Researching Precariousness across the Paid/Unpaid Work Continuum

Dynamics of unionism in the platform economy: the case of the food delivery sector in Bologna (Italy)

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Abstract

It is a characteristic of platform capitalism that struggles to re-embed digital platform work within institutionalized forms of employment have been set in motion by new labour actors (i.e. self-organized, grassroots unions). Contrary to the view that these new actors signify the decades-long decline of traditional unions, evidence increasingly highlights their continued relevance to the labour-capital relations of platform capitalism. We argue that dynamic interactions between 'old' and 'new' labour actors in platform capitalism are influenced by national union traditions, that emerge more vividly when struggles to re-embed labour relations require the transition to more institutionalized forms of labour resistance. We develop this argument based on a longitudinal qualitative study of labour struggles in the food delivery sector in the city of Bologna (Italy). We pay particular attention to the dynamics of intra-labour actor relations that have unfolded in the sector across different temporally-based events of contention in the city. As we illustrate, synergies between the two were prompted by the self-organized workers' need to rely on partners with an 'official' status when re-embedding procedures required; yet, collaboration was also favoured by what we describe as a 'posture of respect' developed by the traditional union vis-à-vis the self-organized informal union, particularly with regard to their quest for autonomy from traditional union structures. We

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interpret this approach of the established labour actor in line with its traditional orientation as 'class' actor, whose actions look beyond the membership so as to expand solidarity to all workers, including in new productive (platform) sectors.

Introduction

Transformations in the character of capital accumulation in the global economy supported by neoliberal deregulatory reforms, have posed in the past decades increasing challenges to labour in its attempts to maintain the institutional embeddedness of capital-labour relations achieved in the post Second World War era. In the framework of neoliberal restructuring, platform capitalism represents one novel evolution of capitalism whose dis-embedding is premised on bypassing existing employment institutions altogether. Digital labour platforms achieve this by using digital technologies to arrange the matching of supply and demand for goods and services (Vallas and Schor, 2020) in innovative ways that individualize (via standardization) and decentralize relations of production (Lehdonvirta, 2018). Yet, despite platform capitalism's attempts to 'solve the labour question' by eliminating labour conflict through the decentralisation and the individualisation of the social (capital-labour) relations, in certain instances labour has proven able to address the trend and challenge of capital's dis-embedding efforts by reclaiming institutions to regulate the new labour-capital relations (Joyce, 2020; Schaupp, 2022). Scholars have paid particular attention to the innovative forms of labour resistance that have mushroomed especially in the first phase of mobilizations, namely spontaneous and self-organized groups of workers who acted, more often than not, outside the perimeter of traditional unionism (Chesta et al., 2019; Cini, 2021). What these studies often imply, in a more or less overt fashion, is that new mobilizing actors in the digital platform economy transcend traditional industrial relations institutions, which includes in particular

'old' and established labour actors (i.e. traditional unions). This is not to gainsay that some recent accounts have acknowledged that in more mature phases of capital-labour struggles in the digital economy, traditional unions have caught up with grassroots' unions demands and *repertoires* of resistance (Bessa et al., 2022; Joyce et al., 2022; Cini et al., 2021). Nevertheless, scholarly research has been less attuned so far to developing a closer analysis of the dynamics and conditions that underpin the way in which new (i.e. self-organised or grassroots unions) and old (i.e. traditional) labour unions have engaged in these struggles. This paper aims to fill this gap by focussing on the case of labour resistance in the food delivery platform sector in the city of Bologna (Italy).

Bologna is an interesting case to investigate the ways in which intra-labour relations between self-organized workers collectives and traditional labour unions have developed given that, after years of steady leadership by a local self-organized 'informal union' (Riders Union Bologna – RUB) in representing food delivery workers, representation has transitioned to the local branch of Italy's largest traditional union CGIL. Therefore, in this paper we ask: why and how has this happened? Whereas much research on couriers' mobilization has so far focused on self-organized workers, we bring established traditional labour unions back into an analysis of labour unrest. It is our contention that understanding traditional labour unions' position and involvement in the episode of labour unrest in the specific case of Bologna is crucial to understand the dynamics that have accompanied the creation of intra-labour relations between the self-organized informal union (RUB) and traditional labour unions. In consequence, the paper explores the conditions underpinning these relationships. This is important in seeking to understand the challenges and possibilities featuring the conflictual pathway towards the re-embedding of platform work.

By departing from literature on 'old' and 'new' labour actors and their attitudes and capacity to represent new segments of the labour force (Doellgast et al., 2018; Benassi and

Vlandas, 2016; Pulignano et al., 2016), we frame our analysis within debates on the "variable geometry" of labour front[2]'s responses to the changing world of work (Hyman, 2001; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017). Thus, we stress the extent to which different industrial relations systems possess distinctive configurations of institutions and resources as well as political traditions which establish the terrain of trade union organisation and action (see also Meardi, 2011). Whereas Atzeni (2021) is correct to guard against the institutionalising of traditional trade unionism in the current period of global economic turbulence, there is also a need to acknowledge the differences in structures and objectives as well as political orientations as "a source of cross-national variation in trade unionism" (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017: 191), and potentially important factors explaining the different 'intermediary character' of trade unions' to mobilize workers' own resources in engaging with those who exert power over them (Ibidem). As Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick (2017: 191) argue, in hard times characterized by diminished traditional power resources, the development of strategic ones becomes crucial in order to leverage "most smartly and effectively those resources which remains to hand". This can be achieved by what Regalia (1988: 351) termed 'decentralised democracy', by which they mean "the capacity to interpret, decipher, sustain, and redefine the demands of the represented, so to evoke the broadest possible consensus and approval".

