of profit.

Having not fully recovered from the Great Recession, which resulted in a restructuring of work and global economy, the working-class has been facing a Covid-19 pandemic, a scenario of environmental crisis, a continuous war between Ukraine and Russia and the eminence of a nuclear war

in the middle east. This context has been leading to massive dismissals, inflation crises, wages and housing costs that have diverged so dramatically that the dream of a middle-class life has become impossible to achieve. Millions of people around the world are becoming itinerant and migrant workers, due to the lack of permanent and location-based jobs and the high cost of housing and living. This phenomenon is occurring not only in the United States, but especially in Europe, experiencing significant immigration from African, Asian and South American countries, as people search for better life and working conditions. Between the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, Portugal went from being traditionally known as a country of emigration, to being also recognised as a country of immigration. Several migratory flows have been observed since then in the country, obeying concrete economic-political circumstances, with migratory flows from PALOP (Cape Verde, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe), Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, and Asia. These people form the extensive and long-lasting reserve army of labour that is always available to perform temporary, informal, and precarious work.

The precariat has always experienced unstable contracts and informal working conditions, with weak institutional and organisational links, and has continually been called upon to work for a fraction of the wages paid to most permanent workers performing the same jobs (Ness, 2005, pp. 22–23). Neoliberalism is intrinsically linked to the processes of “class desubjectification” and the manipulation of working-class subjectivity, breaking class solidarity (Casulo, 2023, p. 167). Neoliberalism created an ideal of self-realisation where most informal and flexible workers do not realise that they are a mix of self-bourgeois and self-proletarians, within a situation of transfiguration in salaried work. The State transfers an individual burden to the worker who becomes a service provider, carrying all the risks and costs, being under the command of the algorithm without access to social protection in employment and unemployment (Antunes, 2018; Lorey, 2012). In the absence of quality employment opportunities, this may be the only way to enter the labour market, especially for immigrant, flexible, temporary, racialised and atomised workers.

Every form of platform work activity is increasingly associated with different shapes and shades of precarity (Eurofound, 2018), where work is performed on the job, or on-demand (gig), being managed by the algorithm or through the mediation of temporary work agencies, especially in the deliveries and call and contact centre service and the tourism sector

(Huws et al., 2019). This condition of permanent insecurity, intermittence and suffering leads them into a state of vulnerability and suffering, corroding their character (Alves, 2011; Roque, 2023a; Sennet, 1998).

The Weberian sociological approach provides a valuable framework to understand the world of work from the perspective of the workers themselves, that is, to perceive how these immigrant workers experience the conditions of precariousness and vulnerability. This chapter brings a perspective from below, focusing on the subjective dimensions of immigrants, revealed through their personal life experiences and social identities and their vision of the world (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994; Lindlof, 1995, p. 33), analysing their access and integration process into the labour market. In this sense, it is relevant to understand not only the socioeconomic context of work, but also the individual experiences, motivations, and challenges that immigrants face in Portugal.

This chapter is divided into seven sections. After the introduction, the second section describes the context for the rising of digital work in a Portuguese gig economy; the third presents the methodology; the fourth details the scenario of immigration in Europe and Portugal; the fifth analyses the occupational trajectories of call and contact centre immigrant workers; the sixth provides the discussion; and the final section brings the conclusions.

2 DIGITAL WORK IN A GIG ECONOMY

Digital platforms brought a new form of externalisation of work (outsourcing) to an indeterminate and depersonalised mass of workers who are available through a precarious reserve army, and who work according to a just-in-time (Abílio, 2020) and just-in-place logic (Wells et al., 2021). In the 1990s, call and contact centres went from national to global through information and communication technologies. Portugal then witnessed a process of globalisation and digitalisation in the service industry through the call centralisation of work, allowing companies to offer products as a service, instead of selling them as physical objects (Batt et al., 2009; Huws, 2003). Like couriers, drivers, and other services that comprise digital platforms, call centre workers also use platforms and are controlled by the algorithm (Artificial Intelligence). In fact, call centres were the first service where this process of machine and algorithmic management was implemented, through the outsourcing and crowdsourcing of services, with access to a periphery of atypical workers who

could be requested by companies to overcome the seasonality of production, leading to work fragmentation. The algorithm dictates and controls the pace of work through the metrics with which it was programmed. As such, all work tasks of a human operator in a call and contact centre are dictated by the machine (algorithm) and personified in the figure of a computer and console, which manage incoming and outgoing calls, depriving operators of any autonomy, creativity and socialisation (Roque, 2010). Operators provide information to customers, connecting them to third parties, through the sale of goods, products and services, through telephone, email, chat and video calls, that is, computer-based technologies. As in the case of other digital and platform workers, at the end of each task (gig), carried out through calls, emails, video calls or chat, the operator's service is evaluated, either by the company or by the customer.

The Great Recession resulted from Troika's intervention, followed by austerity measures and a major restructuring of the labour market, commodification of public services and restructuring of capital with automation and the substitution of goods for services, resulting in mass unemployment and precarious work (Carmo et al., 2021). In the aftermath of the Great Recession, platform economy (Kenney & Zysman, 2016), tourism, and foreign investment became alternatives to overcome the accumulation crisis. Around 2015, Portugal suffered an intense wave of "touristification" within a process of transnational gentrification (Cócola-Gant, 2016, 2018; Füller & Michel, 2014). Lisbon was promoted as an ideal destination not only for tourists, but also for international students and lifestyle migrants looking for a good and cheap place to live in southern Europe. There was also a trend towards the digital management of work, which extended well beyond work carried out under the control of online platforms, that is, the platformisation and uberisation of work.

Uberisation is a new form of organisation, management and control of work, being mediated by information and communication technologies (ICTs), which together with the expansion of the service sector has increased informal, unstable and precarious working conditions, especially through poorly remunerated operational activities (Antunes, 2018). It is devoid of a standard employment relationship between the employee and the employer, accommodating all the exceptions to the standard capitalist system, where the worker becomes an entrepreneur of him/herself and/or an independent contractor (Antunes, 2018, 2020; Huws, 2016).

Nevertheless, digitalisation blurs labour market dualisation between standard and precarious workers (Schwander, 2018). These trends also reshaped the hotel sector and personal transportation business regarding goods and people, mainly through Uber that became a prime example of the gig economy (Roque, 2023b). AirBnB, Tuk-Tuks and Uber services gained strength among the new digital precariat. These aspects differentiate the digital economy from the traditional economy, mainly due to the rapid transformation of value chains, where digital technologies merge with products and industrial services, creating hybrid products, that is, the “Internet of Things” and “Internet of Services”, elements of Industry 4.0 (Roque, 2023b). This also led to migration currents that became more pronounced since 2016 with the arrival of workers from Africa, Asia, but mostly from Brazil who sought to escape the economic and political crisis by seeking better and safer living conditions. Nevertheless, the dreamland they imagined they would find ends up being a world of competition, suffering, and informality (Roque et al., 2021; Poleto Oltramari et al., 2023).

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the trend of platformisation and uberisation of work, promoting significant changes in the world of work, exposing pre-existing social vulnerabilities and inequalities (Huws et al., 2019) and unveiling a series of trends of exploitation and domination, through the ability to organise and control (Moraes et al., 2019). Precarity and vulnerability became aggravated, since several workers had no option but to become gig workers, especially immigrants and those who were unemployed. There was the predominance of bad or bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018), with the raise in the proliferation of multiple atypical and precarious forms of work to the detriment of waged labour associated with modern industrial capitalism, based on effective contracts and social protection (Kalleberg, 2011). Gig workers experience high levels of atomisation and pervasive monitoring, non-standard forms of employment, intensification of flexibility, being subject to the entrepreneurial ideology, driven by a variety of forces, including demographic shifts, labour market regulations, macroeconomic fluctuations, and technological changes (Abílio, 2017; Antunes, 2018; Doellgast et al., 2018; Gandini, 2018; Kalleberg, 2018; Keune & Pedaci, 2020; Slee, 2017; Tassimari & Maccarrone, 2020). This raised issues related to (un)decent employment standards and legal status of workers with the absence of a fixed contract and a salary, informal arrangements, uncertainty, intermittence, and lack of access to labour and human rights

(Benavides & Silva-Peñaherrera, 2022; Kalleberg, 2009). That is especially the case for migrant workers in Portugal who are located especially in agriculture, service (call and contact centres) and logistic sectors, most of them being devoid of any labour and human rights, suffering slavery and xenophobic harassment.

3 METHODOLOGY

Between 2020 and 2023, 16 in-depth interviews were carried out with call and contact centre migrant operators in mainland Portugal, from the North to the South. The fact the author has worked as a call centre operator during her career professional and having collaborated with the Call Centre Workers Union (STCC), allowed us to establish greater proximity and empathy with some operators and trade unionists. Also, non-probabilistic snowball sampling was used to obtain privileged informants. The interviews and contacts were conducted using the telephone, social media and online platforms, such as Zoom, WhatsApp and Skype. Bearing in mind that call and contact centre work involves rotating days off and shifts, most interviews were conducted using online and telephone services, allowing a greater availability and anonymity for many of the operators that at any time of the day or night, including weekends and holidays, could respond to the call to participate in this analysis.

The interviews covered several dimensions related to their occupational trajectories, such as: family social class, professional experiences and/or transitions in the labour market, training, access to social protection, housing, income, immigration, trade unionism and activism, citizenship, daily and relational life, social representations of institutions, aspirations and perceptions towards the future, the affectations of the pandemic crisis and its multidimensional impacts, and also ways of coping with precariousness and suffering in call and contact centres.

A netnography method approach, comprising ethnographic and virtual fieldwork from the internet, concentrated on social networks and technoculture, where technology and social intersect was also carried out (Kozinets, 2014). It involved the nonparticipant observation in WhatsApp and Facebook groups to establish a closer relationship with drivers and deliverers and to follow not only their interactions, but solidarity and struggle arrangements. The information obtained from the interviews in the first person, it was possible to carry out a discourse analysis using MAXQDA software.

At the time of the interviews, all workers were employed in the call and contact service and living in the various regions of Portugal Mainland. According to our interviewees, this is an activity carried out mainly by female workers, aged between 25 and 50 years old and who make this as their main source of subsistence. The sociodemographic characteristics of this sample comprise four women and two men, aged between twenty-two and forty-seven years old. Most of them have a college degree and do not have any prior experience in this service. All the data were organised through qualitative analysis techniques (Bardin, 2011, Schreier, 2012; Zwick, 2018). A flexible coding scheme using MAXQDA qualitative software was used for analysing the interviews based on the operationalisation of the central concepts of the case study (Carmo et al., 2021; Schreier, 2012).

4 IMMIGRATION IN EUROPE AND PORTUGAL

Since the 1980s that Portugal become a country of immigration, especially from its former colonies who arrived first, followed by migrants from Asian countries, as well as from Eastern Europe in the 2000s. According to Castles et al., (2014, pp. 16–17), the abolition of geographic, political, economic and cultural borders has led to the globalisation of migration, with a tendency for a growing number of countries to be simultaneously affected by migratory movements. International migrations can be associated with precarious conditions, especially with a loss of both home and protection, placing migrants in situations where they are vulnerable and at risk of exploitation and discrimination (Steger, 2013) that Portugal has become a country of immigration, especially from its former colonies who arrived first, followed by migrants from Asian countries, as well as from Eastern Europe in the 2000s.

In fact, Bauman makes the distinction between tourists, from the global north, and migrant vagabonds from the south, who are forced to dislocate to escape poverty and to find work, asylum or refuge because of war, discrimination, climate change, and other factors (Bauman, 1998). The most common case is regarding labour migrants (Kritz, 2016) who are driven by “push” factors (e.g. a lack of work or low wage in their homeland and “pull” factors (jobs and higher pay available elsewhere)). Vagabonds tend to be those who have one or more (and often all) disesteemed statuses. They tend to be more likely to be poor, black, a member of a maligned ethnic group, female and from the South (Ritzer, 2010).

According to the International Organisation for Migration (2019, p. 132), a migrant is a person who moves from his or her place of habitual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and across a variety of reasons. Although there was a decrease in 2008 with the socioeconomic crisis, migration numbers raised again in 2016. According to the RIFA 2020 Report, Brazil is by far the most common country of origin, with migrants from that country counting 183.993 individuals, followed by the Cape Verdean, with 36 609 people.¹ In 2022, Portugal saw its number of foreign citizen residents rise to an unprecedented 782.000 (+11.9% compared with 2021), representing 7.5% of the total resident population. It represented the fifth-highest rate of 76.9 in the EU of labour market activity by foreigners, being 18.7% higher than that of Portuguese citizens. However, in comparison with native citizens, foreigners continue to be employed in the most precarious sectors and activities, such as construction, manufacturing, garment making, assembly, platform delivery of food and people, especially in the accommodation and food service activities (11.3%),² that is, non-skilled positions.³

The immigrant population in Portugal has increased, totalling 752,252 in 2022. According to the Immigration and Borders Service (SEF), there was an increase of 58,365 immigrants in comparison to the year prior, an 8.3% increase. Nevertheless, the largest growing immigrant populations in Portugal in the last year were from Brazil and India. The Brazilian community remains the largest immigrant population in Portugal, with over 233,138 people, a 13% increase since 2021, followed by the United Kingdom (36,639), Cape Verde (35,744) and India (34,232).⁴ The Indian community also increased by 13% to around 34.000 residents, making it the fourth-largest immigrant population in Portugal.

According to Schierup (2007, p. 152), although with differences between countries, in general, the economic sectors representing the worst working conditions began to absorb in a widespread way the work

¹ <https://sefstat.sef.pt/Docs/Rifa2020.pdf>.

² https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe_en.

³ https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/library-document/immigrant-integration-indicators-annual-statistical-report-2023_en.

⁴ <https://www.portugal.com/news/immigrant-population-in-portugal-increases-to-75000/>.

of undocumented immigrants as an indispensable part of their productive system, these sectors offer a range of conspicuous examples of feminisation and racialisation of the labour market that go hand in hand with the degradation of work in the post-Fordist flexible regime. The hierarchical system of subcontracting, flexibility and informalisation (which, until then, affected nationals of those territories to a lesser extent) is indicated as key elements for understanding the characteristics of the work of these undocumented immigrants (Basso, 2003).

5 PORTRAITS OF IMMIGRANT WORKERS

This section aims to analyse the occupational trajectories through which immigrant workers are made and reproduced under digital platform capitalism (Baglioni et al., 2022). These portraits result from interviews conducted with call and contact centre workers in Portugal during 2020 and 2023. The sample comprises 15 interviewees, where 9 are female and 6 are male workers. In Table 1, it is possible to see the sociodemographic profiles of this sample of 15 interviewees, where 9 are female and 6 are male workers.

They are aged between 33 and 60, and are from Venezuela, Brazil, Colombia, Cape Vert, Germany and France. Also, the majority lives in rented apartments (T2), in the Lisbon region, and has access to a private vehicle. Their family background is mostly from the working-class, even though there are people whose grandparents and parents were middle-class holding a degree. In other cases, there are people who have Portuguese lineage, while others descend from a family who was prone to migratory movements and that is printed in their DNA. Some of them were married with Portuguese men, in Portugal and abroad, and then came alone with their children searching to obtain their Portuguese nationality, while others had Portuguese relatives.

“I moved due to the social, economic and political crisis in Venezuela. My children’s father is the son of Portuguese parents, and my children had Portuguese nationality. Then the opportunity arose to leave. One of my children already lived here in Portugal and in search of a better future for them and stability, I left a country that was on the verge of a civil war. (...) I have no complaints about how Portugal opened its arms to me and I found a job 9 months after arriving, but I always say that I was very lucky because I entered a call centre speaking my native language in Spanish and

Table 1 Sociodemographic characterisation of the interviewees

	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Country of Origin</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Years in Portugal</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Habitation</i>
E1	Male	France	40	16	Masters in Anthropology	In a relationship	0	Rented T1 in Lisbon
E2	Male	Cape Vert	38	22	12th Grade	Married	1	Rented T1 in Coimbra
E3	Female	Germany	59	35	Degree in Management	Divorced	1	Rented T1 in Sintra
E4	Male	Venezuela	44	8	Degree in Informatics	Single	0	Rented Room in Braga
E5	Female	Venezuela	55	9	Degree in Information Technology	Divorced	2	Rented T5 in Braga
E6	Male	Venezuela	45	11	Degree in Management	Married	2	Rented T3 in Braga
E7	Female	Brazil	38	4	Degree in Journalism	Married	1	Rented T2 in Lisbon
E8	Female	Brazil	38	1	12th Grade	Married	1	Rented T2 in Sintra
E9	Female	Cape Vert	33	13	Masters in Biochemistry	In a relationship	0	Rented T1 in Lisbon
E10	Female	Brazil	40	3	Degree in Human Resources	Single	1	Rented T3 in Sintra
E11	Female	Brazil	48	8	Degree in Law	Married	1	Rented T2 in Sintra
E12	Female	Brazil	40	6	Degree in Management	Married	1	Rented T2 in Sintra
E13	Male	Brazil	43	6	Degree in Environmental Engineering	Married	3	Rented T2 in Porto

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Country of Origin</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Years in Portugal</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Habitation</i>
E14	Male	Colombia	60	10	Degree in Accounting	Married	1	Rented T2 in Sintra
E15	Female	Brazil	50	14	Degree in Pedagogy	Married	1	Rented T4 in Lisbon

Source Elaborated by the author, 2024

earned a little more than a minimum wage and 670 euros (...) It was back and forth on the same day, sometimes more than three hours to get home, but it was worth it because it was work (...) There was always this instability at work, I didn't know if I would leave or no (...) I loved my job, but it was manageable. Until the end of 2020, I loved my work. I was there from August 2015 until March 2020". [E5, Woman, 55 years old, Venezuela]

"My grandfather was Portuguese, according to the citizenship law I would have a direct dependence because it is up to the 3rd generation, my son would still have the right to Portuguese citizenship. However, when my father was born, my grandmother was separated from my grandfather and the What did she do? When she registered my father, she didn't put her father's name". [E13, Man, 43 years old, Brazil]

With the exception of two persons, all the interviewees had completed academic degrees, ranging from Management, Biochemistry, Accountability, Information Technology to Human Resources. Most consider that having a degree did not allow the access to a better job in Portugal.

"No, because I have overqualified colleagues such as doctors, lawyers, graduates and Portuguese specialists in call centres". [E4, Man, 44 years old, Venezuela]

"Before going to work for a call centre, I tried a lot to try in my field (...) what emerged in terms of response first were call centres. I sent my CV

and the next day they got in touch with me". [E9, Woman, 33 years old, Cape Vert]

They came to Portugal, especially in the aftermath of the Great Recession, to search for better living, working and safety conditions, although they had a qualified occupational trajectory in their countries of origin. Many have worked in call and contact centres for more than two years, finding themselves subject to turnover resulting from flexibility and job insecurity, transitioning contractually between the various temporary work agencies. However, when they arrive in Portuguese territory they are forced to accept precarious and informal jobs, such as in the call and contact centre, cleaning, agriculture, construction, logistics and tourism sectors. According to Huws (2014), they form the cybertariat, the new proletariat of the digital age, who risk their lives, even though they might face several challenges, especially during the first two years, where they feel obliged to accept informal and independent working conditions to survive.

"Life as an emigrant is not easy, the first 2 years are a constant battle. I started preparing, I spent a year planning. Until the last minute I had nothing, not even a job, I just arrived with the money I had and tried my luck. After 2 years, things have started to ease up. It is challenging". [E13, Man, 43 years old, Brazil]

"Your experience has no relevance here in Portugal, only for working in a call centre. When I came in 2013 with my son, I didn't have any work. I went to the interview, enjoyed it and ended up staying (...) The first call centre was in January 2014, where I worked 8 hours initially with green receipts and without a contract (...) When you arrive in a new country you have to adapt to the conditions there. I can't claim to have what I had in Colombia (...) I was just starting out, I didn't know much about the Portuguese language. It wasn't a happy job, but it gave me peace of mind. I provided customer service to Spain. I spent approximately 8 months with green receipts, but then I gave up looking for something better (...) the situation was a bit complicated and there wasn't much professional stability". [E14, Man, 60 years old, Colombia]

Although some of these immigrants had already worked in call and contact centres, most suffered a downgrade in their employment status

and quality of life, just to find the opportunity to escape war, insecurity and crime. Among the male interviewees there were logistics and control administrators, commercial managers, public accountants, and among the women there were hairdressers, secondary teachers, insurance intermediaries, logistics secretariats, administrative secretaries, and receptionists.

“In Venezuela I lived on a farm, but in Portugal I have always lived in a room in an apartment in the centre of Braga with an Argentinean and a Venezuelan in a T3”. [E4, Man, 44 years old, Venezuela]

“I had a very comfortable life in Brazil. I have a degree in Environmental Management, but I also have several technical courses. My last job in Brazil was a commercial manager and it was a good salary. My wife also had a beauty salon. I had a car, I had a recently furnished 3-bedroom house, with 2 suites, with a garage for 3 cars. My daughters studied at a private school, it was a very good life”. [E13, Man, 43 years old, Brazil]

Before coming to Portugal, most of these immigrants have a network of family or friends to whom they reach.