In the Italian industrial relations context, traditional unions, in particular the left-oriented CGIL (*Confederazione Generale del Lavoro*), have historically retained an orientation based upon the defence of the working class (Hyman, 2001). This working class orientation has, for instance, been pivotal in expanding the perimeter of union representation to include the growing migrant workforce (Regalia, 2012) and increasing atypical and precarious forms of work (Pulignano et al., 2016). This perspective has also been crucial in the traditional union

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[2] The more usual concept of 'labour' as actor in the Anglo Saxon literature is 'labour movement' but we use the expression 'front' here to retain its vernacular as group of organized labour actors engaged in resistance to capital.

confederation's approach to collaboration with the platform's self-organized workers. Indeed, in the context of the platform economy, solidarity among workers has been more readily re-constructed outside the traditional union structures (Borghi et al., 2021; Chesta et al. 2019). That said, the latter have sometimes gained increasing prominence across time – and in non-adversarial fashion with the former. This is especially so when struggles have achieved (albeit partial) re-embeddedness of platform labour-capital relations, as we shall illustrate.

Therefore, the article contextualises the study of the Bologna case within the realm of the industrial relations in Italy, with the aims of identifying the dynamics of the intra-labour relations (and the conditions accounting for their occurrence) between the self-organized informal union RUB and the traditional union CGIL in the specific case of food delivery in Bologna. To do so, we adopt McAdam et al.'s (2001) approach to move beyond a static appraisal of events and actors (2011: 17) towards an inclusive and temporally longer time frame in order to study the 'episode' of contention around platform food-delivery work in the city. The paper is structured as follows. We begin with a discussion of the dis-embedding features of platform capitalism and the responses it has elicited from labour in the platform sector. We then outline our theoretical approach and our methodology before our empirical findings. We then present our discussion and conclusions.

Resisting (platform) capital's thrust to regulatory dis-embeddedness

A tradition of studies in the political economy of labour, sociology of work and employment explores the relation between labour and capital as one of sustained attempts by labour to 'fix' and 'embed' capital in socio-economic institutions aimed at regulating the power imbalances in the employment relation to the benefit of labour (Polanyi, 1944; Silver, 2003). Whereas in the post Second World War era in Europe, labour organized in its hallmark institutions, i.e. trade unions, arguably reached a peak of labour-favourable regulations in industrialized

countries (Edwards, 2003), neoliberal macroeconomic changes of the late 1970s expanded capital's ability to transcend national boundaries and (employment) regulations (Baccaro and Howell, 2017) forcing labour to adapt to the new circumstances (Ackers, 2015; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). Stronger managerial discretion in the employment relationship and the promotion of outsourcing practices in firms, in particular, have contributed to workforce fragmentation producing new and more vulnerable categories of workers (Baccaro and Howell, 2017; Weil, 2017). These developments have made the emergence of workplace solidarity and collective action especially challenging (Morgan and Pulignano, 2020). Platform capitalism is in many ways a natural by-product of the long-term liberalization of regulated employment institutions. Digital labour platforms, which are the key actors of digital capitalism, purport to 'solve the labour question' altogether by classifying their workforce as self-employed agents, on the justification of acting as purely technological intermediaries between demand and the offer for services (Beerepoot and Lambregts, 2015). Classifying platform workers as self-employed tends to fissure the platform workplace at the level of the individual worker, with significant repercussions in terms of potential for the emergence of labour collectivism (Stewart et al., 2020).

Yet, against expectations that the advent of platform work presents an existential challenge to labour collectivism, numerous empirical accounts of industrial conflict in this sector have been reported in recent years, and especially in the food delivery platform sector (see inter alia Cant, 2018; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020; Piasna et al., 2019). Much research has underscored the primacy of self-organized groups of workers, constituted in (informal) grassroots or indie unions, often disconnected from the traditional union structures, as leading the struggles in this platform sector (Bessa et al., 2022; Borghi et al., 2021; Gall, 2020). Scholars' attention has hence been oriented to understand the causes behind the emergence of these 'new' labour actors, frequently read through the lens of social movement unionism, and

often implying that new mobilizing actors in the digital platform economy transcend traditional industrial relations institutions, and in particular, 'old' and established labour actors (i.e. traditional unions) (Chesta et al., 2019; della Porta et al., 2022). Yet, recent studies have not only suggested that traditional unions represent a valid support for self-organized workers' collectives especially in waging legal actions against platforms (Joyce et al., 2022), but also that processes of incorporation of new actors into traditional unions can frequently occur when platform workers are reclassified as employees (Bessa et al., 2022: 11).

A dynamic labour front: the debate on 'old' and 'new' labour actors

The occurrence of the phenomena of reshuffling and the evolutions within the labour front in the platform economy begs further about the question of the dynamics of intra-labour interaction between the self-organized and traditional labour actors involved in the struggles to re-embed capital, and the conditions underpinning these dynamics.

Debates on the reorganization of the labour front in response to the dis-embedding of capital in the neoliberal age have been a crucial focus in the discipline of employment and labour studies over the past decades (see for instance: Ackers, 2015; Heery, 2009; Heery and Adler, 2004; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013; Hyman, 2015). Scholars have cautioned against the risk of fetishizing traditional trade unions, by questioning their capacity to remain effective in organizing and representing the working class, and especially those most hit by socio-economic and technological transformations (e.g. Atzeni, 2021; Però, 2020; Smith, 2022). These have offered important accounts of the trajectories of labour unions' institutionalization that have increasingly distanced traditional actors from the workers and their practices of active solidarity (Atzeni, 2021). It is not the intention of this article to provide an extensive review of this debate but rather to refer to some key studies and their arguments and counter-arguments. For example, Però (2020) and Smith (2022) have illustrated a

proliferation of new forms of labour mobilizations and organizations, which include structured actors such as 'indie' and radical unions. On a similar note, Cillo and Pradella (2018) report on the establishment of small rank-and-file unions (Cobas) in the cooperative-based logistics districts in the North of Italy, which are disenfranchised from traditional unions structures due to the historical entanglements of established unions with the social cooperative structures that represent the majoritarian business model in the logistic sector in Italy (Sacchetto and Semenzin, 2014). Within the context of logistic work the authors illustrate how immigrant logistic workers organised by Cobas have been able to exercise their power through strikes, obtaining improved agreements with the logistic companies, within a context of inter-unions contestation with CGIL accused by Cobas of not protecting the conditions of immigrants in the logistic sector (see Cillo and Pradella, 2018). Others have investigated more informal and relatively short-lived activist groups and collectives that, as the authors argue, have mobilized often in the form of social movements to resist particularly acute forms of precarity and labour commodification, such as in the example of the *San Precario* movement in Italy (Choi and Mattoni, 2010).

Nonetheless, comparative studies in a broad range of service and manufacturing industries have also indicated that traditional labour actors' adaptation strategies vis-à-vis the changing world of work have been encompassing of the large working class population (Doellgast et al., 2018). Importantly, the argument is put forward that traditional labour unions' success in responding to ongoing challenges depends on mobilizing power resources derived from inclusive institutions and inclusive forms of worker solidarity. This implies that with differences in forms and degree of success, and underpinned by different capacities derived from diverse extent of power structures, traditional labour unions have endeavoured to re-think their actions in order to include voices and interests of vulnerable workers within their

structures (Doellgast, Pulignano and Lillie, 2018; Benassi and Vlandas, 2016; Pulignano et al., 2016).

Inclusive strategies to expand solidarity to new groups of workers have been deployed towards, for instance, workers in conditions of labour market precarity (Marino et al., 2019), atypical workers (Pulignano et al., 2016), including temporary agency workers (Benassi and Vlandas, 2016), and the growing migrant workforce (Regalia, 2012). Importantly, in the case of Italy, all three main trade union confederations (i.e. CGIL, Cisl and UIL) have created new unions federations for atypical workers within their confederal structures beginning in the late 1990s, namely NIDil in CGIL, Tem.p@ in UIL and FeLSA in Cisl. For example, the creation of NIdiL was not just a top-down decision by CGIL since it was also supported by the self-organized precarious workers (Choi and Mattoni, 2010 in Pulignano et al., 2016). A range of research has raised concerns that these structures could become forms of segregation, thereby fostering marginalization of workers inside the union, given that federations for atypical workers develop their strategies within the framework of their individual confederations (Murgia and Selmi, 2012). However, research has mitigated these concerns, illustrating that the existence of federations for atypical workers has in fact allowed unions to coordinate their actions with the sectoral federations, thereby promoting a more general and encompassing agenda allowing space to the needs of atypical workers. On the other hand, although these federations for atypical workers have followed the main political guidelines of the confederation to which it belongs, it has eventually maintained its bargaining autonomy, which has contributed to strengthening the capacity of the federation to protect atypical workers through collective negotiation (i.e. *contrattazione aziendale inclusiva*) (Pulignano et al., 2016).