“For us, the transition was that we left at a time when a lot of people also left Venezuela. My fear was arriving here and not having friends or colleagues to share with, but we arrived here and so many Venezuelans came that I felt at home and that thing made the transition here not so complicated (...) What was most difficult and took a long time was finding a job”. [E6, Man, 45 years old, Venezuela]

The process regarding documentation and legalisation can be a very long and traumatic process, restraining immigrants from obtaining access to qualified employment and renting a house. Most workers found employment through the support of their networks or by themselves searching for job offers on the internet. This happened especially due to the fact that they were did not have access to social security number, VAT number, and a residence certificate.

“This process took 40 months (...) and a friend of mine told me that there was a lawyer in Lisbon who could give me a solution (...) he told me that there is Article 88 (Residence permit to carry out subordinate

professional activity) which says that when your tourist visa expires you have 90 days and you can extend it with SEF for another 30 days and make an expression of interest that would imply an employment contract. But before that you must have a taxpayer number, social security number, certificate of residence from the parish council, bank account, insurance. At the Bank it was not easy to open an account because I was an immigrant and having NIF, Social Security and a passport weren't enough, I only had a tourist visa". [E4, Man, 44 years old, Venezuela]

In fact, especially in rural areas, people can suffer from racism and xenophobia until they are approved by the neighbourhoods where they live.

"It was a shocking experience in terms of xenophobia and non-acceptance. I couldn't rent a house under any circumstances. It was a scary situation, because I barely spoke to people, they hung up on me. It was something that I was very scared about because my friend's friend is someone who was born in the city, and his parents are well known in Torres Vedras. Only after his mother went for a walk with me around the city on a Sunday was I able to rent a space to live with my daughter". [E11, Woman, 48 years old, Brazil]

In the case for exchange students, such as PALOPS, who came to attend academic courses using border agreements, they had easy access to documentation. Nevertheless, the cultural adaptation process can be difficult.

"When I finished the 12th year in Cape Verde, I think the objective was to study and as at the time the universities were still in their initial phase and there weren't many courses yet (...) as Portugal and Cape Verde have many agreements with universities regarding Palop it is much easier. (...) The first months were more difficult to get used to, the new climate, new country, being alone. I think it took me about a year to get used to being alone. (...) The process of acquiring nationality was much simpler than requesting a renewal. In this sense, I think SEF is much more bureaucratic". [E9, Woman, 33 years old, Cape Vert]

Most of these workers consider themselves in the condition of being precarious and poor, having to work simultaneously for several jobs or employment activities to complement their low income (puriactivity).

“Life has become very difficult. I consider that before I wasn’t, but now I consider myself precarious, but now I’m precarious because I have to do a lot of things have three professions: the union, full time at the call centre, and I am also a part-time Uber driver, which is another precarious job. I’m a driver, sometimes I work two or three hours, but I am very poorly paid too. I still have to help my family, my sister who is in the USA (...) I don’t consider myself a poor worker, but I don’t have everything I would like to achieve, I have to eat, maintain a good quality of life. It is difficult to plan the future with the current situation (...) we are facing a crisis similar to the 2008 crisis, who can think about having a child even if they have capital and stability, there are no conditions”. [E4, Man, 44 years old, Venezuela]

“I consider myself a precarious worker in the sense of being poorly paid, of having more work than being recognized”. [E6, Man, 45 years old, Venezuela]

Regarding their projection in the near future, some of them don’t see any other alternative in the labour market but to be a call and contact centre worker.

“Last week I turned 60 and I want to continue working in the back office because there are no jobs in the job market”. [E14, Man, 60 years old, Colombia]

“The ideal job for me is the call centre. The idea that the call centre is a temporary job will disappear because there are many people who have their families working in a call centre and make it a profession like working in a textile factory (...) I don’t see myself working in a cafe. I don’t see working in call centres as temporary, there are many families that depend on the call centre, it’s a job for life”. [E5, Woman, 55 years old, Venezuela]

6 PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS SUFFERING

In this scenario of (de)regulation and flexibilisation of work, the world of digital and platform work comprises a stage of suffering, provided not only by business management, by the metrics established by algorithmic management which, in a way, embodies the role of a virtual foreman,

and temporary work agencies. These immigrants had been working either in outbound and outbound, back and front-office work, especially in customer support service, for more than two years. They do not constitute a transitional workforce, although they were subject to precarious working conditions involving temporary work agencies. In fact, call and contact centres are among the most common and easy entrance employment opportunities for immigrants, being most of them grateful, even if they might suffer exploitation.

“Most people see it as a place of passage in Brazil. In Portugal, it is seen as a means of survival”. [E11, Woman, 48 years old, Brazil]

“There were colleagues that when they came in started talking bad about their work. You are in a place with air conditioning, with a computer, you earn more than the average Portuguese person and you are speaking in your natural language, which is a benefit. You are in another country, and you have to adapt to it”. [E5, Woman, 55 years old, Venezuela]

In many cases, this is stigmatised work, manifested through situations of racial, sexual, migrant and gender harassment, in which the workforce finds itself in situations of enormous social vulnerability and which, for survival purposes, is subjected to precarious employment relationships.

“When I started everything was fantastic, but when I reached the second-year things started to get complicated. My metrics are always great, but I start to feel harassed. The supervisor told me that I was a piece of trash who had to go home, and even wanted to report me to the SEF. I remember that, at the time, the SEF came here to the centre, and that day was a Wednesday, and thankfully I had the day off, they took a deported Colombian and a woman from Equatorial Guinea who got arrested”. [E4, Man, 44 years old, Venezuela]

“Many immigrants come here, from France, Spain, Africa, Equatorial Guinea, Columbia, Brazil and Argentina. It is a multicultural mix because behind this there is precariousness (...) There is a high turnover of people in every call centre service in Portugal. There are more immigrants and LGBT people who take refuge in this work, but they also suffer seriously anyway. There are also doctors, surgeons and lawyers, systems engineers who are in call centres as their main profession (...) Why do you think

the government needs immigrants with expressions of interest? Because it is precarious work and that is what this type of business needs, whether due to naivety or ignorance where people just cry (...) They are not paid extra for speaking other languages and overtime". [E4, Man, 44 years old, Venezuela]

"There was an episode of a supervisor that was heard in the room a supervisor slapped a girl in the face and that was a very shocking scene, I was like, oh my God! There is a colleague of mine who is Italian and the supervisor was telling her to put on a leash because that's what you are, and she didn't know what the word leash meant and when she realised to what she was associated she started crying because it is a very strong word. There was a lot of sexual harassment from the supervisors who used their hands to massage. They bullied at work. I never complained to Authority for Working Conditions, as I had an expression of interest, I didn't want any conflict". [E4, Man, 44 years old, Venezuela]

These continuous situations may lead to high levels of stress, burnout and emotional exhaustion, as well as psychological illnesses, such as anxiety, emotional dissonance, depression, consumption of anxiolytics, antidepressants, and, in more serious situations, sudden death and suicide (Dejours, 1994; Derry & Kinnie, 2004; Roque, 2010).

"In 2018, a colleague of the English customer support line committed suicide. He hanged himself at home because there was a mistake, another of many, and he had only received 40 euros in salary and was full of debts. After several complaints the company did not help him. He got tired and committed suicide". [E4, Man, 44 years old, Venezuela]

"And, suddenly, I asked my colleague, what's going on, Adelino? Let's take you to a doctor. The supervisor said that I had to serve customers. But I helped him and I went to the bathroom. He was having a heart attack, and the company was unable to call an ambulance". [E4, Man, 44 years old, Venezuela]

"She started crying and knocking on the iron door. No one could help unless there was a disciplinary process, but the girl managed to get out of the window and she went to the iron door and threw herself. By each

window there is an air conditioning platform and, and the windows have spikes to prevent pigeons from straying into the windows. The French colleague got hurt all over and they had to call the ambulance and the police. This call centre building was designed from scratch with this architecture due to the train line and the frequent suicides. Every week there were suicide attempts, accidents at work, crying”. [E4, Man, 44 years old, Venezuela]

“By law, you can work six days, one day off and then another six days. They would force us to work overtime every day or ask for Friday, but we accepted. I accepted and did it because I needed the money. The mental exhaustion was total, it was total, but they took advantage of our need to do this. It was only our service because others weren’t willing to do that. The Portuguese and the French lines did not work overtime”. [E5, Woman, 55 years old, Venezuela]

Besides these, there are also situations of disrespect for the human condition and the physiological conditions associated with it.

“Each call has 10 minutes of average handle time, if it was longer than that and if it was a sale, everything would be fine. We have 12 minutes of break in the morning and afternoon, and 1 hour for lunch counted by the second. Every month women have physiological constraints that they cannot control, it is impossible. I saw it happen to colleagues who stayed there and then got up and had dirty pants”. [E13, Man, 43 years old, Brazil]

During the Covid-19 pandemic, most workers were immediately transitioned to the telework regime, while others had to find help in trade unions or had to strike. Instead of liberating, this entire experience constituted a new source of precariousness for workers who found themselves burdened with work costs, increased surveillance and, in some cases, with domestic and care work that became aggravated, especially for women. However, issues related to the transfer of costs from capital to labour still persist, as is the case with the payment of water, electricity, internet bills and the costs associated with work equipment (computer, chair, table), and in some cases the meal allowance was withdrawn. Situations of imposing Orwellian control and surveillance also worsened, through the

attempt to install webcams in workers' homes to possibly control their performance and biometric control applications.

"There is a chat called OyeTalk where you have to apply or notify (...) I have a company phone where you have to connect via VPN. But they wanted to install an application on my phone, and I said no. (...) You know what they say to me, instead of paying me the difference in the cost of cold weather? We recommend having a blanket, secondly having a cup of hot tea and a cat by your side". [E4, Man, 44 years old, Venezuela]

Regarding trade unions, there is concern from some unions around immigrants, for there are delegates who speak foreign languages or are native. Nevertheless, people do not seem to be interested in trade unions or politics, mainly due to their irregular situation in the country.

"In Venezuela unions are not well regarded because it is a mafia. Here it is a little different, but it also has a political content of profit logic. The union has to be dependent on all workers. They cannot think of the communist logic of that the owner of the company is the bad guy and the worker is the victim, they see that it is bad to make a profit from a business". [E5, Woman, 55 years old, Venezuela]

"I was already a union member, and my experience wasn't that good (...) They went with me to speak to the company, but I didn't have support from them. And we had to take legal action because my dismissal wasn't fair and the union was always saying yes, let's see, let's do that and that and I ended up leaving the union. Doing things on the outside I had better results. The union must be something that is meant to bring benefits to the employee, to carry out strikes, but at the end of the day those who benefit are on the employer's side. These union members were fired after a while time, and they could find a solution for them. So, I don't really believe in the union". [E6, Man, 45 years old, Venezuela]

Most call centre workers feel that they do not and cannot build a career in call and contact centres in Portugal, because social mobility is not for everyone.

"I don't feel like I have a career. They don't allow it because there is no meritocracy. You have to be a total devotee of the boss, you have to be

part of the elite club, which is the pure mechanism of capitalist wear and tear that is 21st century slavery”. [E4, Man, 44 years old, Venezuela]

“It’s very difficult to build a call centre career in Portugal because I have seen colleagues who have risen to supervisory positions and are worse off than when they were answering lines, colleagues who can’t even have lunch anymore. They don’t leave call centres out of fear or convenience of finding something else. They are constantly disappointed with it. I don’t see it as career, but as a job that helps those who are immigrants and compared to it. Others, for example, such as cleaning and restoration, are lighter work, but it is work that takes a lot of energy from you, the emotional fatigue is enormous”. [E13, Man, 43 years old, Brazil]

7 DISCUSSION

Considering the research questions raised in this article, the analysis of these portraits allowed to demonstrate that immigrant occupational trajectories are built of constant instability and precariousness, fearing dismissal, for they live in the here and now (Antunes, 2011, 2020; Carmo et al., 2021; Doellgast et al., 2018; Kalleberg, 2018; Keune & Pedaci, 2020). Individuals perceive this type of work as a way of escaping unemployment and integrate the labour market, even though they realise the real dangers this could bring in the near future, especially due to the eventuality of not being able to access basic labour rights.

Digital platform work is not a mere trend, but a process which has been growing, especially after the pandemic, employing the most economically vulnerable, typically immigrant, male and racialised workers (Zwick, 2018). In the twenty-first century, it is crucial to analyse the working-class experience and its morphology and to understand the complexity of post-industrialised societies that are undergoing a process of digital transformation and a consequent dehumanisation of work with the subordination to the algorithm and the transfer of risks to workers, where workers become obsolete and disposable, being “outdated” and replaced by others that are less demanding and flexible, or even by machines (Abílio, 2017; Kalleberg, 2009). The working-class must be understood as exploring the intersections of class with gender, ethnic and sexual identities in the context of changes in patterns of immigration and the rise of new protest movements and forms of organising (Clarke & Hubble,

2018). This highlights not only a new morphology of work, but also of the working-class in its structural precariousness. This reinforces the idea that the working-class is still, or has become even more, heterogeneous, differentiated, and fragmented (Antunes, 2018). It was also evident in this article that disregarding these workers renders them to a vulnerable condition.

The present case study has revealed that most call and contact operators experience situations of flexible, low-paid, and intermittent working conditions, enduring a life of exploitation and oppression in work, and seasonal, shift and physically demanding and repetitive work, facing various health problems, including psychosomatic illnesses, and situations of racial, gender, moral, and racist harassment and xenophobia (Roque, 2020). Through the perceptions of the interviewed immigrants, it was possible to understand the profound problems that arise from the fact that precarious immigrants are marginalised, especially those with an irregular status, even though their labour power is central to many sectors of the labour market as seen during the pandemic (Benson, 2021; Guadagno, 2020; Tagliacozzo et al., 2020). Workers know that they are being exploited but have no other way than to accept the plunder (spoliation) (Marx and Engels, [1849] 2010, p. 242) of their subjectivity.

In the absence of quality employment opportunities, this may be the only way to enter the labour market, especially for immigrant, flexible, temporary, racialised and atomised workers. When the pandemic stroke most were not considered as eligible for receiving any governmental support and they had to enter the informal and digital labour market. The gig economy can lead workers to benefit from job opportunities that they might not be able to access otherwise, on a flexible-schedule basis, allowing them to match work with the performance of other activities and to balance their income. This requires that workers with agility, creativity, open to short-term changes, assume risks on a continuous basis, lowering the level guaranteed by state legislation, and destructuring the employment category as central of the labour law, in the face of a flexible contract that does not even guarantee a minimum wage (Sennett, 2006). The main issue remains in the lack of recognition of the different services regarding digital platform work as professional categories, as in the case of call centres and couriers. Temporary work agencies are still a determining factor for the perpetuation of labour exploitation. An operator can work for several companies in a single day, have a precarious contract renewable daily, weekly, or monthly, or not have a contract at all, being caught

in the web of informality, and be surveyed through a volatile machinery system governed by the metrics stipulated by the algorithm.

8 CONCLUSIONS

Digitalisation blurred the labour market dualisation between standard and precarious workers (Schwander, 2018), whereas labour protection and employment regulation are not assumed by default (De Stefano, 2016). Their core claims of a regular contract and specific regulation need to be addressed. If they keep on being disregarded in the legislation discussion, companies will keep on circumventing the majority of labour laws passed in general, perpetuating situations of (bogus) self-employment and informality (Moore & Newsome, 2018). These workers need to be given visibility. All of these situations are reflected in the discrediting of unions, the lack of collective bargaining due to lack of representation in the sector, weak social dialogue, and little synergy between unions. Governments and unions need to approach these workers and recognise their labour specificities, not only drivers and couriers, ensuring that their rights to social dialogue and collective bargaining are enshrined in the European legislation. The findings of this article also aim to contribute to the emerging debate on precarious labour relations in the gig economy, and decent work regarding digital platform workers in a scenario of racial platform capitalism.

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PART II

Strategies of Resistance



Organising Migrant Platform Workers in London: The Case of IWGB

Paolo Borghi  and *Annalisa Murgia* 

1 INTRODUCTION

The landscape of trade unionism has undergone profound transformations in recent decades, driven by a growing recognition of the need to engage underrepresented categories of workers, including migrants and Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) workers. In this attempt, trade unions have increasingly embraced revitalisation strategies aimed at broadening their membership base and building coalitions with diverse collective actors. Central to these strategies are efforts to adopt an organising approach that can encourage activism among members, and to address not only class and economic exploitation but also other forms of inequality, including those related to race, ethnicity, and social inclusion.

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This chapter critically examines the approaches adopted by traditional trade unions in representing migrant workers, highlighting the limitations that led to the failure to fully recognise the unique vulnerabilities resulting from the intersection of employment and migration status. Drawing on a growing body of literature on the collective organising of migrant and BAME workers, particularly in the field of platform work, we point out the importance of adopting more inclusive and nuanced strategies that acknowledge the socio-cultural profiles of workers and the complexities of their experiences. Moreover, we discuss the key role played by civil society and co-ethnic networks in advocating for migrant labour rights. Indeed, in our research we explored how independent unions especially have increasingly collaborated with these external actors to support migrant workers and challenge unfair labour practices, particularly in the context of digital labour platforms.

In particular, we take the case of the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB), shedding light on the construction of forms of mobilisation through continuous negotiation with migrant and BAME workers. Through an immersive ethnographic approach, the study—conducted in London between 2019 and 2021—illustrates how the IWGB has navigated the complexities of organising precarious migrant platform labour, both within and outside the union structure. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of building bridges with other non-union organisations and communities to amplify the voices of migrant workers and challenge exploitative practices in the gig economy.

2 RECLAIMING MIGRANT WORKERS' RIGHTS

The ability to engage migrant and BAME workers—along with other poorly represented categories of workers, such as women, young people, and more generally non-standard workers—has been one of the main trade union revitalisation strategies in recent decades (Alberti, 2016; Connolly et al., 2014). In particular, Ibsen and Tapia (2017) identified two main trends that, despite national differences, are currently affecting trade unions in the Global North: the convergence towards the so-called organising model, which aims to reach new worker constituencies, and the capacity to build coalitions with other collective actors, including social movements as well as migrant associations and community organisations.

More specifically, in recent years, a number of scholars have highlighted the over-emphasis by traditional trade unions on class and economic

exploitation at the expense of other inequalities and a lack of attention to the socio-cultural profiles of actors, including non-union entities (see Alberti & Però, 2018). By adopting this perspective, a flourishing debate has elaborated on how trade unions are (or are not) able to recruit and organise low-paid migrant workers, and on the novel strategies they can develop to mobilise this particularly precarious category of workers (Holgate, 2005; Milkman, 2000). At first, the focus was on the two main approaches adopted by trade unions to recruit and organise migrant workers: the first, termed ‘universalistic’, which assumed a homogeneous identity of workers, and the second, labelled as ‘particularistic’, which considered migrant and BAME workers as members of specific ethnic communities or individuals with distinct social and employment needs. By showing the ‘false dichotomy’ between work and migration issues, Alberti and colleagues (2013) highlighted that for a long time, trade unions have tended to consider migrants as ‘workers’ rather than ‘migrant workers’, therefore failing to recognise the specific vulnerabilities resulting from the intertwining of employment and migration status. Moreover, in the same article, the authors pointed out the need for trade unions to broaden migrant worker mobilisations beyond the workplace to include community groups.

Contemporary research on the representation of migrant workers agrees that trade unions—historically criticised for protecting the interests of the established workforce only, failing to adequately represent migrant and BAME workers—have in recent years focused more on issues of race, ethnicity and social inclusion, although their efforts can be inconsistent and not always transparent (Martinez Lucio & Perret, 2009; Milkman, 2011). In the current debate, there are mainly two interrelated strategies of trade unions to represent migrant workers’ rights that more broadly reflect the trade union’s renewal strategies. The first one concerns the importance of civil society and especially co-ethnic networks to provide support to migrant workers and advocate for better working conditions, both online and offline. The second is the ability of trade unions to draw on their social movement origins and adopt an organising approach to stimulate activism among their members.

The ability to leverage public relations and civil society for migrant labour rights has long been recognised as a crucial strategy for unions (Martin, 2010; Theodore & Martin, 2007). In analysing the collective representation practices of migrant workers, scholars have progressively shifted their attention to the community organising approach, which

emphasises the importance for unions to build alliances beyond the workplace and the union context (McBride & Greenwood, 2009), especially with workers' ethnic communities, which are more characterised by solidaristic bonds and reciprocal support (Cioce et al., 2023). What has been termed a 'community-oriented' perspective, in fact, sought to investigate the practices of collective action and, at the same time, the processes of identity construction, and how these factors influence union-community relations, as well as the overall success of organising initiatives (Jiang & Korczynski, 2024). Furthermore, this perspective emphasises the importance of the development of 'communities of struggle' (Hamann & Türkmen, 2020; Però, 2020) for a bottom-up construction of community organising.

Labour organising is recognised as an effective strategy for representing migrant workers, particularly in precarious sectors, as it can empower workers by encouraging participatory democracy and substantial worker engagement (Cioce et al., 2023). This approach is indeed supposed to facilitate self-organisation and autonomy among workers, contrasting with short-term and top-down methods (Connolly et al., 2019; Holgate et al., 2018; Jiang & Korczynski, 2016, 2021). However, labour organising has often been criticised for being instrumental and depoliticised, with little room for grassroots initiatives. The approach of organising has thus been described in the debate as not always able to challenge business-oriented social partnership models and manage the complexities of social identity and interests of migrant worker members of the unions (Martinez Lucio et al., 2017; Però, 2020). This led to moving beyond a trade union-centric perspective, paying attention to grassroots efforts and the self-organisation of migrant workers, within trade unions, but especially within other collective actors, such as independent unions and grassroots groups, that proved most able to challenge the processes of racialisation and precarisation affecting migrant labour (Alberti & Però, 2018; Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024; Jiang & Korczynski, 2024).