These arguments hint at the complex relational dimension among actors in the plural arena of organized labour. Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick's image of 'variable geometry of resistance' (2017) well captures the variation across spaces of relational dynamics within the

labour front, and the ensuing resistance. Scholars agree that an important factor, together with a well-arranged opportunity structure, influencing the geometry of labour responses to the changing world of work rests in national and local union traditions and orientations. Historically, trade unions have acted on the basis of political and ideological orientations leaning on one or more of the following: the market, society and class (Hyman, 2001). If propensity to the market steers unions towards economistic aims, often leading to nurturing the interests of their sole membership, closeness to the 'social partner' logic entails a union model of action that pledges social integration. Finally, as agencies of class, unions act as mobilizers against class antagonists, often working on building unity among all workers (Hyman, 2001). In the case of Italy, the character of the country's three largest union confederations (CGIL, UIL, CISL) has traditionally swung between society and class (Hyman, 2001, Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2017) and between a logic of organization (i.e. institution) and a logic of social movement (Regalia, 2012; Cella, 1999). This is based on two distinct but interrelated circumstances. Specifically, these are the alternation of militant class struggle phases (as in the 1970s) with periods of stronger involvement in institutions of social concertation (as in the 1980s-90s) on the one hand, and the cohexistance within the confederations of institutionalized peak groups with, on the other hand, decentralized bargaining at local and firm level (Regalia, 2012). The orientation as working class agents as a whole has been especially relevant in framing the unions' actions as to the deployment of the initiatives promoting inclusivity for atypical workers mentioned above.

This article contributes to the broader discussion on the variable geometry of resistance by focussing on digital platform work, which has attracted great attention from industrial relations scholars due to the unexpected and innovative labour resistance it has triggered. We explore a case study set in the city of Bologna (Italy) because of the remarkable (temporal) variation that occurred within the food delivery labour front in particular with respect to the representation

and organization of the workforce. We suggest that our study can contribute to shedding light on the relational dynamics between 'new' and 'old' labour actors and how these can yield positive synergies within the labour front in the unfolding of capital-labour struggles towards the regulatory re-embedding of platform work.

Methodology

To investigate the evolution of interactions between labour actors in a dynamic perspective, we use the analytical framework proposed by McAdam et al. (2001) in "Dynamics of Contention". McAdam et al. adopt the concept of 'episode' as a model for a non-static description of a case study, where events are viewed as a "continuous stream of contentions" (p. 12) and from where it is then possible to focus on those fine-grained interactions that occur between actors allowing us to identify the mechanisms and processes leading to specific outcomes. Thus, we are temporally sensitive to transformations – in roles, identities, external conditions – within the contentious 'episode' under scrutiny.

To translate McAdam et al.'s framework for the purpose of our methodology, we adopted a qualitative longitudinal approach to the case study that ranges temporally between the beginning of mobilizations in 2017 and the end of 2021. Research relies primarily on evidence gathered through interview data, and triangulated with data collected through unobtrusive participant observation on social media (Facebook) together with desk research of secondary data material. Gathering data from multiple sources and through different qualitative methods allowed the researchers to triangulate data (Denzin, 1978) thereby ensuring a "stronger substantiation of constructs" derived from empirical evidence (Eisenhardt, 1989: 538).

When collecting and analysing data on the case study, we followed an abductive approach (Blaikie, 2007). This approach hinges on a iterative movement between current theories and the data being collected, aiming to advance on theoretical ground when "surprising evidence"

emerges from data in a way that challenges extant literature (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012: 168). Given the rich theoretical production on the subject of workers activism in platform capitalism produced in recent years, the use of abduction was an important methodological tool helping us to reveal and explain "surprising" evolutions in worker representation in more mature phases of the struggles in the sector.

Data collection

Data collection began in May 2020 and was completed in January 2022. The bulk of the research consisted of interview data collected among Bologna's food delivery couriers, and activists and representatives from Riders Union Bologna and Bologna's local CGIL branch (*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*, Italy's main traditional trade union). More specifically, we conducted narrative interviews with 16 food delivery platform couriers based in Bologna and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 8 union activists and officials from RUB and CGIL (see Appendix 1). The interviews with couriers constituted the background material when analysing couriers' working conditions, individual and collective grievances vis-à-vis platforms and helped when exploring their (if any) involvement with, and opinions of, labour representative actors in the city. Given the focus of the case, interviews with union activists and officials from RUB and CGIL were particularly salient in developing our knowledge around the longitudinal interactions between old and new labour actors in Bologna (see Supporting Information Appendix 1 for an overview of all respondents). Respondents were recruited through various channels including personal networks, social media and snowball sampling. In order to get a varied sample among the couriers, we distinguished respondents by platform(s) of activity, job tenure, and closeness to any labour activist group. As for the union activists and officials, respondents were selected on the basis of their current and past (prior to the period of data collection) involvement in the city struggles. As we aimed to account for the

dynamic trajectory of mobilization and labour representation in Bologna, follow-up interviews were conducted when required.

Furthermore, unobtrusive participatory observation on the social media Facebook (Fielding et al., 2016; Slupinska, 2020) was conducted throughout the whole period of data collection. This novel form of observation, typically adopted in digital ethnographic studies, allows for the collection of direct and dynamic information about the phenomenon under analysis. In our study, it represented a key methodological complement to interview data in that it allowed researchers to not only gain continuous knowledge about events, mobilizations, actors involved, and receive significant signals of change in the contention trajectory, but also to review material going back to the initial phase of mobilizations. In practical terms, the researchers reviewed on a systematic basis the content of Facebook pages and Facebook groups (both public and private) of key collective and individual labour actors involved in the food delivery struggles in the city. When entering private groups or connecting with individual profiles, the researchers offered full disclosure of motivation for participation. Over 1.000 Facebook posts were reviewed, saved and stored, and field notes were taken throughout the process of online observation. The social media posts collected ranged between autumn 2017 and the end of 2021.

Finally, desk research and analysis of secondary material was conducted throughout the full period of data collection in order to gather relevant additional information for case study.

Data analysis

All data gathered using the three methods adopted were analysed and interview data were coded line-by-line, first through open coding and later followed by selective coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). NVivo Software was used to carry out all analytical steps of the narrative and the semi-structured interviews. As the purpose of our research was to make sense of

changes to the labour movement within the trajectory of contention (a number of significant transformations occurred while collecting our data) data analysis was necessarily iterative where at intervals all three authors together discussed the possible meaning of the interviews and in particular with reference to the theoretical framing. Extensive note-taking after each interview, and the drafting of memos while encoding data helped the researchers to compare insights across time and "revisit the phenomenon" as prescribed by the abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012: 176).

The case of food delivery struggles in Bologna

Among industrial relations scholars studying platform workers mobilizations, Bologna, a city in the North of Italy, is well known for its couriers' self-organized collective, i.e. Riders Union Bologna, which represents a major example of self-organized informal unionism in the food delivery platform sector in Europe. Marrone (2019) illustrates how a small group of food delivery couriers were able to build solidarity bonds among a supposedly individualized and fragmented workforce, while creatively re-thinking conflictual *repertoires* tailored to the specificity of platform work. In the span of a few months, the informal union 'Riders Union Bologna' (RUB hereafter), created soon after initial protests (Marrone and Finotto, 2019) was able to generate a city-wide coalition with local political movements, activists and consumers. This put significant pressure on the local administration and ultimately resulted in the first local regulation of platform work in Europe (Marrone and Peterlongo, 2020). Signed in summer 2018, the 'Bill of Rights of Digital Workers in Urban Contexts' was a forward-looking example of local regulation of platform work. While it is the case that the Bill has limited efficacy regarding working conditions as a result of the paucity of signatory platforms, nevertheless for the self-organized workers the bill represented an important achievement and point of departure ensuring a favourable social and political environment for RUB's subsequent struggles (Cini

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et al., 2021). Moreover, this success also earned RUB the recognition of the Italian national government, who invited RUB representatives to participate in the national bargaining on platform work established by the government in 2018 (Quondamatteo, 2021). Importantly, Cini et al. (2021) have recently also hinted at the increasing involvement of traditional unions in the context of Bologna, as well as elsewhere in Italy, but the phenomenon remains to date unexplored. Given the strength and sustained activity of RUB in the city, one might be forgiven for overlooking the continuing import of traditional unions in scholarly accounts on food delivery mobilizations. Yet, the increasing shift towards a pattern of institutionalization by 'new' labour actors emphasises the need to explore interactions between 'new' and 'old' labour actors in unfolding of struggles in the city.

Findings

When in mid-2021 a large share of food delivery couriers active in the city of Bologna signed up as members of the local branch of Italy's biggest traditional trade union CGIL, the event pointed to a major shift in the collective representation of the sector at city level. The magnitude of the event was especially due to the fact that the previous five years, i.e. since the arrival of food delivery platforms in the city, had been marked by the steady and unchallenged prominence of the local self-organized informal union 'Riders Union Bologna' (RUB) as protagonist of workers' mobilizations and struggles. In order to understand this turning-point in the labour representation of food delivery platform couriers in Bologna, we investigate the nodal mechanisms and interactions that have occurred throughout the episode of contention.

Paving the way for collaboration among labour actors in the contention (2017-2018)

Not long after food delivery platforms first started business in Bologna in 2016-2017, couriers began to gather spontaneously to "get out of the isolation in which platforms had plunged us [couriers]" (RUB-05). Casual meetings expanded into participant assemblies, leafletting around the city and actions of mutual support among workers. As recalled extensively elsewhere (Marrone, 2019; Marrone and Peterlongo, 2020), initial solidarity among workers was built from the bottom-up and at a distance from traditional unions. Couriers' first core mobilizations were entirely self-organized with the sole support of local political activist groups, of which couriers were often members themselves. As RUB-03 put it:

> "we [self-organized couriers] were better and faster in reacting and mobilizing in
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> this sector, but not necessarily because traditional trade unions have faults, it's
>
> just that they are gigantic organizations with historical roots in other forms of
>
> work and this represents a big mismatch with the way couriers work"

Also among couriers and other RUB activists (who were or had been for the most part couriers themselves at the time of interview), the attitude towards traditional unions, and the CGIL confederation in particular, was not conflictual. What the attitude did reflect however was the view that because the latter was so committed to working with traditional sectors it would be unable to react swiftly to the novelty of platform work to be able to represent effectively platform workers. Unsurprisingly then, the couriers and RUB activists interviewed consistently identified themselves as part of a new "emergent collective labour subject" in the food delivery platform sector in Bologna, claiming a position of autonomy of action from existing trade unions (RUB-05).