The role of independent trade unions and grassroots groups in representing the rights of migrant and BAME workers has become even more visible with the emergence and spread of digital labour platforms. Indeed, existing studies show that in European urban economies, platform work is predominantly migrant-staffed (Piasna et al., 2022; van Doorn et al., 2023; Woodcock & Graham, 2019). From 2016 onwards, and to an even greater extent during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, Europe, as well as other countries globally, have been crossed by several campaigns

and protests concerning working conditions in the platform economy, in particular among food-delivery riders and taxi drivers (Borghi et al., 2021; Dhar & Thuppilikkat, 2022; Leonardi & Pirina, 2020; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). In this frame, the ability of migrant workers to mobilise against the precarity produced by digital labour platforms has proven effective on several occasions. Indeed, “many of the groups, associations, and unions leading these disputes were either founded by migrant workers or supported by them. Rather than take exploitation as a given at a time of pandemic-induced economic instability, they have organised to resist unfairness” (Alyanak et al., 2023, p. 668). While the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities, it has also facilitated a series of struggles, albeit with different intensities in different global contexts (Della Puppa & Perocco, 2021).

Migrant platform workers have collectively defended their rights and interests mainly through grassroots groups and independent trade unions also because it took some time for traditional trade unions to realise how disruptive the platform model was (Bagnardi and Murgia, forthcoming). Such non-union collective actors have shown the ability to take legal action, to approach already self-organised groups of migrant and local BAME workers, to build communities of workers as well as networks and alliances, not only based on working for digital labour platforms, and to innovate established trade union practices by supporting new forms of mutual support and solidarity (Borghi et al., 2021). Moreover, in the case of platform migrant workers, as well as for migrant workers more generally, co-ethnic networks, both online and offline, have also played a relevant role (Borghi & Murgia, 2024; Però & Downey, 2024; Wood et al., 2018). Indeed, gig economy workers have been able to take advantage of the networks developed in their local area, as well as digital communication channels, not only to connect with other workers, but also to build broader forms of solidarity, established in their everyday lives beyond work relationships. By activating their families, friends, and ethnic groups, migrant platform workers have managed to create a sense of mutual identification that is necessary for collective action. These communities have then been able to provide critical logistical and emotional support, enabling workers to organise protests, advocate for better working conditions, and challenge unfair labour practices (Atzeni & Cini, 2023).

Drawing on this flourishing literature, our study uses the case of the IWGB, an independent union based in London, to investigate the

construction of forms of mobilisation as the result of processes of continuous negotiation with migrant and BAME workers. In doing so, we focus on the perspective of both workers and unionists supporting the protests and show how the observed strategies of organising were built both inside and outside the union.

3 RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

The research findings presented in this chapter focus on migrant labour in the context of platform work in the United Kingdom. This focus is part of a broader research programme developed in the frame of the ERC project SHARE—Seizing the Hybrid Areas of work by Representing self-Employment, conducted by a multidisciplinary research team.¹

The case study was conducted with members of the IWGB, one of the most relevant unions within the UK's labour landscape focusing on the representation of migrant workers, including those engaged in the gig economy. With its main headquarters in London, at the time of the fieldwork, the IWGB comprised ten branches, representing a diverse spectrum of professions, including but not limited to cleaners, security guards, couriers, care workers, university staff, private hire drivers, charity workers, cycling instructors, yoga instructors, game developers, and logistics workers.

Access to the organisation and the spaces of collaboration were negotiated with members occupying various hierarchical positions within the union. Research endeavours were characterised by an immersive ethnographic approach, conducted mainly in London in two phases. The first ran between March and August 2019, and the second one was planned in 2020 but then postponed to July–December 2021 due to Covid-19 restrictions. Our participatory involvement extended beyond mere observation, encompassing engagement in public forums, internal coordination meetings, demonstrations, pickets, and other public events, thus facilitating both formal and informal interviews. The data collection process was enriched by an extensive collection of relevant documents, ranging from internal communications to publicly disseminated reports, press releases and official statements, all of which enriched our comprehension

¹ This chapter is part of the SHARE project, which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 715950).

of the organisational position and dynamics. The interaction during the fieldwork was conducted mainly in English and occasionally in Spanish and Italian. A meticulous transcription (and, when necessary, translation) of field notes and interviews ensured continuous collaboration within the research team. Digitally transcribed texts were regularly uploaded to a remote server, fostering collective analysis.

Employing an inductive approach, our data analysis centred on thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) utilising Atlas.ti 24 software. Iterative examination of textual corpora aimed at identifying recurrent themes, thereby shedding light on the processes of collective organising of migrant and British BAME platform workers. The coding process underwent continual refinement to effectively address our research inquiries, enriching an analysis strategy aligned with principles of collective reflexivity in qualitative organisational research (Gilmore & Kenny, 2015; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

4 INSIDE THE UNION

Engaging with Migrant Workers

Organising of migrant workers originated with the very birth of the IWGB union. From the beginning, IWGB organised Latin American precarious cleaners, then extended its offer of representation to other low-paid migrant workers. A bottom-up approach to migrant workers' collective organising shaped its activities since it began, gaining experience and skills that have constituted the union's strengths over time, allowing it to expand its reach to other precarious workers, both migrant and non-migrant, in the gig economy and beyond.

Despite the experience accumulated over the years, which allowed the union to consolidate knowledge and practices, at the time of the fieldwork, the obstacles and barriers in organising migrant workers were still present. As the union's BAME officer claimed:

So, my kind of stance on it is that the labour movement altogether in the UK has routinely failed minority ethnic workers and labourers... IWGB was made as a split from Unison because they weren't willing to organise the Latin American working at the university. This is very much at the heart of what IWGB was. A lot of the other unions have just completely failed on this front. And so, you know, my kind of role in this small institution is to make sure that we stay on target as we kind of grow. You don't lose that part of

what we're doing because like the work itself is very, very hard. It's not easy, especially with the language barrier. I feel like lots of our activists do not speak English and others who've been mismanaging that, but it's something that has to be overcome in order to make the whole thing happen.

The narrative of the origins is a well-known story shared both by the historical representatives of IWGB, who directly experienced the events in the year following its creation, and by the new union representatives who recounted with precision and pride how the union in which they carry out their activities came into being. This is the case of the trade unionist quoted below, who coordinated all branches of the union. Indeed, during the interview, he emphasised the importance of maintaining the same orientation adopted from the beginning.

When we started it was just cleaners and harder outsourced workers in University London sites. These people were unsatisfied about the work done by Unite and Unison and they were fighting for their rights... Unions are used to have their proper procedures in place to look after migrant workers especially and the final point with Unison came when IWGB officials, or let's say people who would become IWGB, were about winning elections... They declared the elections void, so these people said that was the end with Unison and they decided to join that really recently created union, the IWGB that had come from a very similar background. They started running campaigns through IWGB, a big one was the campaign of 'tres cosas'.

The campaign cited by the interviewee refers to the claims made by a group of Latin American migrant workers in 2012, but which had a direct precedent in the wild strikes initiated in 2011 by the workers themselves without the permission of the union to which they belonged. The campaign demanded three things recognised as basic rights for workers: paid sick leave, paid annual leave, and pensions. In the narrative of IWGB members, this campaign was obstructed by Unison—the reason why, as the interviewee recounted, migrant workers decided to join IWGB, a union created only one year earlier. The experience of that campaign shaped the union's attitude and types of interactions with migrant workers and strategies to support their collective demands. The experience gained from the success of the 'tres cosas' campaign was then extended to other workers, such as private security guards, to the inclusion of platform workers:

Normally I'm in charge of organising cleaners—outsourced migrant cleaners were one of the main group of workers that created IWGB in London—and security guards as well. We have two branches. One is called

Cleaners of Facilities branch; the other one is called Security Guards branch. So, my job is to organise them in their workplaces and then try to see what problems today they have and see if we can make them members of the union. Depending on what is the issues, if they say collectively, maybe launching a campaign to improve the pay and conditions of work. Sometimes many... normally most of these people that we represent, they are migrant workers who are on precarious conditions of employment. So that's what we do.

The experience gained in traditional areas of precarious work proved to be fundamental in defining the set of skills and practices that, to a large extent, spilled over into the context of platform work. Indeed, the difficulties and opportunities experienced returned in new forms and combinations. In the beginning, it was not simply a matter of skills and practices, but of building and maintaining a certain reputation combined with the ability to make the effectiveness of mobilisations visible. Moreover, as another unionist and rider met during the fieldwork claimed, interlocution with workers started from extremely distant perspectives. The ability to listen to their claims requires time, energy, and a significant capacity to adopt the workers' point of view to include their perspective in a collective bargaining framework that the union can adopt.

This is something I really want to challenge as a union. I think is really fundamental: it is about personal agency. I work full-time, like, but I want the agency to not work when I want. And recently we've had a campaign with the cargo drivers. Some of these guys working, were working like 15 hours a day, six days a week, but they still want free log in. And you can't like... I feel like to a degree, okay, it seems like a fiction. It seems like they are wrong... At some point you've got to be like, you've got to hear what they're saying. They just want those hours per week to be their choice when they stop working. And I feel like, okay, we could try and... You know, you can make the argument that actually, this is ridiculous, and you should have more formalised employment. At the same time, you got to listen to...

In the words of the interviewee, therefore, the union should make constant efforts to consider workers' voices, especially in labour contexts with a significant migrant and BAME component. The expectations, trajectories, and claims of workers may in fact be quite different from those that a traditional trade union might act for, considering the needs of its standard members. In this case, the meaning of not wanting to be hired as an employee—linked to the ambiguity of digital labour platforms in requesting documents, income maximisation, and the flexibility

of having multiple jobs—needs to be analysed not only in the framework of standard employment to which a series of rights are granted, but also considering the alternative strategies of migrant and BAME workers, which may be linked to life trajectories that do not overlap with those of standard employees represented by traditional trade unions.

The first meeting with platform workers showed the complex dynamics that underpinned the process of collective organising of migrant workers. As the unionist interviewee recounted, the first contact opened a phase of dialogue aimed at finding common points of coordination and action:

Our general secretary was who started first organising cleaners when he was a student. But couriers we had no absolute idea [...] Couriers came to us and they said, “we have seen what you have done with cleaners and we have seen the high-profile campaigns you have organised and please can you do the same for us?” And I think they have really evolved with the support of IWGB, trying to design actions trying to be eye-catching because they can make a big difference. But when they came to us, we have essentially asked few basic questions: how many people you have, who is interested, and we usually ask for a dozen people [...], what were the main issues in their workplace, and we focused on one or two issues and we heavily campaigned those. With couriers we played that playbook and tried to be as ambitious as possible as well being focused on what workers wanted really to achieve because I think it’s why we stand out along the times in the union movement because of our willingness to respond to radical requests and that’s the thing on what couriers were interested in.

A window of opportunity thus opened thanks to the initiative of the food-delivery workers themselves, in search of a trustworthy interlocutor able to listen and interpret emerging needs, which were not entirely codified. It is for this reason that in this first phase of their activities of collective organising, collecting, analysing and understanding demands for claims were the basis for defining the first strategic actions capable of orienting the energies of the protest, concentrating on issues widely shared by workers. The testimony reported here by an IWGB unionist also underlines the need to assess the existence of a minimum number of workers interested in playing an active role in organising protest actions. On the one hand, this aspect granted the union the possibility of developing a solid dialogue with a group of workers that could act as an intermediary with the wider ethnic groups of workers potentially interested in supporting protest actions and awareness-raising campaigns. On the other hand, it guaranteed the possibility of actively supporting a group

of workers by sharing practices and tools for a collective struggle that in a medium-term perspective could become an autonomously manageable heritage:

They said, “we are all just very vulnerable, not treated really well, there is a lot of bullying in the work”, so we look at those issues and we wanted to meet that challenge although we haven’t addressed all the issues in the courier industry. Something’s changed since they joined us because we have got the pay rises, we have managed to get victories in legal cases, and we have managed to get union recognition that is quite out of order in courier industry. There are therefore some paths really typified on how we build an early campaign and now they are expanding on different branches and some of them are becoming national as in the case of Deliveroo workers and Stuart too, that is another food-delivery company, 10% owned by a French company.

The long process of negotiation and organisation of activities promoted by the independent union in coordination with migrant and BAME workers thus generated in the medium term a process of structuring and consolidation that, as mentioned above, allowed for the progressive settlement of specific branches in the areas of the country where the practices of protest-claims were developed. Indeed, if the starting point was the city of London, where the food-delivery platforms began their activities and where a significant number of workers were concentrated due to the size of the urban area, over the years other cities, such as Manchester, Sheffield, Liverpool, and York, became the sites of experimentation of collective forms of organising food-delivery workers’ claims and actions.

Recruiting Migrant Workers as Unionists

Along with the continuous attempts at dialogue and support of spontaneous protests raised among migrant and BAME platform workers, another equally important element for inclusive paths within the union was the capacity to foster forms of legitimacy and protagonism creating spaces of recognition for migrant workers who then became union representatives, facilitating the involvement of other workers with the same origins. This was the case, for example, with a Brazilian rider who, after responding to a call promoted by the union, was selected to become a reference organiser for the Latin American community.

I did the application for the job, so they called me... made the interview. That was it. But, before, never had any contact. Of course, I saw them, in the news or I saw them in some protests but was never really attractive enough for me to chase them.

The case presented above was part of a long-term strategy in structuring the organising activities promoted by the union with the support of specific projects for large-scale campaigns such as the one promoted by the International Transport Federation (ITF), which allowed the IWGB to cover part of the costs for new union positions. The presence of different migrant communities from many countries represented at the same time a great opportunity and a significant element of complexity, as reported in the interview with a young Italian unionist who for a couple of years contacted and organised several groups of food-delivery workers with migrant backgrounds in London, at a time when digital labour platforms were consolidating their market:

Organising riders in London is very complicated; there are migrants from many different countries with very different backgrounds, e.g. North Africa, Brazil, India, Bangladesh. Between these groups there are a bit of differences due to language barriers... they generally don't understand each other, therefore they don't speak to each other. Moreover, the various forms of mistrust in our society are also reproduced within these communities even if they are marginalised communities. There are however dynamics of exclusion or fractures that, for example, involve undocumented migrants. We as unionists must be aware of and take into account these fractures when we try to organise migrants. Sometimes it happens that a Black Caribbean British uses the same stereotypes as a white racist against Brazilians because he is a little more English than the others, while other fractures occur in other groups with respect to religious orientation. We have to look at these barriers, trying to deconstruct them, but it is not a job that can be done right away; that is why we initially look at homogeneous groups by migrant background, trying to find so-called natural community leaders.

Identifying natural community leaders therefore represented the first step in organising food-delivery riders with a migrant background, creating the possibility of building a shared path where frictions within the group could develop over different ideas with respect to shared goals, but without the further challenges caused by linguistic misunderstandings, negative stereotypes, or ethnic prejudices.

One of the strategies adopted was to focus attention on the specific dynamics taking place in the workplaces of people approaching the union.

It was at this level that opportunities for representation could develop and the reasons for collective organising could take root. The union's strategy therefore consisted of seizing these opportunities and supporting central figures for mobilisation who could become reference persons for the union itself, acting as collectors of claims and referents for workers involved in campaigns and protests.

I was personally a member of IWGB, since 2018–19, since I started this self-employed thing, because I have always been member of a union since I'm working here in the UK. So, when I became a self-employed, I became an IWGB member. I was a silent member, being a union member, but not spoke a lot. [...] For the last two years, I was just a silent member. Then what happened? To now, when we are struggling there, yeah, I was really involved in the protest since the beginning and now I'm the reference union rep for the protest: The company's bad behaviour has harmed me directly and I am now openly fighting for my rights. We already had a meeting with Ryde when Ryde took over. So, Stuart was working fine but they got this new company called Ryde. Yeah, this is a brand-new company. We never heard about it or something. And only few people knew the guy, who was very close to the managers. This is what happened: they send us an email on the day when they started saying 'there is this new company is going to come for a trial. This will have a minimal effect of your deliveries' and all that thing. I said 'okay', but what they said was not true and our deliveries decreased significantly despite they promised the equivalent of 40 working hours per week.

The interviewee, who was of Pakistani origin, played a strategic role from the very first days of the protest, acting as a contact person for IWGB (then becoming the leader of the protest), explaining the reasons for the discontent and the misbehaviour of the company which, after an initial promise to improve working conditions offering a substantial increase of the daily deliveries per worker, decided instead to reduce the assignments to some of them, thus significantly reducing their earnings expectations. All this happened through a change of the company in charge of supplying the labour, without any kind of transparent process of information and involvement of the workers. This case, discussed in more detail in the following section, is extremely representative of IWGB's ability to seize the misconduct of digital labour platforms as an opportunity for active involvement of the migrant and BAME workers in union activities.

5 BEYOND THE UNION

IWGB's activities largely revolved around specific campaigns focused on emblematic cases of ethnic discrimination and misconduct involving migrant and British BAME workers in the context of platform work. During the fieldwork, we had the opportunity to directly follow the protests against Ocado Zoom, a company focused on developing automated technologies for logistics management. To test new technologies, the company developed an experimental food-delivery service that had as its centrepiece the warehouse showroom where the new technologies were on display for potential customers from all over the world.

As one of the protagonists of the protest told us in a long interview, the company enticed self-employed workers, predominantly of Pakistani and Bengali origin, who were contracted exclusively through service providers Ryde and Stuart, to invest in electric or hybrid vehicles.

They wanted to use only polluted free vehicles, zero carbon miles and all that things, which is obviously not true because after that public campaign, after they made their advertisement and all that thing, what they've done, they promised that they were going to give us 40 hour per week, which is a full time in the UK, 40 hours per week guaranteed, if we switch our cars to the green. So, most of us bought this car using our own expenses. I had money in savings, and I sold my other car. And mix it up. And I bought this car with my money safe for my house. I want to buy my house, I'm going to get the mortgage, so that was my money, but I thought, OK, I can own this money back within a year, if they guarantee me 40 hours money every week. And now I am messed up because my plan was to buy a house next year or end of this year. Now I'm totally messed up. I have this car. I can't do anything with this car. Like, how can I own money now? I don't have a job, they literally made us all jobless. They offered me £10.85 an hour, minimum London wage, if I had applied to one more company they chose to manage the fleet. As self-employed, I was earning like £15 an hour. Even sometime more.

Promises of a substantial increase in delivery orders, equivalent to 40 working hours per week, were made as part of a 'green transition' initiative. However, shortly after these workers had invested their savings in environmentally friendly vehicles, the new management, succeeding the previous one, abruptly dismantled the plan. Most delivery orders were redirected to couriers using diesel cars and motorbikes, rendering the investments futile. To make matters worse, the company implemented

a fire-and-rehire tactic to cut costs under the new contract, subsequently reducing payment per delivery. The perception of having been misled and the mockery of being in the position of earning less than in the previous period, together with the company's refusal to acknowledge its mistakes, led to a campaign to denounce such situations of discrimination. This situation was even more unbearable because the company was playing on ethnic divisions to prevent workers from uniting.

On 30 September 2021, a protest against this misbehaviour took place in West London near Acton Town. It formed part of a broader coordinated effort to condemn the jeopardisation of jobs held by BAME key workers. Commencing at the Ocado Zoom showroom-warehouse, which had previously been the starting point for couriers, the demonstration saw workers, IWGB members, and activists marching through the area. Public speeches were delivered by workers, activists, and various supporters, including the founder of the Nocado campaign and the local MP for Ealing Central. This protest not only addressed the grievances of Ocado Zoom workers but also provided a political platform for an alliance between IWGB and the Archway and Tufnell community in London. This coalition managed to oppose Ocado's plans to construct a 24/7 depot near Yerbury Primary School, raising concerns over urban development regulations and the adverse effects of increased pollution and noise on the local area.

During the demonstration, a spokesperson for the Nocado campaign highlighted the exploitative practices of the digital labour platform, its failure to uphold ethical standards regarding worker treatment, and its disregard for environmental concerns. The collaboration between IWGB and the Nocado campaign remained steadfast in the subsequent months, with both organisations offering mutual support in their respective initiatives. Additionally, a message from Black Lives Matter London, expressing solidarity with the workers' struggle against Ocado, was read aloud during the protest:

[...] We can't be with you in person, but we are with you in spirit. We have a message we want to send to all workers. We want to make you know that we all stand in complete solidarity with you in your struggle against Ocado and we look upon your action here today with admiration and respect. We also have a message for Ocado bosses if they didn't know already, we want to make our position crystal clear: we are sick of sick treatments of black and brown workers on the hands of Ocado and we completely reject that political gesturing. It is absurd that Ocado pretends to be an ethical

brand to be committed in equality and diversity. You cannot be selectively anti-racist. That's not how it works [...].

This message condemned the mistreatment of Black and brown workers and criticised Ocado's purported ethical stance on equality and diversity. The demonstration drew widespread support, particularly from migrant and BAME workers who had been dismissed after investing in environmentally friendly vehicles. The focal point of the protest was the rejection of Ocado's disingenuous portrayal of itself as an ethical company, particularly in regard to environmental and diversity management issues.