Nonetheless, while firmly claiming autonomy, all RUB representatives also reported on the existence of dialogue between them and the confederal unions at city level. Interactions had started during the preparatory work on the Bill of Rights promoted by the city administration early in 2018 continuing further after the passing of the Bill (May 2018). Yet, by their own

admission, Bologna CGIL officials interviewed recognized that their union's involvement in the initial phases of contention had been very limited. While acknowledging their marginality in the mobilizations, CGIL unionists also claimed that their side-lining, paradoxically, provided for a vantage point from which to examine and study "what was going on in this sector that was growing enormously" and that it represented an unsettling challenge to the usual way of operating of CGIL (CGIL-01). In particular, the ambiguity of couriers' work status (self-employment) and the unconventional work arrangements in food delivery platforms had been perceived as major obstacles for the union to react in a relevant way in the sector. In fairness, the unusual features of platform work had made it difficult even to identify what union within the CGIL confederation could satisfactorily represent couriers. CGIL's tentative solution was to maintain a shared functional representation between the NiDil union, representing workers with atypical contracts, and Filt, which brings together workers from the transport and logistic sectors, while relying on the confederal secretariat, also in its local representation, to provide general guidance on the issue

> "to make an efficient synthesis between the different union categories […] for
> those workers who are in precarious conditions and whose representation under
> collective bargaining structure is still to be built" (CGIL-03)

External 'observation' of the phenomenon and internal rearrangements were not the only moves CGIL carried out in the initial phase of the contentions. Importantly, vis-à-vis the self-organized workers, CGIL adopted a posture of non-interference and respect to the autonomy claimed by the grassroots RUB:

> "We have tried to act humbly and be listening [to the workers], let the workers
> mobilize spontaneously and acquire an organizational structure […] without

presenting ourselves and saying: 'Hey, we are CGIL, and we do as we say'"

(CGIL-01)

Aware of its incapacity to act as mobilizing actor in the growing unrest of the platform sector in the city, CGIL framed its position within the contentious episode as an experienced labour actor viewing the emerging new subject with curiosity and a certain 'distant' respect, advancing offers of solidarity and technical support where needed:

> "Since the beginning, the position of the local CGIL has been not to put obstacles
> in any way the mobilizing and organizing path of RUB [but] offer support to all
> workers who needed it, and try to create a synthesis" (CGIL-03)

At the time of the interviews, around three years after the start of mobilizations in Bologna, the CGIL officials interviewed looked retrospectively with satisfaction at this strategy of non-interference, respecting the autonomy of RUB. A high-level official from the Bologna confederal secretariat stressed his belief that this attitude of respect and recognition vis-à-vis the grassroots union had "gained us credibility" allowing CGIL to "start interlocutions with this group of workers that was organizing spontaneously" (CGIL-01), paving the way for fruitful collaboration.

Collaboration through legal activism (2018-2021)

In the years that followed the Bill of Rights,

> "this [collaboration] has happened, thanks to the unions but especially to workers
> themselves, and I mean Riders Union Bologna, who used their strength to make
> a step forward all together" (CGIL-02)

The 'strength' assigned to RUB by a CGIL official in this quote reflects the stabilization of RUB as main mobilizing and representative labour actor in the food delivery platform sector

in Bologna after the initial, heated phase of mobilizations. In fact, RUB succeeded in maintaining its mobilizing traction while remaining independent from traditional labour actors. This represents a rather unique case in the Italian national scenario, where smaller and more fragile self-organized informal unions have been subsumed after the first waves of mobilization within traditional labour structures, such as for instance in the case of Naples and Florence (RUB-04). RUB activists pointed to support received by the "local militant groups and individuals who played as a 'chain of transmission' throughout different cohorts of couriers" (RUB-04) as the key factor ensuring their survival as an organization in the medium term, because permanently committed activists could remedy the very high turnover of the local workforce thereby maintaining the union's grassroots structure and, more importantly, its mobilizing capacity.

Notwithstanding the strength accrued by the self-organized workers, RUB remained an informal union. The informality of the new labour organization implied the lack of a collective legal status from which to start court proceedings against labour platforms. As elsewhere around the world, legal activism in platform work contentions is an important part of labour's strategy to reclaim improved working conditions while striving for re-embedding platform work within national labour regulations. To this end, RUB then turned to CGIL because "CGIL can [start court cases] and so we have teamed up with them" (RUB-03). CGIL was not only a repository of a longstanding experience in assisting workers with labour court cases, but it also represented an acceptable partner for RUB due to the solidaristic and respectful (of RUB's autonomy) attitude that the confederal union had adopted towards the local militant workers since the beginning of their struggles.

Over the years, RUB and CGIL engaged in synergetic relations through the cooperation on the court cases (RUB-02). Generally, court cases would be built in close collaboration between CGIL-affiliated lawyers and couriers and the RUB activists who "contribute by

writing the appeal ourselves on the basis of our experience of mobilization and on researches conducted by other couriers who are members of RUB" (RUB-01). Moreover, the lengthy timeframe of the court cases set the stage for the stabilization of interactions among the two labour actors in the city. Here, the self-organized workers and CGIL officials could reinforce feelings of mutual solidarity and trust, which also meant for CGIL the progressive exit from the isolation in which it had been plunged in the initial phase of the contentions. Important victories on legal cases of national relevance, such as the case against Deliveroo in late 2020, undoubtedly boosted morale in the partnership (Marà and Pulignano, 2020). In this ground-breaking ruling, the Bologna labour court found the Deliveroo's algorithm "Frank" discriminatory and in particular with regard to unionization rights. Hence, the Court required Deliveroo to change its platform functioning while improving its treatment of the company's workers.