The anti-Ocado Zoom campaign represented an opportunity for collaboration between IWGB and other non-union organisations, such as civil society associations and the activists of Black Lives Matter London. As the interviewee—a rider and unionist committed to demanding the rights of ethnic minorities—testified, the collaboration with Black Lives Matter became continuous and structural because the union was extremely attentive to social groups that suffered extreme forms of discrimination, and the Black Lives Matter network found in it an interlocutor consistent with its objectives:

We have gotten a lot of support for various campaigns from... so, like, Black Lives Matter is one of the bigger ones I've been talking with. So, I've written articles for them in the past, just on the topic of like anti-racism in the UK [...]. And so where IWGB kind of like browses in, I think, is on having like a really close relationship with the workers themselves, who all experienced these different forms of repression, kind of mostly through their labour. [...] And so, I think that what is kind of valuable for these organisations [...] It's very useful for us as well because like they have a larger kind of like media presence, than we will.

The collaboration with Black Lives Matter, a highly structured network in the UK, allowed the IWGB to strengthen social alliances that enabled it to amplify the voice of the protest and thus influenced public opinion with respect to the core issues they were dealing with, while at the same time helping to support the objectives of the partners with whom they formed alliances, which in this case were civil society associations and Black Lives Matter especially.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we focused on the forms of collective organising of migrant and BAME platform workers by looking at the specific case of the independent union IWGB, the main organisation in the UK currently dealing with the collective representation of migrant and precarious work. In doing so, based on the data gathered during our ethnographic research, we showed that the observed forms of organising were built both within and outside the union. Our analysis is therefore in line with the debate on the ‘organising model’ that is increasingly being adopted by unions to reach underrepresented categories of workers, and migrant workers in particular, to build alliances with other collective actors (Holgate, 2005; Milkman, 2000), represented mainly by civil society associations and co-ethnic networks supporting migrant workers (Martin, 2010; McBride & Greenwood, 2009). In the context of platform work, this approach is carried out in particular by independent unions, which together with grassroots groups were the first to organise food-delivery riders in Europe (Borghi & Murgia, 2024; Borghi et al., 2021; Leonardi, et al., 2019; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020).

In our study, first, we analysed the main characteristics of union action both in the phase of approach and interlocution with migrant and BAME platform workers and in the processes of active integration of the same migrant workers into the union structure in correspondence with specific struggles and protests. Second, we showed how, during specific struggles and campaigns, the independent union in question acted by building bridges and links with other organisations capable of supporting and sustaining the claims of migrant workers. In doing so, we noted how IWGB was able to effectively capitalise on the expertise it had developed in representing precarious migrant labour in other contexts, such as cleaning, gaining visibility and reputation that allowed it to initiate a dialogue with food-delivery platform workers. Reputation and visibility then gave way to a long interlocution that allowed it to define shared objectives with migrant and BAME workers through a democratic process that included and defined common demands, starting from the real needs expressed by workers. This involved a long process of mediation and mutual recognition by the workers with their needs and by the union with its own experiences and practices. This meant taking workers’ claims seriously, even when they were not in line with the union’s expectations. This contribution is therefore also an invitation to open a structured reflection

on the need to set up flexible and shared representation strategies with migrant and BAME workers, capable of redefining union expectations to standardise migrant workers' claims and to understand their specific needs linked to both working conditions and biographical trajectories. Indeed, as Alberti and colleagues (2013) suggest, the false dichotomy between labour and migration issues must be deconstructed, not least to open up new shared meanings and spaces for collective organising.

The case of IWGB in the context of migrant platform labour shows how the dense and largely hidden work of interlocution can succeed in opening up democratic processes of inclusion and collective claims. To overcome inter-ethnic fractures, often instrumentalised by the digital labour platforms themselves, one of IWGB's main strategies was to support co-ethnic networks and then extend struggles to all union members regardless of migration background. In addition, the systematic work of connecting with civil society associations and organisations such as Black Lives Matter helped to reconnect labour conflicts with social conflicts. Indeed, the alliances thus constructed aimed to question, and thus challenge, labour exploitative practices that are functional to the reproduction of the social status quo and racialised labour markets (Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024). This case study shows that the inclusive and democratic practices of collective organising of migrant and BAME workers contribute to restoring an overall meaning to work, understood as a form of emancipation.

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Migration, Precarity and Solidarity Among Migrant Platform Workers in China's Food Delivery and Ride-Hailing Sectors

Yang Zhou 

1 INTRODUCTION

Like anywhere else in the world, China has in the recent years saw a steady growth of a large body of gig workers in its various service sectors. Official statistics show that until 2022, around 84 million worked in China's platform economy, mainly in ride-hailing, courier service, food delivery and logistics.¹ While no precise figures are available, several survey reports show that most of these workers are rural-to-urban

¹ https://www.acftu.org/xwdt/ghyw/202302/t20230228_825484.html?7OkeOa4k=qAk.rqkRgB_5Tirn2uVzJdJKQNF4OtOpuvNkA4nEOlqmqmJcxFDqAqqgG.

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migrants. For example, a 2021 report by International Labour Organization shows that nearly 80% of Meituan's² riders previously worked in manufacturing, construction, mining, transportation, catering and accommodation sectors that were once dominated by rural-to-urban migrants. The figure is slightly lower, but still significant in the case of Didi, which is around 65% according to the same report (I Zhou, 2020). In general, these workers have relatively low level of education, typically graduates of high and vocational schools, although since the pandemic, more and more people with higher education degrees took these jobs due to the bleak labour market condition. Geographically, while in the case of export-oriented manufacturing, most migrant workers concentrated in cities of China's industrial heartlands like Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Shanghai, platform workers did their daily grinds in both industrial heartlands and industrial peripheries.

As has been shown by numerous studies, news reports and surveys, labour conditions among these migrant gig workers are precarious and backbreaking, characterized by intense exploitation, high risks of sexual assaults and occupational injuries and diseases, and a lack of employment protection, which only worsen as leading platforms secured market leadership (Chen et al., 2020; I Zhou, 2020). In daily management, riders and drivers, legally designated variously as independent contractors, self-employed or dispatched agency workers, are subject to the dual pressure of algorithmic systems and human managers that systematically favour platform and customer interests over theirs. Despite high risks of work injuries and occupational diseases, most of them are not covered by the occupational injury insurance scheme, not to mention other forms of social protection and public services like education, healthcare, housing etc..³ Finally, there is little space for skill upgrade, career development as well as little space for them to air their own voice, in managerial decision-making related to price-setting, commission deduction, service standards, and reward and punishment system. Under this condition, if, as ILO's

² Meituan is China's largest food delivery platform. It forms a duopoly with its largest competitor, E'leme in China's food delivery market.

³ This is even so given the state's recent move to institutionalize gig workers' social protection, by decoupling social protection from employee status. Under this new regulation, a centralized work injury fund was set up for all gig workers to apply in cases of injuries, alongside a platform-instituted commercial insurance. For other social protections, gig workers are made eligible to pay for their own social protection scheme, which are too costly for many.

report cited above shows, riders and drivers enjoyed relatively higher—yet unstable—income than local wages before the pandemic, this was because they had worked for excessive hours. For example, a 2018 survey showed that 30% food couriers worked for more than ten hours each day in a week (Wu & Li, 2018). The condition only got worse since 2021, as the much-anticipated post-pandemic economic recovery did not materialize. In my post-pandemic trips to Shenzhen and Guangzhou, riders and drivers frequently complained that they now needed to work for even longer hours to get less income. They frequently used *ao'shijian*, enduring time, to describe their work, because they needed to work for 4–5 more hours to earn the same amount as pre-pandemic times. Many reported working for 12–16 hours a day. Some even slept on their cars during the night.⁴ Pervasive overwork has severely damaged the health of drivers and riders. Occupational diseases like backpain, prostatitis, sexual malfunction, and heart attack are commonplace. Even cases of sudden death in cars were not rare.⁵ Official statistics on such fatalities are non-existent. Yet according to *E-hailingHeadlines*, the WeChat portal of a Guangzhou-based legal and repair service provider for ride-hailing drivers, and several other channels of its kind, more than 50 drivers were reported dead in their cars in 2023 after prolonged periods of overwork. Given *E-hailingHeadlines* relies on its fans for news resources, which is around 80,000, it is plausible to say that across the country, the actual number of such cases can only be higher.

Squeezed to the extreme, migrant gig workers are not docile bodies incapable of resistance. In their daily work, they constantly co-create labour algorithms and mutual aid communities to make the labour process more bearable (Sun & Chen, 2021; Zhou & Pun, 2024). In addition, they also leverage collective actions to push management and government concessions (Lei, 2021; Liu & Friedman, 2021; Zhao & Luo, 2023; Zhou & Pun, 2024). Notably, since 2017, China Labour

⁴ Ride-hailing drivers sleeping on their cars has frequently made it to national news headlines in the past two years. for example, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_25832815; https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_27561020.

⁵ Official statistics on such fatalities are non-existent. Yet according to *E-hailing Headlines* (网约车大事件), the WeChat portal of a Guangzhou-based legal and repair service provider for ride-hailing drivers, and several other channels of its kind, more than 50 drivers were reported dead in their cars in 2023 after prolonged periods of overwork. Given *E-hailing Headlines* relies on its fans for news resources, which is around 80,000, it is plausible to say that across the country, the actual number of such cases is higher.

Bulletin's strike map has documented a total of 567 collective actions among food delivery riders, and more than 170 cases among ride-hailing drivers, which represents at best a tip of the iceberg.

To date, existing studies to understand this dialect of precarity and resistance tend to take the labour process approach (Burawoy, 1979; Gandini, 2019; Smith & Thompson, 1998) and locate platform workers' precarity in the realm of the immediate labour process. It has been argued that algorithmic management is the main factor behind platform worker precarity. By algorithmic management scholar denote an algorithmic system that is constantly fed by labour process and user data to automate workforce direction, evaluation and discipline (Kellogg et al., 2020; van Doorn & Chen, 2021). Main mechanisms of algorithmic management include automated order dispatching, automated evaluation and rating, dynamic pricing and information asymmetries, among others. The goal is to produce just-in-time and just-in-place labour. In addition, customers are invariably granted organizational power of direction, monitoring and evaluation over workers to laundering control (Y Zhou, 2020), further supplemented by subcontractors or third-party labour intermediaries (Li, 2021). Finally, these control mechanisms evolve over time, depending on the platform's desire to increase profit margin, the changing institutional environment and the expectations of financial capital. All these arrangements are found to be able to socially, legally, spatially individualize workers, thus accounting for various forms of precarity outlined earlier.

In the meantime, this largely technology-enabled, dispersed form of labour process arrangement and individualization paradoxically also offer platform workers free space to associate, through both social media and offline interactions. As a result, like platform workers in Europe, in China they have strong associational power (Joyce et al., 2023; Zhou & Pun, 2024). Apart from mild forms of mutuality and contingent agency, riders and drivers also resort to more confrontational collective actions. Insofar as platforms rely on riders and drivers to deliver orders, this very simple fact gives them strong workplace bargaining power against the platform and third-party agencies. In moments of resurgence, platform workers' strong associational power can translate into strong collective workplace bargaining power, to pressure management and government concession. Research further noted that the very marketplace flexibility platforms tap into, also gives riders stronger marketplace bargaining power, i.e. even though when the unemployment rate is high, workers can still switch

between different platforms easily, thus reducing their reliance on certain platforms while enhancing their collective power of resistance (Liu & Friedman, 2021; Zhao & Luo, 2023).

These studies offer important insights into platform workers' precarity and resistance in terms of how these are rooted in factors related to labour process arrangements. Yet this is far from sufficient. For example, this cannot account for why more and more riders and drivers overwork to death, for to point out workplace control is harsh and stringent and exploitative cannot account for why they risk their lives. In existing literature, one reason to account for this has been the gamification features of digital labour platforms, which serves to generate consent among platform workers. Yet if we consider the extremely long working hours drivers and riders have to endure, the pains and occupational diseases they suffer—not to mention rising cases of overwork to death, it is not difficult to realize that the arguments of gamification and consent significantly downplays—hence makes invisible—the pressures workers face when taking on such a harsh workstyle. To argue they are fooled to overwork themselves to death is simply untenable, if not absurd. This draws our attention to the role of migration in shaping platform workers' precarity and resistance, which can help enrich our understanding of how, alongside factors of labour process arrangements, institutional and cultural factors also shape gig workers' conditions and the gig economy in general. This will in turn help inform policymaking to enhance worker well-being and alleviate class conflict. This line of analysis can also provide clues for concerned parties to cultivate collective power and culture among migrant platform workers, paving the road for alternative forms of community economy and social relations.

In what follows, I first delineate my analytical framework, centring on notions of migrant precarity and modes of differentiation. I then elucidate my data sources. The main body of the analysis will identify three distinct modes of differentiation, explaining how they lead to migrant platform workers' precarity, on the one hand, while enable their solidarity and collective actions, on the other. To conclude the chapter, I draw some implications related to policymaking and bottom-up efforts to enhance worker welfare.

2 THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, my central research question concerns the relationship between gig workers' migration status, and their precarity and solidarity. To answer this question, I construe a theoretical and analytical framework that brings together labour process theory (LPT) with Stephen Castle's notion of modes of differentiation.

LPT explains workers' precarity and solidarity in terms of the outcome of the interaction and interdependence of managerial power and worker power in the labour process. In labour processes of capitalist nature, it is argued that capital/management has the inherent tendency to overcome the double indeterminacy to push for the highest possible amount of surplus value, through constantly changing labour process arrangements (Burawoy, 1979; Gandini, 2019; Smith, 2006). In this process, insofar as production requires certain level of collaboration among them, workers, while being exploited, also forge connections among themselves, which provides basis for solidarity (Atzeni, 2010).

First formulated by Burawoy in his *Manufacturing Consent*, LPT has since been variously critiqued and developed. In his later work, Burawoy himself challenged the unjustified empirical priority given to what is happening inside the factory workshop when understanding worker precarity and solidarity through the lens of the interactions between managerial and worker power. In *The Politics of Production*, he considered the impact of the state and the conditions of the external labour market (Burawoy, 1985). Later work in this tradition further explored how socio-cultural factors/institutions like gender and race shape micro-level labour process dynamics, including the implications for workers (e.g. Lee, 1998; Ness, 2005). This article considers the role of migration status, drawing on the notion of mode of differentiation.

In relation to migrant workers, the concept of *modes of differentiation* denotes the *institutional and sociocultural mechanisms*, in both home and host societies, that give migrant workers unequal chances in market competition and the ideologies used to legitimate them (Castles, 2015). For Castles, modes of differentiation are comprised of context-specific combinations of a range of factors—including race, legal status, ethnicity and nationality, among others—that are weaved into modes of differentiation that align with the interest of capital, in different historical, social and cultural contexts. Historically, governments across the

world play an important role in shaping particular modes of differentiation, especially through its control over immigration-related institutional arrangements to respond to labour needs and social malaise engendered by the changing capitalist political economy. Castles's account focused exclusively on western, advanced economies. As Munck (2013) pointed out in his critique of early, European-centric debates around precarity, changes in work due to the decline of Atlantic Fordism (Kalleberg, 2013) are but one modality of precarity, and that workers—especially migrants—have always-already been precarious in the South, shaped by, echoing Castle, the 'fraught relations between workers, the state and society' (p. 751) (see also Schierup & Jørgensen, 2016).

The notion of the mode of differentiation as outlined above can usefully help us capture migrant workers' possession or lack of power in relation to their employers, whether rooted in immigrant/migration policies, or broader sociocultural factors. By shaping the power relations between migrant workers and management, these modes of differentiation, along with factors in the immediate labour process arrangements, further shape the interaction and interdependence between workers and management and among the workers, giving rise to different forms of exploitation and connections/solidarity among migrant platform workers.

In the specific context of China, *hukou* and gender has long been two important and interlocking modes of differentiation that propel precarity among migrant workers (Fan, 2008; Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005). The *hukou* system is comprised of a set of policies and legislations regulating the supply, rights and entitlements of migrant workers. It distinguished between rural and urban residents in terms of their social, civil and political rights and entitlements and varies across localities. Rural migrants were in the early days required to apply for a temporary residence permit in order to live and work legally in Shenzhen, yet still excluded from social welfare and public goods provision. It is well documented how employment practices exploited their non-local status to create varied forms and experiences of precarity (Peng, 2011; Wu, 2017). This is further compounded by the role of gender, rooted in the patriarchal family and gendered conceptions of work. Where male migrants were generally under immense pressure to provide for the family and struggled constantly to retain control over work (Choi & Peng, 2016; Lin, 2013), female migrants were caught between rural patriarchy and urban exploitation. Besides, managerial practices were gendered, often conceiving young women as inferior, docile and disposable.

Migrant precarity can be understood in terms of structural condition, but experiences of precarity simultaneously create possible rallying points and harbinger novel strategies and discourses for resistance (Waite, 2009). This has shown to be the case among immigrants in advanced capitalism (Ness, 2005). In China, migrant workers are not docile and diffused mobs who do not feel part of a solidaristic labour community. As *hukou* and gender render them more precarious, this same key mode of differentiation also shapes their collective actions to negotiate precarity, by, for example, forming self-organized cooperative groups and participating in strikes (Chan, 2010; Fan & Xue, 2017).

To sum up, migrant precarity is relational, context dependent, contested by the state, capital and migrant workers themselves, and mediated by certain modes of differentiation. It designates structural conditions of neoliberal dispossession while provides a platform for contention and reclaiming commons. In China, migrant precarity has long been part of the state's development strategy and mediated by *hukou* and gender as two modes of differentiation. The gig economy developed in China amid profound political and economic shifts. How, then, does these politics of precarity and solidarity unfold for migrant gig workers?

3 METHOD

To answer these questions, this chapter focuses on two platform-based gig sectors, namely, food delivery and ride-hailing. They are chosen because they are epitome of the gig economy in China. Like many other gig platforms in China, they both emerged against the larger backdrop of post-2008 economic downturn. Both quickly gained market leadership through financial power. And they share similar legal, technological and managerial arrangements with other gig platforms, setting low threshold for entry, defining drivers as independent contractors, and relying on an algorithmic management and a delicate balance of crowdsourcing and outsourcing models for daily operation and labour control. Particularly relevant here are that both sectors employ a large workforce, among whom most are migrants, and that like gig workers elsewhere, the experience of migrant drivers and riders is a mixture of precarity, indecency, anger and frustration. Sudden deaths are not uncommon, while numbers and scales of driver collective actions increased over the past years. All these promise rich insights into the research question raised.

Data analysis in this chapter draws mainly on my fieldwork in the Pearl River Delta area, since 2020, mainly using ethnographic observation and in-depth interview. Two phases of fieldwork are carried out. The first phase lasted for 10 months between 2018 and 2019, during which period I stayed in an electronics factory and its nearby villages in Dongguan and Shenzhen. Initially, the goal was to understand migrant workers' mediated work and life experiences amid the rapid digitalization of the Chinese economy. In this process, I carried out 46 in-depth interviews with worker-turned-Didi drivers, recruited through (1) snowballing from factory colleagues; (2) drivers' WeChat groups; (3) reaching out directly at gathering points, each lasting for 1.5–2 h. In addition, I spent time with the drivers as they went through daily routines, observed their WeChat groups, participated in their regular meetings, and followed them in their collective actions.

The second phase was carried out between 2020 and 2023 in Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Nanjing and several small cities in Guangdong and Jiangsu Provinces, where I mainly carried out in-depth interviews with riders and drivers, with more than 40 interviewees. These interviewees were mainly recruited via connections with drivers and riders in Dongguan and from gathering points and charging stations in Shenzhen, Nanjing and Guangzhou. Most interviews lasted from 0.5 to 2 hours and centred around their experiences of precarity and practices of resistance and solidarity making.

To sum up, this chapter draws on my ethnographic fieldwork, and around 90 in-depth interviews with riders and drivers, over a period of a few years. This provides solid basis for some preliminary systematic analysis of the relationship between migration and platform workers' precarity and solidarity, while offers the possibility to delineate some temporal trends. Most of the interviewees aged between 20 and 50 who originally came from different provinces. Many were married with 1–4 children. The majority of them previously held rank-and-file or lower managerial positions in manufacturing and service sectors, ranging from assembly line workers and supervisors, small vendors and retailers, to those in sales and catering, all typical precariat migrant groups in China (Swider, 2017). This is consistent with the demographic pattern of Didi drivers in China as identified in corporate and NGO reports.

Full verbatim transcripts of interviews and extensive field notes were prepared for detailed analysis of the ways in which migrant drivers were

locked in precarity, the structural conditions and circumstances leading to their predicament the impact of these issues on their well-being, as well as their feelings and responses.

4 THE RISE OF THE GIG ECONOMY AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF MIGRANT PRECARIETY IN CHINA

Before analysing specific modes of differentiation and how they link to platform workers' precarity and solidarity, I first briefly sketch the organization of the two sectors China, and provide the context of their rise and expansion. Specifically, I mainly contextualize their rise and expansion within the macro-level economic crisis since 2008 and state-led efforts to pull China out of it, highlighting key industrial policies, employment policies and changes in the ideological sphere. I also point to changes in social policies, especially those related to migration, as they play important role in channelling workers to gig platforms and fix them in precarity. These, I hope, can provide the larger context for the analysis to follow.