Collective bargaining with Just Eat and repercussions for the Bologna labour front (2021)

Despite the close interaction between the two labour actors in Bologna in the years between 2018 and 2020-2021, RUB and CGIL remained two separated entities and RUB's position as main organizer and mobilizer in the city remained unchallenged. Especially during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, the protests organized by RUB against the appalling working conditions of the couriers, who were considered as 'essential workers', proved that the self-organized workers' drive to guide the resistance movement had not diminished. The sustained primacy of RUB vis-à-vis the traditional unions in Bologna was even more remarkable when contrasted with the Italian national scenario, where convergence between 'old' and 'new' labour actors in the platform sector was becoming a shared reality in many territories. This was occurring against the background of the social dialogue established by the Italian government

from mid-2018 between the social partners (official and unofficial unions, and platforms), and where grassroots and confederal unions had resolved a range of difficulties allowing them to establish a common bargaining agenda. The "leap forward in the constitution of a 'unitary' pathway" (RUB-03), as it was acclaimed by the RUB activists, was the creation in May 2020 of the network 'RidersXiDiritti' (Couriers for Rights), which gathered together the confederal and grassroots unions from across the country into a single labour actor premised upon mutual respect.

Against this backdrop, in December 2020 the platform Just Eat-Takeaway announced a plan to change their employment model in Italy and immediately began hiring couriers as employees. In pursuit of this they opened negotiations with trade unions. Bargaining was conducted at national level by the three main confederations, in consultation with the other members of the network RidersXiDiritti (there including RUB). By the end of March 2021, the Just Eat contract was signed, as part of the overall sectoral agreement of the transport and logistics sector.

In Bologna, Just Eat's new contract in the late Spring 2021 set off a little revolution within the platform labour movement. The company's hiring campaign began to change the local labour market in the sector as many workers were now working under standard employment contracts. An important consequence of the status reclassification was that workers were now entitled to nominate representatives within the company (what in Italy is called *Rappresentanza Sindacale Aziendale-RSA*). Yet, national regulations with respect to company-level workers' participation prescribe that representatives are workers affiliated to officially recognized (formal) trade unions which inevitably would exclude RUB. Hence, although the majority of Just Eat workers were RUB affiliates, grassroots union members could not be elected as representatives within Just Eat. The self-organized workers held an assembly, where,

> "the majority of Just Eat workers expressed the will to have a[n official] union representation as soon as possible, hence the only thing to do was to negotiate with the formal union that was the closest to our positions so that we could at least keep a clear and consistent political line" (RUB-05)

When balloted, workers committed to CGIL and to become officially members of the union. CGIL welcomed the couriers' decision by continuing to display respect for their autonomy, as in previous cooperation. One of our respondents, a courier and experienced activist in RUB who later became a CGIL representative within Just Eat, described the CGIL approach as:

> "leaving us [workers] completely free to choose our representatives, as opposed to other cities where representatives were nominated among workers who were already active CGIL members […] and allowing us to give value to RUB's experience and to keep our line of mirroring in the representation the ethnic composition of the workforce and those people who had already informally contributed to voice workers interests" (RUB-05)

What is worth stressing is the qualitative recognition of the capabilities of the self-organized workers by the traditional union, which was manifested in the space left to the workers to re-continue their practices within the official union. On a more practical level, the affiliation to the traditional union was facilitated through the 'direct mandate system' (*delega diretta*), which allows workers to become union members while protecting their anonymity vis-à-vis the employer. This encouraged a rise in CGIL membership among Just Eat and non-Just Eat couriers, achieving in just a few summer months in 2021 an increase of 180 CGIL affiliated couriers in the city. A remarkable change also occurred at the level of communication strategies. The announcement of mobilizations and the communications of grievances that had been primarily communicated through the RUB channels, were now promoted through CGIL

communication outlets. On a similar note, CGIL symbols (flags, vests, etc.) were starting to be displayed during couriers' collective actions.

Of course, a note of caution is required to avoid painting an unrealistic and overly optimistic picture of the resulting situation. To be sure, not all tensions between the formerly self-organized couriers and the traditional union had been resolved by the time of the merger – at least not within the timeframe covered in this article. Mild disagreements were reported from both sides, with workers lamenting that "the union sometimes resists taking onboard the innovative resistance practices" that had originated in moments of struggle by self-organized (RUB-05), and particularly so in the case of a traditional union such as Filt (the transport and logistics union). Indeed, the Filt official recognized the difficulty, at times, of dealing with workers' expectations of flexibility, especially within the standard employment status prescribed by the Just Eat contract. However, such divergences seemed less relevant to the actors involved than the general circumstance of solidarity and unity that had emerged in Bologna after the Just Eat agreement that led to the incorporation of workers into CGIL's structures.