The development of platform-based gig economy gained momentum in China amid entrenched domestic contradictions and the recent global financial crisis in 2008. By the late 2000s, the old export-oriented growth regime increasingly faced a profitability crisis, while social, labour and environmental unrest abound (Li, 2015). In response, from the early 2010s, the Chinese state pursued a new economic restructuring strategy that centres around digital and high technologies, to reorient the growth regime to one of capital and innovation-intensive and domestic consumption-driven, and rebalance the economy along sectoral, regional and rural–urban lines (Lei, 2023; Naughton, 2018).

In this recent round of economic restructuring, two central policies include *Made in China 2025* and *Internet+*. *Made in China 2025* aims to upgrade China's manufacturing capabilities through technological innovation, automation and informatization. And *Internet+* seeks to restructure selected areas of the economy through digital platforms to improve efficiency and productivity, including ride-hailing and food delivery sectors that this chapter focuses on. While, to use Lei (2023)'s framing, creating these new birds, the state was also careful to deal with the old birds, especially the labour-intensive manufacturing sectors. On

the one hand, the supply-side reform was carried out to reduce over-capacity, especially in low-efficiency state-owned sectors. On the other hand, inland government, especially those in underdeveloped central and western regions, actively seized the opportunity to take on the transfer of labour-intensive manufacturing sectors from the industrial heartland to boost local manufacturing and service sectors. In rural areas, a state-led campaign is leveraged to establish modern agricultural systems. All these contribute to the state's overall goal to promote economic growth by accelerating urbanization and boosting consumption.

In the past decade, the implementation of these policies, like in other liberal democratic market economies, has been fuelled by market and financial means. For example, in ride-hailing and food delivery sectors, financial capital, both domestic and international, provides extensive investment throughout their establishment, market expansion and monopolization, and research and development, which further shape platforms' labour use. But in China, as Lei (2023) has demonstrated, the state plays a more proactive role, not just in policy making to set the agenda and pathways for economic restructuring, but in policy implementation. Because to promote economic restructuring has been variously built into the performance evaluation of local governments, local officials were motivated—and to some extent had no choice but—to mobilize all possible resources and capacities—including but not limited to direct fiscal fund support, favourable industrial and tax policies, administrative support, relaxation of restriction on the operations of financial capital, de-regulation in substantial areas and social, as well as strategic discursive framing—to promote this development, especially by nurturing national champions across sectors.

Almost a decade into the restructuring, economic crisis and industrial restructuring produce large unemployment and structural change in labour market demand. In response, employment policies and labour protection aim to create more labour market flexibility to keep companies afloat. Labour dispatching is legalized (Kuruvilla et al., 2011), while the active labour market policy—notably *Mass Innovation and Entrepreneurship*—encourages entrepreneurship and actively embraces flexible forms of employment popularized by gig platforms (Zeng, 2014). Finally, vocational education is promoted unprecedentedly to meet the new demand for skilled labour (Central Government, 2010). As migrant workers form the backbone of China's work and consumer forces, important changes also take place in the *hukou* and social welfare provision systems. In

general, limits on rural-to-urban hukou transfer are relaxed, and migrant workers are now granted more civil and social rights in cities and better protected in rural areas. Yet because of local needs for economic growth and population control, reform was largely stagnated in megacities like Shenzhen. Besides, the new provision system is deeply unequal and neoliberal, favouring the formal sector and those with higher individual contributions. Where public resources fall short, private capital is encouraged to supplement through market provision (Duckett, 2020).

It is precisely in this transitional context that platform-based ride-hailing and food delivery began to emerge and establish itself in China. In both sectors, several leading companies have since 2012 underwent a process of gradual ascent, intense competition, and the establishment of market leadership. In this process, the organization of labour process in the two sectors similarly underwent substantial changes to become increasingly informal and precarious.

The food delivery sector started with platform direct employment, but gradually a mixture of crowdsourcing and outsourcing/subcontracting were developed and become the norm to balance labour power security and flexibility. In the crowdsourcing model, riders directly enter into relations with the platform and were subject to direct algorithmic management/ technological control by the platform itself in their daily work; in the outsourcing/subcontracting model, a subcontractor is responsible for the platform's operation in a designated area and is sandwiched between riders and platforms along an evaluative chain. In their daily operation, a subcontractor usually further divide the area into several stations, operating under the *zhanzhang* (station manager) responsibility system and performance-based tiered management.⁶ In the case of ride-hailing, the turning point was 2016, when state regulations of *shuangzheng*, double certificate, was promulgated after several cases of female passenger murders sparked public outrage. The new regulation required both cars and drivers to get licensed for a fee, while imposed strict restrictions on the specs of cars and driver experience and in some cities, their *hukou* status. As a result, many existing drivers and cars were no longer qualified. This gave rise to a shadow car-rental market

⁶ In real-world operations, platforms and subcontractors have great autonomy over how these mechanisms of management and control are designed and implemented. The reality is far more complex than what the space allows us to describe here, and can vary from place to place. But the general structure can be grasped as what has been described here.

where vehicle leasing companies (VLCs) rent cars to drivers on a monthly fee comparable to that of the traditional taxi sector. Like subcontractors in food delivery, these VLCs carry out daily management over the drivers and control them through deposit, rent and debt. In both sectors, the market is more fragmented in big cities at the industrial heartlands (Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Nanjing), while less so in small cities at the industrial periphery, measured in terms of the number of independent subcontractors/VLCs in a given geographical area.

In sum, China's state-led, tech-driven economic restructuring (STER) project results in the dispossession of rural subsistence and new forms of labour market informalization and differentiation, leading to the double crisis of employment and social reproduction. It reinvents the *hukou* system, subjecting migrant workers to neoliberal looking social welfare and public service provision while luring them to aspire for a better future in cities. A decade into economic restructuring, the level of unemployment remained high, especially after the pandemic. It is in this context this chapter examines the relationship between migration and precarity/solidarity among platform workers in China.

5 THREE MODES OF DIFFERENTIATION AND MIGRANT PLATFORM WORKERS' PRECARIETY

In this section, I identify three main modes of differentiation found among migrant platform workers' experience of precarity, namely skill-based, gender-based and *hukou*-based, and explicate how they, in their unique ways, link to migrant platform workers' precarity.

Tech-Driven Industrial Upgrade and Skill-Based Differentiation

Skill-based differentiation refers to instances where migrant platform workers are rendered to a disadvantaged position in, or entirely excluded from, certain segments of the labour market because of their lack of certain skills, due to constraints related to educational attainment, resources and time to acquire these skills. In the context of China's STER, the institutional basis of this skill-based differentiation lies in the fact that when the state lent enormous support to industrial upgrade, its efforts in 'skill upgrade' are sluggish, for it largely fails to provide migrant workers with related opportunities and resources. For one thing, rural-to-urban migrant workers are typically less educated, and they have always been

excluded from skill training provisions by the state due to their non-local *hukou* status, making it unlikely that they can possess the literacy needed to acquire new skills demanded by the restructured economy. For another, even when they do possess such literacy, many were either excluded from state provision of skill training due to their non-local *hukou* status, or because of the lack of time and income to sustain their lives when receiving training. Given the widening gap between wage increase and living expenses, many migrant workers are living a hand-to-mouth existence, which is further exacerbated in the aftermath of the pandemic. Unable to skill upgrade, migrant workers were hence channelled to platform-based service sectors like ride-hailing and food delivery, for the relatively high income these sectors can offer.

The story of 50-year-old Laowang, originally from He'nan, was illustrative of this emerging skill-based mode of differentiation. In our interview, he summed up his reasons to take up Didi in 2017 in terms of 'low-requirement jobs are too bad, but I am not qualified for good ones'. Before 2017, he held a lower management position in a small factory in Dongguan. When the factory was relocated to the inland province of Hu'nan in 2016, he rejected a senior position in the new factory. Yet when looking for new jobs in Shenzhen and Dongguan, he found himself left with little choice: most low-skill jobs were offered on a temporary basis, while stable jobs of higher income required substantial skills like moulding or operating advanced machines. He then took up a line supervisor position back in He'nan. Yet not only was his wage discounted, but no social security was offered. Knowing that labour conditions could only be worse, in 2017, he returned to Shenzhen and became a Didi driver, mainly for the higher income.

Laowang's experience is typical among migrant workers in low-end manufacturing sectors I interviewed. Having been the epi centre of the world factory since reform, Shenzhen and Dongguan were in the recent decade at the forefront of STER. As part of the *Made in China 2025* plan to upgrade the manufacturing sectors, the local policy of *tenglong huanniao* sought to promote industrial upgrade by introducing higher value-added, high-tech industries, by boosting the service economy and by automating labour-intensive manufacturing. In the context of dwindling orders, the policy and its implementation by local governments, echoing Lei (2023)'s findings in *The Gilded Cage*, destabilized the manufacturing sector and increased their cost, to which factories responded with relocation, putting out and a flexibilization of labour use, including

dispatched workers and student interns. In this process, migrant workers like Laowang became ‘old birds’ who were systematically marginalized. Having spent their lifetime performing repetitive tasks, without opportunities to develop skills, and typically of low educational attainment, the new labour market condition had meant for them declining job quality and the threat of imminent displacement. Statistics showed that in the early months of the crisis, about 23 million migrant workers lost their jobs (National Bureau of Statistics, 2009). In this context, platform-based service sectors like food delivery and ride-hailing, however informal and precarious, provided migrant workers with a steady stream of income higher than factory jobs.

Like those in low-end manufacturing, also having to confront threats of skill-based displacement and exclusion are migrant workers/entrepreneurs in the informal service sector, for example, street vendors, end-of-network distributors for small brands. As Swider (2017) shows, these small businesses often required minimal investment and operated on a small-profits-quick-returns model. If migrant entrepreneurship as such could previously generate sufficient profit to support migrant workers’ livelihood and family, *the opportunities they could offer to migrant workers were increasingly undermined*, in both industrial heartlands and small cities at the periphery, thanks to the rapid penetration of e-commerce as well as the swift expansion of logistics networks and related services. Both e-commerce—in various guises like shopping website, livestreaming e-commerce new retail, and more recently, internet-based local life service—and logistics are strategic areas in STER, as the Chinese government increasingly resorted to improving its logistics and circulation systems to boost productivity and domestic consumption. E-commerce, for example, has since expanded quickly. In 2019, China’s national online retail reached 1.063 billion yuan, accounting for 20.7% of the national total (Qian, 2020; Wei, 2019). These have in turn significantly squeeze the space of locally based, community business of small scales.

A 46-year-old A’xiong was the owner of a cloth shop in Shenzhen’s industrial town of Guanlan. He and his wife sourced from local manufacturers and sold at a slightly higher price. Before 2015, they could earn a good 15,000 yuan per month. However, the fast expansion of e-commerce not only undercut his business but rendered his business model obsolete: ‘young people are ICTs-savvy ... we are no match... We don’t even know photoshop and livestreaming ...’. Without even the basic skills required to survive e-commerce, A’xiong and his wife downsized their

store in 2017. Now his wife ran the store, and he took up Didi as the main source of family income. While A'xiong still tried to carve out a life in Shenzhen, A'li, who was in his 30 s worked as a sales representative in a 4S store, opted for returning to his hometown Shaoguan, and became a food courier, citing reasons of marriage and taking care of the family. When asked his experience of seeking skill upgrade, he told me that he was not eligible for any skill training programmes offered by Shenzhen's Bureau of Human Resources and Social Security (HRSS), simply because he did not have a local *hukou* and had not paid enough for a local social welfare account that is too expensive for him.

Even for younger migrants with higher levels of education, the new skill landscape of the labour market was not always easy to navigate. 32-year-old Jian came to Shenzhen after high school and worked as a warehouse manager in a downstream supplier for larger manufacturers. His daily job involved matching the factory's logistics demand with local capacities to deliver orders in time at lower costs. Over the years he had relied on an extensive network of local logistics companies and truck drivers that he carefully built and maintained. In 2016, upstream manufacturers began to adopt digital supply chain systems, which automated the matching process, rendering his network useless. As a result, his role was reduced to quality check and his wage had been frozen since then. He tried hard to turn himself into a warehouse logistics engineer but was constrained by his limited literacy and lack of resources and time. In early 2019, as his daughter started primary school, he decided to move to a Didi for its higher income:

it is more than learning to operate new machines. Digital systems change the logic of warehousing ... requires systematic knowledge ... not what a high school graduate can handle ... I do not have time ... I have to bring money home every month.

Apart from the HRSS bureau systems, the state also invested proactively in vocational education to resolve the skill gaps resulted from tech-driven industrial upgrades. In this process, vocational schools received fundings to boost training capacity and forge partnerships with employers to secure employment opportunities. Students alike received tuition waivers and subsidies, sometimes regardless of their *hukou* status. Yet even vocational school education largely failed to prepare migrant workers

for the new economy. Woronov (2016) found China's vocational education is fraught with problems of obsolete materials, low social recognition and a mismatch between highly theoretical course design and purposes of practical skill training. Chan et al. (2016) revealed how schools colluded with governments to turn the supposedly skill-enhancing internships into a source of low-cost and flexible student labour for local enterprises. The experience of Guiwang, among other migrant vocational school graduates, echoed both observations. He had a degree in mechanical engineering from a vocational school in Jiangxi. Yet in the final year, he was sent to a local factory to tighten screws for internship. Feeling disillusioned, he escaped to Shenzhen. When he tried to find an engineering job there, he was rejected all the time, not only because such positions often require a bachelor's degree, but because he is not familiar with the increasingly digitalized and automatized systems. As Guiwang put it,

Can you imagine that the machines we used for experiment in the 2010s were actually the 1990s model? None featured computer numerical control, not to mention programming. How come we can adapt to the new system?

Economic Restructuring as Masculinity Crisis and Gender-Based Differentiation

Economic restructuring in time of crisis has not only changed the skill landscape of the labour market, which in turn gives rise to the skill-based mode of differentiation; it further engendered a masculinity crisis among male migrant workers, making gender an especially important factor in work-related decisions among them. Gender-based differentiation here is rooted mainly in hegemonic gender norms in China where men should be the breadwinner of the family; they should be *youchuxi*⁷ in order to get married and pay for bride price; and that men should do jobs that allow them more control over the situation. Such gender norms not only play an important role in channelling migrant workers to informal platform jobs, but also help sustain overwork and hyper-exploitation as the emerging norm in these sectors, from which they painstakingly suffer.

⁷ Have one's own career and power.

An important aspect of migrant workers' masculinity crisis concerned their gendered family role as men, which they defined, in line with the hegemonic gendered norm in China, as the ability to adequately provide for his family, support their children and parents, and bring the family a better future (Choi & Peng, 2016). Economic restructuring in recent years increasingly challenged their ability to fulfil this role, notably by destabilizing their jobs and rendering their skills obsolete. Didi and Meituan, thanks to their relatively large space of profit, open employment relations design, and its quasi piece-rate payment system, allowed migrant workers to resolve this masculinity crisis by working as hard as they can.

Laowang told me that his wife used to work in Shenzhen. In 2015, his wife went back to He'nan to take care of their children and the elderly. Since then, his pressure to bring home an adequate wage had been rising, especially as his salary became unstable while life costs soared. For him, Didi provided a solution to this pressure. Despite his serious back pain, he worked on average 12 hours a day, 6 days a week. As he explained,

We do not want our kids to become gangsters ... my father is ill in bed ... as a man, my responsibility is to earn more money, keep them fed, support their education and get them treated. Costs go up every year, but my salaries do not. I must do something ... back pain is no big deal ... Did is for me a practical choice. Taxi in Shenzhen is more expensive than in He'nan so you can earn more. And at Didi, the more you work, the more you earn. As long as you work hard, you get well paid.

In my post-pandemic visit to Shenzhen and Dongguan, among both drivers and riders at both the centre and the periphery, a new term frequently invoked by them to describe their work is that of "*aoshijian*", waiting it out. Many told me that the rate per task declined significantly after the pandemic, as more and more people became unemployed when the much-anticipated post-pandemic economic recovery did not materialize after measures of pandemic control almost put the economy to a halt. Having spent most of their savings, changes in post-pandemic Chinese economy only reinforce their gendered reliance on platform work. A'xiong and his wife lived in Shenzhen in a rented flat with their two children, both studying in a local middle school. Before the pandemic, he worked only during the morning, evening and night peaks to exploit the higher price to balance higher income with enough rest. But in post-pandemic times, this was no longer possible, and his working

hours increased from 10 to 15. Recently, he was diagnosed with prostatitis and sexual dysfunction, which were popular among drivers. When asked if he was worried about his health and conjugal harmony, he became emotional:

it saves a lot and life would be easier if we sent our children back. but growing up left-behind ... I can't see them repeating my tragedy. I hope they can live a better life so that our family can move forward... my own health and sexual desire? ... You can't have your cake and eat it too...

While married migrant platform workers faced growing pressure to provide for the family, their younger, single counterparts aspired to save adequately to set up their own families. In the post-reform era when gender imbalance in the population is swelling, to get married for male migrant workers is a complex and demanding project. Bride price and wedding ceremony aside, they are expected to provide housing for the new family (Lin, 2013). More recent studies show this standard is rising quickly (Choi & Peng, 2016). As Xiaoliang, a 27-year-old food courier from Wanzhou, Chongqing explained,

my will-be father-in-law asked me to buy a new flat in Wanzhou... he expected me to earn more and work for myself, which means to start my own business... this, for them, means a young man is *youchuxi* (having one's own career)... only when you *youchuxi* are you good husband material who can give his daughter a good life... I think this is reasonable... it is my responsibility as men to do so... this is why I worked so hard nowadays...

For Xiaoliang, working in the low-end manufacturing or service will never make one *youchuxi*. Food delivery, on the other hand, can help him achieve the goal because he could earn more to save enough so as to start his own business back in his hometown.

It is interesting to note that some of the interviewees further link gender to freedom and flexibility when explaining why they stuck to digital platforms. While they are fully aware of the exploitation and control by the platforms—many lamented the degradation of platform work, and told me that they were ready to take actions against the platform to restore the flexibility in the early phase of their development, the riders and drivers I interviewed still preferred platform work over jobs

in manufacturing, construction or service sectors. This is because platforms still allows them more freedom and flexibility, mainly the freedom from inhuman and arbitrary insults and punishment from the management, and the flexibility to control over the time, place and length of their own work. These basic freedoms and flexibilities had long absent from their work experience, and having these make them feel more like a real man and give them a sense of dignity restored and under control. For Liyan, this is an important reason why he still stayed with food delivery platforms, despite the mounting risks and dwindling income.

Hukou-Based Differentiation and the Longing for a Good Future Life

A final mode of differentiation is *hukou*-based. For those who are familiar with China issues, this should come without surprise, as it is now established consensus that the *hukou* system has long played a limiting role shaping migrant workers' working conditions and community life (e.g. Solinger, 1999; Xiang, 2004; Young, 2013). And it does so by creating de facto dual, hierarchical citizenship statuses within one country, with urban residents at the top and rural residents at the bottom, each entitled with different civil rights to work and live in urban areas and different access to social welfare and public service provisions. The distinction between urban and rural residents is sharp to the extent that scholars and commentators often compare the *hukou* system to the Apartheid system in South Africa and the caste system in India. At the beginning of the reform, under the *hukou* system, rural residents were secondary citizens who were denied legal rights to work and live in cities, but were required to get themselves a visa-like residential permit to do so, which cost around one month's wage (Chan, 2001; Fan, 2008). They were further denied access to work-related protection, social welfare and public service provision in the city. This is reminiscent of Guy Standing's characterization of immigrants in Europe as 'denizens' (Standing, 2014), and effectively created a dual labour market where rural-to-urban migrants were denied access to public sector jobs, while in private sectors, employers could take advantage of their denizen status to squeeze their labour at incredibly low rate and with despotic managerial practices (Peng, 2011; Wu, 2017). In other words, *hukou* as a mode of differentiation, because of the constraints it posed on migrants in terms of citizenship rights and entitlements, have long locked China's migrant workers in extreme precarity, in situations

similar to clandestine immigrants in Europe, despite that they were in their own land.

Since the Hu-wen era, the *hukou* system, along with the related social welfare and public service systems, have undergone substantial reform, to restore some level of redistributive justice (Howell & Duckett, 2019). Yet by no means does this mean that *hukou* as a mode of differentiation for migrant workers has entirely vanished. This becomes clear when we look closer at how the reform unfolds: in rural areas, universal social welfare and public service provision system is established; in small cities, rural-to-urban *hukou* transfer becomes easier, meaning rural migrants now can enjoy equal social and civil rights—for example, the right to work and live in urban areas—with urban locals; in megacities like Shenzhen, conditions for *hukou* transfer remain prohibitively high for migrant workers, but they can now access local social welfare scheme through individual or employer contribution, which in turn give them access to public education and healthcare services, although benefits are marginal and education and healthcare are of low quality compared to urban locals. Additionally, private capital is encouraged to provide these services through the market. Hence, despite the reform, the *hukou* system remains a relevant mode of differentiation, but the reform has produced a change in the specific mechanism of differentiation, from citizenship-based differentiation to differentiation based on a mix of citizenship status and class status, reflected in growing importance of one's market capacity in accessing quality education, healthcare and housing services.

For many of my interviewees, the reform indeed provided baseline protection. Yet it failed to relieve them from the heaviest of burdens, namely, health and education. Instead, as the *hukou* system is increasingly mixed with a class system in cities, pressures to provide for the family are intensified. The situation is further complicated by the various problems within the medical insurance system, especially corruption, the uneven distribution of medical resources and local protectionism. This intensified pressure drove them to excessive overwork, however flexible and free the employment relation is.

Laotang was a case in point. He worked for 14 hours a day, because otherwise he wouldn't be able to afford his father Tangba's medical bill. Tangba spent his life as a construction worker, an industry notorious for informal contracting (Swider, 2015). As a result, he had long suffered from hypertension and severe low back pain and was further diagnosed with lung cancer in 2016. Without a formal contract, Tangba was

not covered by any protection schemes until joining the New Cooperative Medical Scheme (NCMS) in 2015. After receiving two surgeries in 2017, Laotang's pressure became all the more intensive. And NCMS was not meaningfully helpful, because of the limited benefits it provides and because doctor earnings are linked to medication fees:

NCMS provides reimbursement. But doctors nowadays tend to recommend more expensive medication because it is linked to their income. So what we pay is not necessarily less. Additionally, for serious diseases like my father's, NCMS only cover 60% of surgery fees. Even after reimbursement, the spending is still catastrophic and sucked up my savings.

Local protectionism further undermined the effect of NCMS. Because NCMS is locally financed, permission from the local government is needed for one to get reimbursed for treatments done elsewhere. And because many local governments, especially in underdeveloped areas, suffered from massive debts, they rely heavily on private capital to provide medical service, which is at best of moderate quality. As private hospitals often collude with local governments to make trans-local reimbursement difficult, it is more difficult and costly—if not impossible—for migrant workers to get quality treatment. When Rizuo's mother was rushed to a local hospital in 2017, he was faced with the dilemma of whether to stay with the hospital or transfer his mother to a top hospital in the neighbour city, which meant extra 50,000 yuan spending:

rumors of misdiagnosis and mistreatment by that hospital widespread ...
I cannot risk my mother's life. Talking to the government is not useful, unless you have *guanxi*. They all know each other.

Even more acute is the pressure to provide their children with quality education. Murphy (2020) observed that rural migrants' hope for their children to study out of drudgery increased since 2010 due to the expansion of the labour market, mass compulsory education and higher education. The STER further reinforced this hope. Many migrant drivers lamented how it is increasingly difficult to make a living without higher education as technologies advance. As the *hukou* system began to relax, many hoped their children could secure a good future in cities through education. A'xiong is among them. Having contributed to his local social security account for 5 years, his children were eligible for compulsory

education in Shenzhen. This saved him 20.000 yuan per year, equivalent to 3–4 months of his income. Yet he was still worried that his children might ‘lose at the starting line’, since they were channelled into a *minban*, privately run, schools where the quality of education was widely believed to be lower, by a point-based system. The system linked access to quality public school education to one’s *hukou*, employment and housing status, favouring local property owners with formal employment. To better prepare their children for the labour market and future life in the city, A’xiong sent them to extra-curriculum cram schools, which cost over 20.000 yuan per year. In addition, because without local *hukou* his children were not eligible for high school in Shenzhen, he had further plans to buy a flat and settle down in Dongguan, where it was easier to get local *hukou* and where housing price was significantly lower. For him, this is worth it,

Now the policy is more relaxed, giving us peasants an opportunity to become city man. We all know that key to a good city life is to receive good education. Although it takes a lot of money, I will try my best.

Back at home, migrant platform workers faced no less pressure in securing quality education for their children. The challenges came mainly from the school district policy, which stipulated that to attend public schools, one needs to hold ownership or tenancy of commercial housing within the school district. Local governments across China have in recent years actively embraced this policy to boost land finance and the real estate market. Zhan transferred their agricultural *hukou* to Fancheng, a small county in He’nan in 2015 to prepare his two children for middle school. In 2016, the local government launched the school district policy. Previously he had no plans to buy a flat, but it took only two months for the price to double after the policy was released. He finally decided to mortgage from the bank. Now he had to save 3.000 yuan each month to repay it:

It is loads of stress ... some chose to buy a position from corrupt officials. But I do not want to commit a crime. What can I do? Nothing but work, work, work ...

6 MIGRATION AND WORKER SOLIDARITY

The discussion so far has identified three modes of differentiation that lock migrant platform workers in China in precarity. But as laid out earlier, precarity simultaneously creates possible rallying points for resistance and harbinger novel strategies and discourses for re-embedding the economy in society (Waite, 2009). Related to migrants, Ness (2005) shows how ethnic links among immigrant Mexicans, west Africans and south Asians in New York underlay their solidarity and organized struggle for living wages, humane working conditions, and respect. Similar trends can be observed among migrant platform workers in China.

While some argue for the detour of the development of class consciousness among platform workers in China (Liu & Friedman, 2021), in fact, just like ethnic minorities in New York, migrant platform workers in China also actively organized various forms of collective actions to negotiate and talk back to the unfair and harsh conditions they have to confront. When they have to overwork, if the first-generation of migrant workers largely attributed their lack of choice to their own lack of education or ability, migrant platform workers were well aware of the role played by platform and capital in this process. The disposition to act in solidarity to change the situation was thus commonplace among them, partly thanks to their previous experience labouring and resisting in manufacturing sectors. In addition, in my visits to megacities in China, I also constantly heard stories of collective actions among riders and drivers, although such actions were often nipped in the bud—especially in large cities—after the pandemic. As I pointed out earlier, existing studies often understand these actions in terms of labour process factors. In this section, I build on this understanding to highlight how being a migrant contribute to solidarity making and collective mobilization processes.

In the ride-hailing sector, three main reasons drove migrant drivers to action. First, the reduction in price, which directly adversely affect drivers' income. This can be rather significant, for example, RMB 400–500 yuan per month less at the same working hours. Second, the surge in driver numbers due to the rapid expansion of VLCs, which both drives down the rate, and dilutes the market. Now more drivers compete for relatively stable numbers of riders at lower price. Third, the proliferation of scams and fraudulents due to lack of proper regulation and oversight in the otherwise exploding car-rental market, for example, VLCs

refusing to refund deposits or secretly colluding with microloan companies to entrap drivers in debts etc.. These scams become even more unbearable for drivers given the dwindling income, not to mention the daily grievances generated by despotic algorithmic management, and the discrimination and unreasonable requests by consumers. Therefore, two main targets of drivers' action include platforms like Didi and VLCs. But how do drivers form solidarity and coordinate action when their work process is geographically dispersed and socially individualized? Existing literature, in explaining this, often highlight (1) geographical arrangement of ride-hailing work; (2) the availability of free space; and (3) the role of social media in this process (e.g. Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Wells et al., 2021). My observation echoes these findings. These structural conditions are indeed important for solidarity making among platform drivers in China. Yet these structural conditions alone will not automatically produce solidarity. And my findings further suggest that being a migrant under the skill, gender and hukou-based modes of differentiation contributes to their solidarity and collective action in several ways.

First, being a migrant is instrumental in helping platform drivers overcome individualization and build association. Platform drivers were scattered around the city without a geographically bounded workplace in their daily work, as the algorithmic mediation of their labour process is antithetical to social connections and trust ties among them (Ferrari & Graham, 2021). Yet being a migrant provides drivers a starting point and a solid basis to restore social relations and trust ties amid work. This is because although theoretically anyone can recruit her/himself as a driver simply by registering on the app, in reality, for many full-time drivers, this is more complicated, as they need to learn more about labour conditions on platforms, and to decide on where to operate and which vehicle leasing agency to rent car from etc.. These are important for them because they need to make sure they can make the best of the job to earn enough for their family. In this connection, because their lack of advanced skills and urban *hukou* status, they have no formal channels to find relevant information. Even though they have been migrating to the city for a long time, they still can only rely on the own *laoxiang* and peer networks they have accumulated in previous work experience. In addition, my interview with recruitment personnels from vehicle leasing agencies similarly shows that they also rely on their existing drivers' *laoxiang* and peer networks for recruitment and in daily management, more effectively.

Entering the sector in this way, although no strong trust ties can be guaranteed, it nevertheless can bring social relations of migration back in the labour process that otherwise tries to extinct social relations as such, thus providing the basis for drivers to build social relations and associations that in turn form the basis for solidarity. In my fieldwork, drivers form among themselves both offline and online groups, which revolve either around gathering points or vehicle leasing companies. In both types of associations, the formation and sustaining of such groups are strongly mediated by drivers' *laoxiang* and peer networks, although relations in those revolving around gathering points were often closer than those revolving around vehicle leasing companies. In a given city/area, these two types of groups were often interconnected, by nodal drivers, again through *laoxiang* and peer networks ties.

Second, being a male migrant also significantly shapes the drivers' collective framing of their grievances, diagnostic or prognostic. Specifically, when discussing their grievances before action, the way they invoke and frame their experience always highlight their identity not just as workers (in relation to employers), but also male migrants. For example, they would constantly complain that they have limited access to social security and social support in cities; they were discriminated against by urban passengers which is insulting and unbearable for them as men. When mobilizing, they constantly frame resistance of exploitation in terms of defence of dignity, and they believe that they should do so because this is what is required of being a real man: 'men should be courageous and far-sighted to act in the face of humiliation and injustice, regardless of the results'.

The third way being a migrant plays a role in their solidarity and collective action concerns the process of mobilization. In moments of insurgence, *laoxiang* and peer networks, and their interconnection with each other—however weak the connection might be—allows the strike information to be disseminated as wide as possible across the city. More importantly, the close groups drivers developed among themselves based on *laoxiang* and peer networks provide strong trust base in the organization of action and initial mobilization, which is especially important when there were widespread concern that spies from Didi and VLCs might infiltrate, and the political risks of collective actions under the increasingly repressive political environment is high.

7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter examines the relationship between migration and precarity/solidarity among platform workers in China. It contributes to the growing body of literature on China's fast-expanding platform workforce, by highlighting the continuing relevance of these workers' migratory status in shaping their experiences of precarity and solidarity. In existing literature, curiously, this important dimension has largely been ignored. In addition, by identifying and analysing three distinct modes of differentiation, it also enhances our understanding of the relationship between migration and platform workers' precarity and solidarity in general.

The findings suggest that platform workers in China, predominantly consisting of rural-to-urban migrants, are subject to three distinctive modes of differentiation in the labour market. The skill-based mode of differentiation is mainly the product of China's recent economic restructuring, where digital and intelligent technologies are used to reorganize the production, circulation and consumption processes of the economy. In this process, the demands of skills in labour market in China also changed, with newly emerging, higher-paid jobs often requiring specialist knowledge and skills that migrant workers do not have the literacy, time or resources to acquire. Skill-based differentiation thus effectively excludes migrant workers from these jobs and channels them into platform-based service jobs, not least because its labour process design allows a high-level of flexibility through which migrant workers can earn higher income (than most of the jobs they can find in the labour market) by '*aoshijian*'. The other two modes of differentiation, hukou-based and gender-based, then push migrant workers to work as hard as they can, by pushing them to conform to gender roles and by increasing their life expenses, especially when after *hukou* reform, the citizenship barrier was lifted, and social welfare and public service provision became even more marketized—as a result, migrant workers now are lured to believe in a better future in urban cities. It is largely these three modes of differentiation, plus the flexible design and exploitative managerial practices of digital labour platforms, that lead to pervasive overwork, to death, an extreme form of precarity, among migrant platform workers.

Though being a migrant imposes constraints on these predominantly male migrant workers and limit their agency in relation to the changing landscape of labour market and the rising platform power, it simultaneously contributes to their shared grievances, and allows them to reclaim

social connections and trust ties with each other in the otherwise individualizing work environment. The same gender norms that push them to migrate and work excessively also enrages them in face of the daily inequalities and indecencies they have to confront, and provides them with strong motivations to fight back collectively. Finally, in a time of heightened corporate and political surveillance, the connections based on migrant networks provide a safe/free space for migrant platform workers to organize and mobilization, among the wider driver/rider community.

A remarkable incident in recent years is the pandemic, which brings about enormous impact on societies across the world. In China, stringent measures of pandemic control were implemented for two years, which basically putting the domestic economy to a halt. Without a job, many could only rely on their savings and debts for a living. When the pandemic control measures were lifted, small and medium enterprises that employ the largest number of China's workforce did not bounce back. Despite that the state issued various policies and launched various campaigns, the level of confidence was low among private capital. Globally, advanced economies actively promoted de-coupling from the Chinese market, and as a response, the Chinese government emphasizes the domestic circulation while actively pursues markets in the global South, with limited achievements. The effect on the domestic labour market is that unemployment is surging within China. As a result, even more people pour to ride-hailing and food delivery sectors, reinforcing these modes of differentiation and exclusion and deepening migrant platform workers' precarity.

In China, the analysis of precarity in relation to algorithmic management has led some to propose the establishment of a three-way mechanism, comprising of the platform (its managers and engineers), platform workers and the government, to co-design algorithmic management mechanisms. The idea is to design a more worker friendly algorithm so that workers can fare better on platforms. The analysis in this chapter raises the question, if migrant platform workers' extremely precarious conditions have to do with not only algorithmic management, but to migration-related modes of differentiation, what kind of algorithmic management can help workers overcome the structural pressures brought to them by the structural changes in the labour market and in the provision of basic medical and educational services? I also wonder, if platform companies are there to survive and thrive in market competition, how much space they really have to make the concession, even they are made

to do so by state regulations? I am pessimistic about this, because of the sharp contrast between corporate/state power and labour collective power in China where the latter has always been weak and its development has always been systematically repressed throughout the reform. Drawing on the analysis above, I argue that the government needs to play a role—in a way accountable for the workers—in addressing the structural conditions in labour market and in public service provision in order to really improve workers' conditions. In this connection, *hukou* reform is an important point of intervention. The current strategy of *hukou* reform that is, to use Duckett's term, essentially neoliberal—as I have shown, only add salt to injury. A more useful strategy should try to remove dual citizenship while in the meantime guarantee the equal provision of social security and public services. This is, of course, not an easy task, especially given the entrenched interest pattern of social security provision (province-based, favouring urban and public sectors) formed since the reform, as well as the enlarging deficit in China's social security funds and medical insurance funds. The ongoing reform related to gig workers is also pretty much in line with the neoliberal strategy. Whether there is space to push the *hukou* reform to a different direction is worth future research.

Another point of intervention my analysis points to is skill upgrade. The government can provide more support for skills upgrading of migrant workers. In this respect, China has a good institutional foundation based on which a lot can be done: in fact, the Chinese government has long been committed to providing skill training and upgrade for ordinary workers through labour authorities such as the Ministry Human Resources and Social Security and its local bureaus. It has also encouraged private capital to provide related training courses. In other words, a skill upgrade infrastructure that involves multiple players and sectors is already in place. The question, then, is why, as my preliminary interviews have indicated, this infrastructure seems to have not been able to benefit migrant workers, and what can be done to change the situation. Further research can be conducted to map this skill upgrade landscape and explore why migrant workers have difficulty benefiting from it. These analyses can inform reforms in skill upgrading and help address the problem of precarity.

Finally, the analysis in this chapter about how migration—while perpetuating precarity—simultaneously enable association, connection and solidarity among migrant platform workers also point to another possible

form of intervention, namely solidarity economy. This is especially important in a time when collective actions are politically sensitive, if not impossible at all. In fact, my fieldwork in the past several years in Guangzhou and Shenzhen reveals that some worker-led small platforms are emerging. They are exploring new, alternative forms of organization and operation in the platform economy, pretty much in the spirit of the fast-expanding platform co-operativism/commons movement across the world (Scholz, 2023). These bottom-up practices may be small and vulnerable to commercial encroachment, but they nevertheless bear the seeds for an alternative platform future where we can labour with decency.

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Transversal Unionism: Resisting and Navigating a Neoliberal City Through Identity and Labour Power

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1 INTRODUCTION

This city doesn't treat us as their own, yet they also know they can't survive without us. So we do what needs to be done, do your job with honesty and unite where you see you are being wronged. Both have to be done together, *continuously*.

Ali Jabbar, a migrant gig worker organizer, December 2023.

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Jabbar (name anonymized) is one of the many thousands from West Bengal who have migrated to Bengaluru, Karnataka—the so-called Silicon Valley of India in search of a better future. Hailing from a village in Murshidabad, West Bengal, he represents a generation that is forced into precarious urban work by the gradual erosion of agricultural jobs and state neglect (Mistri, 2021; NSO, 2019). Following the footprint of the people came earlier, he relied on the social network from his village and district, people who had already moved here, eventually securing work as a rag picker in Bengaluru—an occupation in which Bengali Muslims are disproportionately represented across Indian metropolizes (Chakraborty et al., 2022; Paul, 2023). Soon after settling, Jabbar brought his wife and children to live in a slum near Bengaluru’s Whitefield, one of many Bengali migrant hubs in the city.

Across Bengaluru, one can find distinct ghettos or unauthorized settlements formed by the different migrant communities. There are people from within Karnataka, including Dakhini speakers from regions such as Kalburgi and Bolar; Telugu-speaking people from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana; Bengali-speaking Muslims from Assam, Tripura, and Bengal; and a large number of Hindi-speaking migrants from the Hindi heartland. The people from Bengal who live in these enclaves are spatially clustered according to their place of origin, i.e., the districts. For example, workers from Nadia and Murshidabad districts primarily live in Kundalahalli, working in garbage collection, domestic work, and construction. Migrants from Howrah (Amta and Jagatballavpur) are concentrated in Varthur, employed mainly as gold artisans or zari workers. Meanwhile, those from Medinipur have clustered near Kaggadasapura, where painting work is their main occupation. These workers, many who are Muslims, face persistent discrimination and suspicion due to the language that they speak; branded as “infiltrators,” “ghuspetiyas,” “illegal immigrants,” and “Bangladeshis,” with their religious identity and place of origin in India’s porous eastern borderlands mutually reinforcing the optics of scrutiny, suspicion and exclusion. Despite over 1.3 million Bengalis in Bengaluru, lower-class Bengali migrants inhabit a distinct geography of survival and

sociability, centred around their labour *bastis* (informal settlements), while being denied dignified social citizenship.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many rag pickers—already suffering the hardships of informality—lost their jobs under the guise of physical distancing, hygiene, and safety measures, often exacerbated by classism and casteism. In this context, many shifted to location-based digital labour platforms (DLPs), such as food delivery services like Swiggy and Zomato, and care services like Urban Company. On these platforms, workers experienced selective formalization of their workflow, including features such as standardized rates (rather than negotiated payments with clients) and the direct deposit of earnings into linked bank accounts (Bertolini et al., 2023). For many, it was a way to supplement their income; for some, it even became their primary source of livelihood. Yet, for migrants enduring ethnic, linguistic and communal discrimination in the city, the centralization and control of work through DLPs (Abílio, 2023) provided not only an entry point for employment but also opened new doors to exploitation, a lack of voice, and powerlessness. In this context, this chapter examines how Bengali migrant workers in location-based DLPs in Bengaluru navigate multiple axes of marginality and organize themselves within the city.

2 TRADITIONAL TRADE UNIONS AND ORGANIZING THE UNORGANIZED

Traditional trade unions have a rich history of formally representing the collective interests of workers in industries, large business establishments, and the public sector and demanding state regulations to protect workers' well-being and rights. Their organizational form and leadership are structured, operate according to systematized rules and procedures and usually permit voluntary membership. However, from the 1980s and 1990s, globally, there was a marked decline in traditional trade union membership, political influence and bargaining capacity against employers and state (Kelly, 2015) mainly due to the informalization and fragmentation of the production process through subcontracting, outsourcing and massive adoption of temporary and part-time employment structures.

In the Global South, the triumph of the neoliberal economic policy regime (and the withdrawal from the import substitution industrialization) and the global mobility of capital in search of cheap labour has led to the enormous shrinking of the formal sector, where traditional trade

unions faced a huge decline in membership (Visser, 2019, p. 19), and the rise of the informal and unorganized sector with high work participation by women and migrant workers as well. Therefore, the traditional trade unions confronted not just the challenge of weakening social security and declining employment opportunities in the formal sector but the difficulty of representing the growing diversity of workers' interests and attracting union membership in the "new forms of work," where "large workforces, with identifiable common interests and employers, and [workspace] which are physically and geographically bounded" (Doherty & Franca, 2020, p. 126) did not necessarily exist. Therefore, they had limited success in organizing the peripheral workers, those outside the permanent and full-time job contracts in industries and enterprises largely deploying migrant workers, and informal, part-time, and temporary/casual labour (Hyman, 2002, p. 13).

The failure of traditional trade unions to organize precarious workers in the informal sector, attend migrant workers, and the gig economy, partly because of the sole dependence on class-based universalistic approach and changing nature of work and workspace (Kulkarni & Datta, 2024), also invited an outcry for trade union revitalization and rethinking of strategies (Bensusán, 2019; Fine, 2011). This also led to experimentation of new forms of labour organizing for collective bargaining and worker representation, including the worker centres among immigrant labourers (community-based labour mediation and support institutions), worker associations and networks, informal unionism, hybrid and networked unionism, social movement unionism, forming different kinds of cooperatives (Chesta et al., 2019; Dhar & Thuppilikkat, 2022; Marrone & Finotto, 2019; Salvagni et al., 2022; Thuppilikkat et al., 2024; Webster & Forrest, 2019; Webster et al., 2021). Many of these new forms of unionism have challenged hierarchical leadership structures and re-evaluated the role of external organizers, a practice that traditional trade unions typically adhered to. Furthermore, some of the emerging associational formations of workers did not even formally engage in collective bargaining with employers (Mosco, 2008, pp. 33–35), and focused on issues beyond the workplace. Recent studies, particularly on digital labour platforms, exploring cases outside of digital labour platforms, have also highlighted that migrant identities and ethnic connections play a key role in fostering cultures of solidarity and collective action, both online and offline (Zhou, 2024; Zhou & Pun, 2024). Grohmann et al. (2023) identified how WhatsApp groups of Brazilian riders in the UK, built on shared

ethnicity, foster digital spaces for DLP workers to address work issues and organize collective action. Similarly, studies have highlighted how migrant status generates shared experiences, fosters communities, and even enables resistance (Mendonça et al., 2022). In this context, researchers have called for exploring migration as a source of workers' social power, examining its strength and limitations (Zhou, 2024).

However, if we zoom into the Indian scenario, particularly after neoliberal economic reforms from the mid-1980s, unions are faced with the struggle to organize new regimes of work. Many have argued that traditional trade unions need to focus on emerging industries such as the IT and Business process outsourcing (BPO) sector, their success in organizing these sectors has been limited (Sundar, 2006). Even in the early 2000s, IT employees in Indian cities like Bangalore formed groups like the IT Professionals Forum but largely distanced themselves from unions. This was due to factors such as a desire to distinguish themselves from blue-collar workers, coupled with many employees' direct access to higher-ups and efficient communication systems (Sundar, 2006). Nonetheless, trade unions also have struggled to organize lower-class migrant workers, predominant in the informal sector. Scholars have examined the internal dynamics of traditional trade unions to understand their lack of inclusivity towards the migrant labour force. They have highlighted factors such as challenges in aggregating workers' interests, where unions carried assumptions of worker homogeneity (Menon, 2020; Sundar, 2007, 2019). Furthermore, the dominance of local majorities within unions in respective provinces has further marginalized migrant workers (Sundar, 2007). Furthermore, particularly in the case of lower-class migrant labour, their distinct spatio-temporalities, such as mobility and temporary residency, is also identified as hindering unionization efforts (Rogaly, 2001). Evidently, the traditional strength of trade unions, rooted in their ability to engage in bipartite or tripartite wage bargaining between labour, employers, and the state—particularly when employers violated workers' rights enshrined in laws and procedural norms—has eroded, as such clear agreements are largely absent in the informal sector. With the rise of digital labour platforms, where weak state regulations, labour misclassification (e.g. “partner”/independent contractor) and opaque algorithmic management defined the work atmosphere, unions are encountering similar challenges in advocating for workers' rights and representation. Nonetheless, recent studies indicate that trade

unions have diversified their strategies, shifting from a class-based, universalistic approach to incorporating a more particularistic approach that acknowledges the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences of migrant workers (Kulkarni & Datta, 2024). With this shift, unions also started extending support beyond the workplace, addressing issues in workers' broader social environments (Ibid). However, existing literature lacks an examination of how unions concretely address these ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences. Similarly, there is also evidence of traditional trade unions' organizing attempts among IT workers and digital labour platform workers (Thuppilikkat et al., 2024; Thuppilikkat et al., 2025). In this context, we explore a scenario where a traditional trade union in India organized both lower-class migrant workers and workers on digital labour platforms, with tech workers playing a crucial role. We examine how the union framed strategies that went beyond class universalism, incorporating the unique needs and identities of these diverse worker groups.

3 BENGALURU: THE MIGRANT CITY

Bengaluru, often referred to as the city of aspirations, drew energy from India's liberalization policies in the mid-1980s, positioning itself as a hub for IT firms from the global North seeking low operational costs and access to a growing pool of skilled, affordable labour. This led to the rapid growth of IT, software industries, and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sectors, and Bengaluru soon earned the label of India's Start-up Capital (Heitzman, 1999; Parthasarathy, 2004; Patni, 1999; Saxenian, 2002).

With the IT boom, skilled human capital from both within India and abroad flocked to Bengaluru. The city actively encouraged the influx of migrant tech workers, drawn by opportunities to work for global giants like Infosys, Wipro, Google, and Microsoft. Bengaluru's welcoming atmosphere, combined with promises of long-term career growth and access to robust healthcare and education systems, made it an attractive destination for tech professionals seeking career advancement and stability. However, alongside their expertise and the flow of capital and technology, the contributions of lower-class migrant workers—from rag pickers, construction workers and sanitation workers to domestic workers—were equally vital in facilitating the city's expansion both vertically and horizontally. This rapid transformation led to significant changes

in the “human-nature-space” of the city (Vakulabharanam & Motiram, 2024), prompting the expansion of urban boundaries and the conversion of areas once considered part of the *mofussil* or deemed “uninhabitable”—such as water bodies and forests—into urban spaces (see Table 1, Appendix).

While lower-class migrant workers supported the social and reproductive needs of the “white-collar” class and tech workers, they often found themselves navigating the harsh realities of informality. These workers were unable to aspire to a quality of life that included decent housing, basic sanitation, access to safe drinking water, healthcare, fair working conditions, and a fulfilling social life (Zabeer et al., 2019). In a city producing 5,000 tonnes of solid waste daily, where migrants make up 51% of the population, working populations such as rag pickers forced to live in informal settlements not only endure unhygienic conditions but also face constant threats of dispossession by authorities. Most migrant workers remain trapped in a cycle, oscillating between the dehumanising conditions of urban life and the economic hardships of their villages, with no reprieve in sight (Muktiar & Sharma, 2024).

Since 2014, Bengaluru’s urban landscape has also been shaped by the growing presence of digital labour platform (DLP) workers, many of whom are migrants providing essential services like transportation, care work, and food delivery. Similar to the domestic work sector, which absorbs a large portion of rural and semi-urban migrants, location-based DLPs have become a major source of employment for these workers (Tandon & Rathi, 2023). While DLPs play a crucial macroeconomic role by absorbing migrant labour and enabling their mobility through simplified onboarding and tech-mediated workflows (e.g., GPS and algorithmically managed tasks), they also exploit racialized and caste-determined migrant labour flows, leveraging their precarity to impose long hours and further entrenching inequalities (Van Doorn & Vijay, 2024; Katta et al., 2024). Notably, the migrant workers in digital labour platforms (DLPs) exhibit high tolerance for degraded working conditions—an imposed position due to their structural vulnerabilities (Zhou, 2024).

Urban economic growth has clearly relied on the exploitation of low-paid migrant labour, with workers’ rights systematically denied through extra-legal and informal labour market mechanisms (Jayaram & Varma, 2020). Typically engaged in subcontracted jobs and digital labour platforms, where employer accountability is often obscured, these workers are

excluded from labour laws and state oversight, resulting in severe exploitation (Jain & Sharma, 2018; Jayaram, 2019). In this context, our case study will explore how traditional trade unions have organized migrant workers, despite the fact that many of these workers lack direct employer accountability.

4 BACKGROUND: BENGALI MIGRANTS AND ITS QUEST OF BUILDING A “HOME”

Bengaluru has seen significant migration from eastern Indian states such as West Bengal, with many migrants choosing the city due to the hostile social environment in northern and western India, as well as the relatively higher wages offered in southern India (Chakraborty et al., 2022; Reja & Das, 2019). Unlike educated and high-income Bengali migrants who often bring their families, most lower-class migrant workers face conditions that prevent family relocation, with Bengaluru’s rag pickers being a critical exception (Chakraborty et al., 2022). Many of these migrants also move across different destinations, navigating uncertainty along the way (Ibid). Furthermore, West Bengal, with its long border with Bangladesh and shared Bengali ethnicity, hosts many Bangladeshi migrants, who, while not facing significant divisions locally, are often seen as infiltrators elsewhere in India, affecting mainly lower-class migrant lives (Shamshad, 2017). With the rise of Hindutva politics, undocumented Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants are increasingly seen as threats to national security, making life particularly difficult for Muslim migrants (Ramachandran, 1999). Notably, with the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act under the Modi regime, migrant workers, particularly those living in Bengaluru’s informal settlements, became highly vulnerable, often facing eviction without notice and facing power and water disconnections by authorities (Chandran, 2020). For example, in 2020 the Bengaluru Bruhat Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) razed a labour settlement at Kariyamma Aghara to the ground, with Bangla-speaking Muslims being labelled as Bangladeshis (Bhat, 2020).

5 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on qualitative field data collected in December 2023, which includes participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions conducted in various Bengali *bastis* in Whitefield

and Electronic City, Bengaluru. In total, 13 participants took part in the in-depth interviews, including five worker-organizers and eight union members. The interviews were conducted at union offices and in Whitefield, one of the largest Bengali slums in Bengaluru, with one worker-organizer interviewed via telephone. Additionally, four focus group discussions were held, with each group consisting of 20 to 30 participants. Two of the groups consisted exclusively of young men; one group comprised only women; and the fourth was a mixed-gender group. To complement these primary data sources, we also analysed social media content, such as union Facebook pages and Facebook posts by union members, with their consent, to understand the chronology of events and track the unions' routine activities.

<i>Name of the Organizers</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Caste/Religion</i>	<i>Native</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Union</i>
1. Sumit	M	UR/Hindu	West Bengal	Engineer	AIITEU, IMFK
2. Dipak	M	UR/Hindu	West Bengal	Engineer	AIITEU, IMFK
3. Jabbar	M	OBC/Muslim	West Bengal	Rag Picker-Urban Company	IMFK, AIGWU
4. Palash	M	SC/Hindu	West Bengal	Engineer	AIITEU, IMFK
5. Alok	M	SC/Hindu	West Bengal	Scientist	IMFK
6. Samrat	M	UR/Hindu	West Bengal	Engineer	AIITEU, IMFK
7. Surmaiya	F	OBC/Muslim	West Bengal	Domestic Labour	IMFK
8. Ganesh	M	SC/Hindu	West Bengal	Zomato/Swiggy	AIGWU, IMFK
9. Sanaya	F	OBC/Muslim	West Bengal	Urban Company	AIGWU, IMFK
10. Hari	M	OBC/Hindu	West Bengal	Urban Company	AIGWU, IMFK
11. Abdul	M	OBC/Muslim	West Bengal	Zomato/Swiggy	IMFK
12. Sadiya	F	OBC/Muslim	West Bengal	Domestic Labour	IMFK
13. Parveen	F	OBC/Muslim	West Bengal	Care Work	IMFK

6 THE ALIENATED TECH WORKERS AND BENGALI SUB-NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS: CIVIC INTERVENTIONS & TECH-WORKER ORGANIZING

Bengali migrants, particularly tech workers and the educated Bengali middle class—many of whom are from privileged-caste backgrounds—enjoy access to a vibrant associational life in Bengaluru. The city is home to over 120 Bengali associations (DHNS, 2019), celebrated for fostering Bengali culture in Bengaluru. Events such as Durga Puja, a quintessential Bengali festival, are prominently celebrated and occasionally attended by chief ministers and other prominent state politicians, who commend Bengali tech workers and educated migrants for creating a “slice of Bengal” in the city (Ibid.). In stark contrast, lower-class Bengali migrant workers are often met with suspicion and discrimination in their daily lives, particularly from administrative authorities. Nonetheless, while tech workers and educated migrants leverage their skills for higher incomes in multinational corporations, many also engage in civic actions within the city, particularly among the lower-class Bengali migrant workers, striving to foster a sense of purpose and social belonging beyond their professional aspirations. For example, during our field study, we got to know about an organization in Bengaluru named “Pother Dabi,” a name popularized in West Bengal through the novel by Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay. Established in July 2018, the organization identifies itself as a youth-led initiative with the motto, “Serve the oppressed, serve the country.” It explicitly states that it is not a non-governmental organization (NGO) or a corporate social responsibility (CSR)-funded organization, instead they appeal to the Bengali residents in Bengaluru to contribute financially and engage their families in its activities. Through this community-driven approach, the organization aims to undertake social initiatives, such as providing education to Bengali migrant children in sites such as Kundalahalli, Bengaluru. Our participants involved in the Pother Dabi initiative indicated that their social action was primarily a response to the alienation they experienced as first-generation migrant tech workers in Bengaluru.

Palash, our participant said:

“Bengaluru for me was strictly a workplace. I didn’t have many people to socialize with. Monday to Friday you act like a Corporate *Majdoor*. Wake up, work and come back exhausted to sleep. We have nothing much to do on weekends as well. How much partying can one do? You will start to feel the hollowness. Back there in Kolkata we had a vibrant political

culture. *Meeting, Michil* (rallies) were like a part of our life, here you don't see all that happening."

The opportunities for civic, social, and political engagement that they had in their home state were absent in Bengaluru, where they felt reduced to migrant labour within multinational corporations. In an effort to reclaim a sense of social citizenship, they identified the lower-class Bengali migrant workers community in Bengaluru as a critical site for community action, enabling them to reconnect with their ethnic identity and language while engaging in meaningful social work. These workers' recognized an opportunity when they discovered that, despite the affordability of nearby government schools, the mandatory use of Kannada as the medium of instruction posed significant challenges for lower-class migrant children, leading many to become early school dropouts. Even children who had received preliminary education in West Bengal were unable to continue their education in Bengaluru due to the language barrier. As a result, during the weekends, the tech workers and other educated Bengali youth began holding regular educational classes for lower-class migrant children in subjects such as Maths, Science, English, and Bengali, with the aim of empowering them and providing opportunities for learning.

Initially focused on weekend teaching, their initiative gradually expanded to include organising blood donation camps, lake cleaning drives, and cultural programs for lower-class migrant workers, all aimed at improving their social habitat and making it more livable. As our participant Dipak stated, "Many of our friends, who were never part of any union or organisation, started joining us for the school. There was a sense of community." Therefore, the Pother Dabi initiative also provided an avenue for tech workers and the educated Bengali class to find a community for social action. On Saturdays and Sunday evenings, from 3:30 to 5:30 pm, they found fulfilment in volunteering for marginalized Bengali children, taking on the roles of *dada* (elder brother) and *didi* (elder sister).

Furthermore, in addition to the vulnerabilities, insecurities and exploitation within the corporate tech world, many Bengali tech workers became involved in tech-worker organising. On January 6, 2018, the All India IT and ITeS Employees' Union (AIITEU) was founded, offering membership to any employee working in the Information Technology (IT), Information Technology Enabled Services (ITeS), or computer/software-aided industries in the state of Karnataka. This included workers

employed directly, through contractors, or on work-based contracts, among other forms of employment. The intent behind the unionization was to fight for better and fairer working conditions for all employees in the IT and ITeS industry, regardless of their background or area of service. As one of our participant Sumit explained, around 40 million personnel work in the IT sector, it remains largely unmonitored. Some states exempt the IT sector from the Shop and Establishment Act, resulting in no specified working hours, no provision for overtime pay, and the ability for employers to hire and fire at will.

Similarly, as Samrat said:

“My CTC (cost to company) on paper is 10 lakh per annum. Out of which 5 lakh is basic and 5 lakh is variable. But, my company will deduct 50% of the variable though it is not running in any loss. So, I would get $(5 + 50\% \text{ of } 5)$ 7.5 Lakh per annum, which is in direct violation of the contract I had. But, there is no one to raise the voice.”

While wage-related issues and the degradation of work-life quality became key drivers for tech-worker organising, Bengali tech workers played a critical role in setting up the union, similar to their counterparts from Kerala in the city. This reflects the political temperament inherited from their home states, shaped by the ongoing legacies of parliamentary communism and trade union involvement in provincial politics. Many of our participants had prior engagement with Left-wing political parties and their youth and student fronts from their college days. This involvement shaped their political consciousness, which they carried into their work in the tech sector and their efforts in unionising. However, unions like the All India IT and ITeS Employees' Union (AIITEU), affiliated with traditional trade union Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), were not region or ethnicity-specific. As our participant Sumit explained, “To fight an multinational corporation (MNC), the struggle must be national. If we protest locally, tech companies will just move operations elsewhere, making the fight pointless.”

Also, for many migrant tech workers, organising was not just about addressing workplace exploitation; it was also a means of building associational culture and power, and creating a sense of community for an otherwise alienated workforce. As Sumit explains:

“When the AIITEU was formed, and we had to campaign or take part in the marches, I felt a certain connection to the city and the space. It seemed like a continuation of the past life. So we proactively found time for Union work, even during office hours too, breaks were used to

connect workers with the union members. And since Union was not a thing back then in our trade, there was a thrill doing it. It's like you are using the time, space and salary provided by the company to organise against them only."

Similarly, Dipak stated:

"We unite to make work in the technology sector enjoyable, meaningful, socially useful, and personally fulfilling." Thus, our participants, Bengali tech workers, were involved in civic actions with lower-class Bengali migrant workers communities as well as unionization efforts within the tech sector. Many of the tech workers had overlapping engagements in both areas. These efforts were primarily aimed at navigating the alienation they experienced as tech workers, while also fostering a sense of community centred around rights and social citizenship.

Nonetheless, the Bengali tech workers' involvement with Bengali lower-class migrants living in the *bastis*—initially through civic interventions and later, as we show in the subsequent sections of this chapter, through sustained efforts to unionize them into the Inter-state Migration Federation of Karnataka (IMFK) and the All India Gig Workers Union (AIGWU), both affiliated with the traditional trade union CITU—also revealed an inherent contradiction, not just solidarity. The tech workers were relatively privileged, not only in terms of class status but also within the caste hierarchy when contrasted with lower class migrant workers living in *bastis*. Yet, they continued their efforts to organize these workers.

As described by our participant Samrat:

"Even though we get a 6 digit salary, wear nice clothes, but don't forget we are also nothing but petty labour. Maybe we are a bit sophisticated. The hire and fire regime in the corporate world has made every job insecure now, these workers, rag pickers also have the same insecurity. The only difference is we still have some place to raise our voice, they have nothing. If I demand for job security these people should also have that platform too right? they cannot be simply jailed because of suspicion [as illegal citizens] right?"

While many members of AIITEU earn better wages and identify with both professional roles and tech management, the labour conditions they face expose their proletarianized reality. This contradictory class position (Wright, 1980), coupled with the absence of meaningful civic and socio-political participation in the host city's formal structures, pushed these workers to seek solidarity and collective action as a means of

asserting their rights and visibility. However, when they also foster solidarity with other marginalized and precarious workers—specifically, those who share their ethnic and linguistic background, this solidarity is not solely born from a labour stand point, but also because they interpreted the frames of migrant labour precarity through cultural frames. As Dipak expressed when asked why, as a tech worker, he engages with the lower-class Bengali migrant workers in the *bastis*, “The kind of injustice and hard life that they go through, I feel compelled to contribute in my limited capacity, however possible. They are my people, after all.” Therefore, the Bengali sub-national consciousness shaped their socio-political engagements within Bengaluru city.

7 UNIONIZATION THROUGH MIGRANT ENCLAVES: FROM CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TO POLITICAL RIGHTS

As Bengali tech workers sought a platform for civic and community action, their experiences and identities as migrants led them to connect with fellow migrant workers from the Bengali sub-national region. As Palash said “it is easy for us to connect with them; we speak the same language, and we all come from the same land.” For Bengali tech workers who do speak Kannada, engaging with lower-class Bengali migrant workers was also a matter of convenience. As a sub-national community, they also felt a need to uplift Bengali lower-class migrant families, through initiatives such as Pother Dabi. However, this rediscovery of sub-national community unfolded within the spatial fixity—defined as the “convergence of commodities, information, multifaceted human and non-human interactions, norms, customs, and social practices in a bounded geographical place” (Thuppilikkat et al., 2024)—found in the unauthorized settlements and labour *bastis* of lower-class Bengali migrant workers. These *bastis*, which house Bengali migrant rag-pickers, gig workers, and others engaged in informal labour, have become enclaves within the city, with its own rhythms and markers of identity.

As urban lower-class migrant enclaves, these *bastis* are surrounded by towering buildings that seem to erase their existence. Yet, within this enclave, everything needed to feel at home is present. During our participant observation, when we walked through these settlements, we passed by workers here who have carved out homes from rusting tin boxes and tarpaulin sheets, creating a semblance of stability in a city that offers little. Within it, there are tiny saloons, women managed small grocery shops,

sites where men gather after long workdays to play carom game, small shops with TV set playing Bengali news channels in the evening, and films or sports at night, and streets lined with second-hand motorcycles, bicycles, and makeshift stalls, each contributing to the vibrant, albeit humble, life in the basti. We also identified a tea shop with Bengali music playing in the background, a fritter shop serving Bengali-style snacks like chop, and a mobile repair shop cum CD parlour where Bengali songs echo nonstop. In one corner, we observed a small Kalimata Mandir (a Hindu temple), where fresh flowers were placed every day. Above the tin roofs, we spotted bottle gourd vines climbing up, nurtured by the women of the family—lau, a vegetable beloved in Bengal, symbolising both their connection to home and the continuity of life in this alien city. Inside their small single room huts, posters of iconic Bengali figures like Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Rabindranath Tagore decorate the walls, a silent testament to their cultural pride. These workers knew they were not welcome in the city; their status as informal labourers left them marginalized. However, they are also acutely aware that the city desperately needs their cheap labour as much as they need the city to survive. In this precarious existence, they have forged an uneasy pact with the city—a city that does not fully acknowledge their presence but cannot function without them. For now, though, these workers remain rooted in the city, staying as long as their labour is needed and as long as they can send money back home to their families. The basti is their home, not by choice, but by necessity—a testament to their resilience in the face of exclusion and hardship.

Critically, the engagement of Bengali tech workers within the life-world of migrant Bengali lower-class workers unfolded through their regular access to the *bastis*, which enjoyed spatial fixity. This provided tech workers a grounded connection to their social space and their multi-layered livelihood struggles. Notably, the *bastis* display a deeply rooted struggle over social citizenship—an existential fight that the tech workers and educated Bengali migrants, who have found their place in the city's corporate landscape, never had to face. With most of these workers being Bengali-speaking Muslims were routinely subjected to illogical harassment, random identity checks, and a societal witch-hunt that labels them as illegal citizens or Bangladeshis, and city administration's threat of eviction of the *bastis*, many of Bengali tech-worker and educated migrant volunteers discovered that many of the workers in these bastis, whose children they teach on weekends, face imprisonment at the hands of local authorities when they are unable to satisfy official demands or clear doubts

about their citizenship status. Therefore, the spatial fixity of the *bastis* was not merely a site where Bengali tech workers and educated classes found a space for civic intervention; it was also a learning site where, unlike tech workers, lower-class Bengali migrant workers faced significant challenges beyond workplace issues.

For example, on December 3, 2018, the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), the city administration, issued a notification to evict the slum dwellers in Kundalahalli, which sparked massive mobilization by the residents, supported by the traditional trade union CITU, lawyers, and other human rights organizations, alongside tech workers navigating these spaces. On December 6, a stay order was issued by the Karnataka High Court, temporarily halting the eviction. This event fostered the development of political trust between the slum dwellers and the traditional trade unions, as well as other supporting actors. From that point onward, Bengali tech workers, as part of AIITEU, became involved in sustained political mobilization of the slum dwellers, including their participation in the all-India general strike organized by trade unions in January 2019.

On February 13, 2019, in Munnekollal, Bengaluru, 25 homes of migrant workers from West Bengal and Tripura were bulldozed. Armed goons attacked and ransacked the homes, injuring a woman and a child. The workers suspect the attack was orchestrated by the local MLA, driven by Hindutva politics, with the intention of targeting these individuals as “illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.” When traditional trade unions and tech workers who had been organising the slum dwellers, approached the Labour Department for support, officials dismissed the incident as a petty land dispute rather than acknowledging it as a labour issue. This context paved the way for articulations of migrant labour organising around the right to the city and the demand for dignified social citizenship.

In India’s labour organizing context, which is deeply entangled with partisan politics, focusing on social citizenship also carried significant political implications. As Sumit said;

“During the effort of eviction we got to know it was the local BJP MLA who sent his musclemen to attack this slum people. The Hindutva goons are always behind these people [Muslim migrant workers], this can’t be solved with one protest or two protests.. It needs continuous political intervention for longer period.”

Similarly Dipak said:

“The workers are seeing what Hindutva groups are doing. In *bastis* it’s not just Muslims. They know who wants to push them out. They will carry this back home as well. Like labour, the struggle against Hindutva is also multi-sited.”

Therefore, these tech workers, with partisan ties to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M))—once the ruling party in West Bengal but now challenged by the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) and the rise of Hindu nationalist party like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—saw organizing migrant labourers as a critical site of political resistance as well. Organizing lower-class migrant workers was their way of channelling efforts to contribute to not just labour solidarity, but also to the political movements of their home state.

Nonetheless, in March, as the pandemic hit, 30 people from Dinajpur, West Bengal, stranded in Kattamanallur near KR Puram, received support from Bengali tech workers, Pother Dabi volunteers, and the traditional trade union CITU (many of them are native Kannadigas, Malayalees), who provided them with 15 days’ worth of rations. As the crisis deepened, the number of volunteers increased, with many being tech workers who were working from home. They took the initiative to support lower-class Bengali migrants during COVID-19, using their personal vehicles to deliver essential mutual aid and food. By collecting money from friends and with the help of Gyan Vigyan Samity, they reached out to those in need, ultimately feeding 20,000 workers across Bengaluru. As Hari shared, “We started off with 2–3 people and two bikes. Later we had 18 people, 6 four-wheelers, and three bikes. From Bommanahalli to Yelahanka, even Ramnagar, we were reaching as many people as possible.” Some also expressed the futility of donating to union government funds, as they felt the state was neglecting migrant workers. As Dipak expressed “People were giving [donations] to PM Cares, but they are not feeding anyone. So we had to.”

During the pandemic, lower-class Bengali migrant workers also felt the need to raise demands to their home state. As our participant Jabbar explained:

“COVID taught me a lesson. I have only one demand from the home state government: if we die and our bodies need to be returned to Bengal, it costs 20,000 rupees. Do we have that money? No. Many of our brothers are cremated in this foreign land. If the government could at least take on that responsibility, I would be happy.”

In this context, where the labour issues faced by lower class Bengali migrant workers in *bastis* intersected with social citizenship and livelihood crises beyond the workplace, and with the growing realization of the need to articulate demands to the State—both in their home province and the host province—the continued civic and political mobilization of Bengali tech workers paved the way for the formation of the IMFK on September 19th, 2019. Affiliated with the traditional trade union CITU, they continued their organising efforts in various other lower-class Bengali migrant workers *bastis*, delivered union membership card distribution, asserting the identity of migrant workers as rights-bearing individuals in the city, further strengthening their collective presence and advocating for the rights and welfare of the workers. By the end of July 2021, the IMFK’s union expanded to *bastis* such as Munnekollal and Brookfield, further solidifying its presence and influence in the migrant worker communities.

8 GIG WORKER UNION AND THE MIGRANT BASTIS: THE TRANSVERSION OF MIGRANT NETWORKS INTO GIG WORKER NETWORKS

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, rag pickers and other informal workers living in lower-class migrant labour *bastis* faced severe unemployment and state neglect. While many of them had relied on informal kith and kin networks to find work, the pandemic and ensuing lockdown exacerbated their already precarious situation, leaving them in dire conditions. This led many in the *bastis* to opt for location-based DLPs, either to supplement their income or as full-time work. As our participant Hari said:

“...I also have to send money home. The pandemic made life difficult, so I took up a job in Swiggy [food delivery platform]. I used to rent electric bikes from the stand, do my duty, and then put it back. Now I got a second-hand motorcycle.”

Among our participants, many lower-class Bengali male migrants entered location-based DLPs for food delivery and ridesourcing, either by renting electric bikes or finding agents who sold Uber IDs and cabs in exchange for fixed rent or commission. As lower-class migrants, they often did not own their vehicles, so they had to rely on third parties to manage their access to these resources, facing not only fees and commissions to

platforms, but also to other intermediaries. This created conditions for double exploitation, with platform and beyond platform. Furthermore, many women from these *bastis* entered location-based DLPs such as Urban Company, working as beauticians and domestic workers. However, their onboarding process was far from easy as many had anticipated. As our participant Jabbar explained:

“Many people here want to do app-based work. But how will they do it? To register in Urban Company you have to submit a lump sum amount of money in the beginning. Most of the people here don’t have that kind of money. The only place that they can borrow money from is the *Jhuggidar* (often another Bengali migrant who has taken the land on lease from a local and is now renting it to the other Bengali workers), but if you don’t pay him in time, the torment will be unbearable. They will throw you from your home also.”

Therefore, many of our participants, the lower-class Bengali migrant workers, were dependent on intermediaries to secure jobs due to their vulnerable economic position. However, because of their reliance on informal networks, these intermediaries often came from within the Bengali migrant community itself. This created a cycle of dependence, where the lack of income from location-based DLPs could lead to further dispossession or additional challenges, such as housing eviction, as the workers navigated these informal, interconnected systems. Moreover, racialized imaginaries also pose challenges to migrant workers, particularly women, when it comes to onboarding with DLPs. As Ganesh explained:

“I work with Urban Company, but my wife works at people’s homes. We both clean their dirty bathroom. Back in the village I was a farmer, I didn’t let my wife work. But here it’s necessary, you can’t run a family alone. If only she knew beauty parlour work, she could also join an urban company, we could have earned double. But entering that section is difficult. Nepali girls are more in number, they are all fitfat (tidy-presentable) my wife dont stand a chance. (laughs).”

Nonetheless, despite such difficulties, these *bastis*, particularly after the post-pandemic period, have been serving DLPs with labour supply. One of the significant challenges migrant workers face is the lack of knowledge about the cityscape and the local language. If they find work outside DLPs, this lack of knowledge makes them dependent on stand-based auto drivers, who tend to charge higher fares. At least in the initial period of migration, most of our participants had difficulties using public transportation. The algorithmically dictated workflow and reduced human

interactions in DLPs, was hence a blessing for many migrant workers. However, it did not eliminate their workplace challenges, as Samrat said:

“The main problem here is language, we speak bangla. I can understand Hindi a little bit, but Kannnda was very difficult to understand. Problem is if we face some issue with our customer, we can’t really argue much. They will start speaking in Kannada.”

While working in DLPs was their critical reliance, these migrants faced crises and exploitation within and beyond the workplace, such as reliance on intermediaries, threats of eviction, and harassment. Moreover, political forces driven by bigotry and insider-versus-outsider discrimination further compounded the severe challenges faced by many of these migrant DLP workers. Responding to the harassment and nativist rhetoric from sections of Bengaluru’s population, one of our participants, a DLP worker Jabbar, remarked:

“These people call us outsiders, Bangladeshis, and what not. But just look around—take any food delivery boy from the streets. How many local people will you find?? So, our labour is not an outsider, only our body is an outsider?”

Therefore, due to their multiple axes of marginality suffered by Bengali-speaking lower-class migrants in Bengaluru, these workers, often with the sustained efforts of tech workers who had long engaged with them, were mobilized not only into the IMFK but also into the AIGWU, often with dual memberships. Along with unionization the migrant basti found their own strategies of micro-resistance or bypassing the algorithmic control using their social network. Our respondent Jabbar interestingly told:

“I started working in Urban Company as a sanitation worker from 2022. After the covid other business was down, I also became a father so needed extra money. The work was doing fine, but the job was very draining. I could do maximum one job a day. So, I devised a strategy: I will take along one person from the Basti. Though I am the only one registered with the company. Since two people will work, I can save up energy and time and get more orders. I usually do a 50-50 but days I can’t work right I can do 40-60 as well. In this way daily I can get 3 orders now. During the holiday season I even have taken two more people with me looking at the demand of the work, if you do the work right, people don’t complain. Though at times I get scared that what if the company finds out, but benefits everyone. The client, me and other workers. Not everyone can join apps like that no, so many got their ids blocked without

a reason. What will these people do? Remain unemployed? They also have families to feed. I do this much sin, I hope Allah will forgive me after looking at my intention.”

They mindfully dodge the algorithmic surveillance of DLPs, relying on members of their *bastis* to generate additional employment and support through informal, under-the-radar networks that operated beyond the digital panopticon. Thus, even before unionising with gig worker union, the well-established labour networks within IMFK and the spatial fixity of the *bastis* provided lower-class migrant gig workers with breathing space to find workarounds against the exploitative nature of DLPs.

While organising workers in algorithmically enforced, spatially dispersed workforces, such as those in location-based DLPs, has often proven challenging for unions (Dhar & Thuppilikkat, 2022; Thuppilikkat, 2024), in this context, the spatial fixity of lower-class migrant workers *bastis* provided a unique entry point. It allowed tech workers to step in as external organizers, leveraging these anchored spaces to build solidarity and mobilize workers not only for workplace issues but also for broader livelihood struggles.

Notably, the effort by tech workers to organize gig workers navigating DLPs was also a conscious political decision, taken up by their AIITEU union. On the one hand, gig workers were critical infrastructures supporting the lives of tech workers in the city. On the other hand, it represented an experiment in finding converging points between tech workers and gig workers, both navigating tech-mediated workspaces. As Palash explained:

“We could see them being exploited every day. In Electronic City, where I live, half of the population is either part of these gigs or dependent on them. Many bachelors come here who don’t have the time or skills to cook, but they have money. What do they do? They order. For groceries, you can have home delivery, and for transportation, you can take an auto or bike through an app. Going out, finding an auto, and bargaining with the driver in a foreign language for the fare is like a massive task. But with the app, you’re free from all those hassles. So, gig workers are part of our everyday life.”

Furthermore, as tech-worker Sumit argued:

“If you are politicised enough, you will understand how the corporations that send you abroad on business trips are actually exploiting you. It is natural that you would understand the precarity these people [Gig

workers] are going through. So, it was a thoughtful attempt from the union's side to think in this direction."

Therefore, as politicized tech workers, they experimented with linking the struggles of tech workers and gig workers. However, while they were able to organize them, it did not result in successful, sustained labour agitation in most parts of the city. The tech workers like Palash reflexively recognized their limitations:

"The workers lose interest due to the lack of results from the movement. The lack of results is because the protests are localised. These big firms [DLPs] don't actually care if 500 workers from a certain area stop working. Their scale is so large, and for the movement to succeed, mobilisation has to be on that scale. Sporadic movements here and there are not going to help the cause."

While the lack of results from agitations in the initial stages partially explains the limited political success of gig workers' struggles, it is crucial to recognize that the immediate livelihood challenges faced by migrant Bengali workers in the city are not solely in contradiction with the DLPs. They are also shaped by a multiplicity of actors—from intermediaries to the state—and by the struggle to navigate issues of illegality in citizenship, as well as the challenge of surviving within the ebb and flow of city life itself. The lower-class migrant working population is a fluid community that moves between cities, adding layers of complexity to the challenges of unionising these workers. Nonetheless, the spatial fixity and spatial organization of the *bastis* endure, preserving collective memories of past and present struggles. These anchored spaces offer entry points for organising, as they provide a sense of stability and solidarity amid the transitory nature of migration.

9 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Transversal Unionism: How Identity Intertwined with Class Position Creates a Rubric of Resistance

As our study indicates, responding to multiple axes of marginality—shaped by lower-class migrant workers' spatial anchorage in unauthorized settlements, the politics of suspicion fuelled by anti-Muslim phobia and illegality of their citizenship, and the vulnerability and exploitation faced as labour—the social context of Bengali sub-national consciousness played a formative role in the mobilization of migrant social classes inhabiting

the urban peripheries of Bengaluru. Notably, workers primarily inhabiting contradictory class locations, such as tech workers—many of them privileged-caste Bengali Hindus—found converging points with lower-class Bengali migrant workers in support of their livelihood causes. This led to a scenario what we identify as “transversal unionism,” where polyphonic practices of collective action and organising, mediated through Bengali sub-national consciousness and unfolding through the spatial anchorage of migrant labour *bastis*, paved the way for inter-class solidarity manifested through three distinct but fraternal unions: the AIITEU, the IMFK, and the AIGWU. While these unions are sites of class mobilization, not confined solely to sub-national politics, the lower-class Bengali migrants was drawn into unionization through the overlapping mobilizations of sub-nationalism and livelihood issues, accessed through the spatial fixity lower-class migrant labour *bastis*. This highlights how migrant workers’ agency apart from labour also carries both spatial and temporal implications (Rogaly, 2009).

***Organising Beyond Workplace: Imbedding Labour Power
into the Spatial Dynamics***

One of the significant challenges faced by traditional trade unions in contexts like India is the opaque relationship with employers, compounded by the erosion of the spatial fixity of the workplace, as seen in the case of DLPs. This shift creates challenges in (a) navigating collective bargaining through established contracts and institutionalized structures, and (b) reducing the access that external organizers from traditional trade unions have to workers, making it more difficult to engage and mobilize them, especially as they are dispersed across various locations. However, our study indicates that organising efforts, particularly reliant on external organizers, can explore and identify spatial fixity beyond traditional workplace scenarios, when they are absent. Similarly, focusing on demands beyond the workplace—such as social citizenship and right to city—can bring in cohesion amongst lower-class migrant workers engaging in heterogeneous work relations. Such entry points can be found in spaces such as unauthorized residential settlements where migrant labourers live, which, despite being outside formal work environments, serve as key sites for mobilization and solidarity. Particularly for migrant workers, their labour struggles are not necessarily disconnected from their struggles related to social citizenship.

Moreover, with the decline of the factory-based industrial working class and the emergence of an economy where 90% of the total workforce is highly unorganized and informal, or even spatially dispersed, or if the choke points of production relations are opaque, the city itself could become the site of resistance. Migrant labour is critical infrastructure that sustains the city. They make the city productive, not only sustaining it but also reproducing its social and economic fabric. They help “position residents, territories, and resources in specific configurations, where the energies of individuals can be most efficiently deployed and accounted for, driving the city’s growth and functioning” (Simone, 2004). Any breakdown in this labour force is unaffordable to urban economies. Therefore, traditional unions should attend to the lower-class migrant labour force, by considering the city as the choke point, where production and consumption flows are structured.

Also, in the cityscape of Bengaluru, shaped by neoliberal imaginaries and the accommodation of labour from a diversity of cultural contexts to meet the needs of capital, these labour flows often intersect with cultural conflicts, such as “son of the soil” debates, over who gets to work or live in the city. Migrant workers, particularly Muslim minorities as in our case, are highly vulnerable targets, facing heightened oppression from far-right politics. Organizing lower-class migrant workers’ in such scenarios also opens up new frontiers of political resistance, demonstrating the interconnectedness of struggles against Hindutva in multiple provinces, as seen in our case. Therefore, organising efforts must address the subjective vulnerabilities and insecurities of migrant labour, considering cleavages such as ethnicity, caste and religion as well.

Bengali Tech workers’ supported organising efforts such as IMFK and AIGWU signify a creative exploration of engaging with migrant labourers’ social and cultural subject position alongside their objective condition of labour. Therefore, the composite nature of labour, which embodies a heterogeneity of social, political, cultural and economic contradictions, needs not be seen as something to be absolved into a singular class framing. Instead, organising efforts could engage with and navigate these contradictions, shaped by cleavages such as ethnicity, caste and religion, opening up lateral avenues of solidarity and action that reflect the complexity of workers’ lived experiences. Therefore, the engagement of

Bengali tech workers with lower-class Bengali migrant workers,’ rather than being sectarian, is an exploration of informal spatial avenues for the mobilization of labour, by leveraging the cultural content of labour. This serves as an entry point to mobilize otherwise difficult and dispersed class constituencies, while also being integratable into the broader universe of class solidarity.

APPENDIX

See Fig. 1 and Table 1.

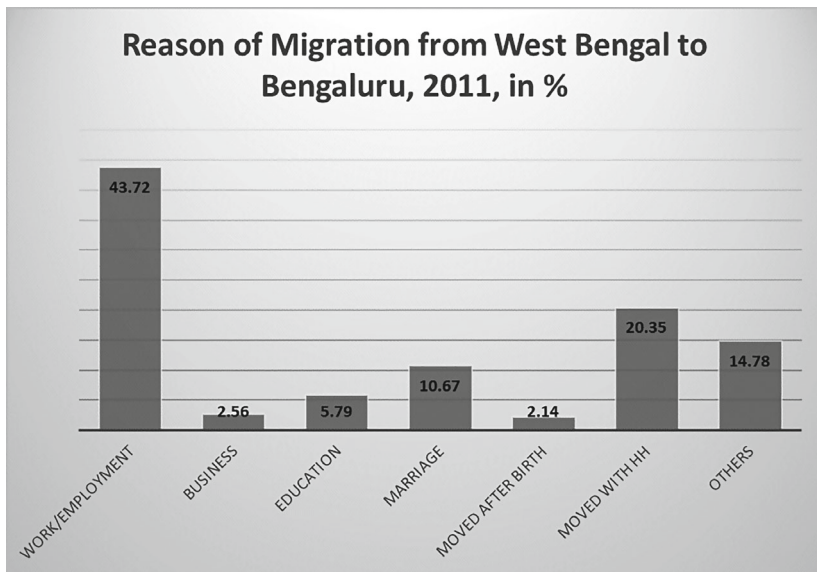


Fig. 1 Reason for Migration from West Bengal to Bengaluru (2011)

Table 1 Expansion of Bangalore City Agglomeration, 1971–2011

<i>Census Years</i>	<i>Bengaluru Agglomeration Area Extended To:</i>	<i>Economic-Morphological Identity</i>
1971	Bangalore Municipal Corporation (BMC) and City Improvement Trust Board (CITB), BEL Township, HMT Township, Jalahalli, HAL Township, ITI Notified Area	Public Sector Undertaking Tier I Phase of City-Scape
1981	Baiyyanahalli-Hebbal-Kengeri-Krishnarajapura-Lingarajapura-Yelahanka-Koramangala	Tier II inclusion as a subservient to Tier I
1991	Banaswadi-Byatanaryanapura-Benniganahalli-Bairasandra-Mahadevpura-Nagavara-Peenya	Private Sector Undertaking: Tier I Phase I of Cityscape
2001	Herrohalli-Pattanagere-Uttarahalli-Bommanahalli-Konankunte-Gottikere-Kothnur	Private Sector Undertaking: Tier I and Tier II together: Phase II
2011	Whitefield-Global Village-Bellandur-Electronic City-Madiwala	Revamped Tier I and Renewed Tier II: Phase III

Source Author's addition to Shashidhar (2003), based on Census 2011 data

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