Discussion and conclusion

Adopting a longitudinal perspective on the episode of contention in the food delivery platform sector in Bologna, we illustrated the dynamic relations between the 'new' (i.e. workers' self-organized informal unions) and 'old' labour actors (i.e. traditional unions), which allowed us to make sense of the relevant shift in workers' representation that occurred in mid-2021. In this respect, we offer a qualitative illustration of Bessa et al.'s (2022) argument that incorporation of self-organized workers groups into traditional union structures occurs when platform workers are reclassified as employees. This was achieved by unpacking and eliciting the factors leading to such an outcome. Furthermore, we also address and temper scholarly positions that

call for the end of traditional trade unionism (Atzeni, 2021) and, conversely, suggest that 'new' and 'old' labour actors can transcend their differences and build synergetic relations leading, under certain conditions, to an integration of the two labour groups. More especially, we argue that the Bologna case illustrates how the local geometry of resistance can vary *over time* due to specific dynamics in the mutual (re)definition of identities and positions of 'old' and 'new' labour actors along the unfolding of struggles to re-embed platform capitalism in regulatory institutions. Where most scholarly accounts have so far concentrated on the formation of platform workers' self-organized movements (Marrone and Peterlongo, 2020; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020), our empirical data reveals the significance of processes of identity (re)elaboration as crucial for understanding the conditions accounting for the occurrence of intra-labour relations between 'new' and 'old' labour actors, not only within the two groups but also in their dynamic interlocking across the episode.

From the beginning of this case, while the self-organized workers engaged in the building of their identity as emerging collective subject in the new platform economy, the local CGIL remained, by their own admission, marginal to these workers' mobilizations. One of the prominent reasons given by CGIL interviewees was that they wanted to avoid co-opting the couriers to the detriment of RUB itself. Their logic was that grassroots mobilization, although outside their union structures, were positive in building power among workers in this new sector. A sector whose functioning confounded CGIL, hence making the trade union's responses hesitant and ineffective. Building on this, CGIL articulated its approach as one of respect for the autonomy claimed by RUB, while reasserting their availability to be supportive of the newborn labour actor. The ensuing events narrated above prove that the stance adopted by CGIL in this initial phase of the episode was salient in setting the stage for collaborations among the 'old' and 'new' labour actors in the city. It is important to note that CGIL's interest in the self-organized informal union was not so much an instrumental concern with

membership so much as a reflection of its broader class orientation (see, especially, Hyman, 2001; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2017). In Bologna, CGIL's class orientation approach allowed RUB to perceive it as an acceptable ally. This paved the way for synergetic collaborations on court cases among members of the two labour groups. Confirming Joyce et al. (2022) findings that in the platform sector 'old' and 'new' labour actors frequently join forces for legal struggle against labour platforms, our study unpacks key elements in the development of collaborations. If, on the one side, non-conflictual reciprocal attitudes among RUB and CGIL generated a potential for working together on (and win) legal cases against platforms, RUB had a specific interest in engaging in such collaboration because, as an informal union, it lacked the official status and related resources needed to initiate legal proceedings. Thus, when workers sought to put pressure on platforms via the law aiming, ultimately, to re-embed labour relations, they had to rely on partners with a higher degree of institutionalization. As informal union they lack institutional self-sufficiency.

The shortcomings of RUB's informal nature become more evident after the introduction of Just Eat's collective agreement, which reclassified couriers as employees with standard labour contracts. Here, we witnessed a major shift in the episode of contention. Specifically, with employment relations finally re-embedded in national labour law, the affiliation of worker representatives (couriers) to an officially recognized union had significant presence. The shift exerted a powerful influence on the re-arrangement of the geography of resistance of labour actors within the episode of contention. In effect, it placed those with higher institutionalized roles (i.e. traditional unions) in a position of advantage. In Bologna, where the couriers' response to this new situation was a relatively unproblematic vote to affiliate to CGIL, we argue that this solution is in fact the result of longer-term processes that occurred within the episode of contention. This was especially notable in relation to the positioning of CGIL as non-conflictual ally and the reciprocal relations of trust built by the two actors when dealing

with the particular legal concerns. Indeed, although one may judge the teaming-up of RUB and CGIL around court cases as a rather opportunistic one, our evidence also highlights the extent to which the collaborative practices established when building the cases, positively spilled over to the general relations among the informal and traditional unions. Arguably, this deepened understanding, mutual solidarity and trust.

Our study therefore also contributes to the longstanding debate on the reorganization of labour resistance, and its 'old' and 'new' actors, in response to the dis-embedding of capital in the neoliberal age (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013; Hyman, 2015). Responding to claims that industrial relations scholars should shift their focus from 'old' labour actors to explore more closely workers' grassroots solidarity (Atzeni, 2021), our paper shows that, under specific circumstances, traditional unions can remain significant actors. The case of Bologna is a telling example because expectations of a come-back by CGIL as the leading actor were weaker than elsewhere, given the resilience and strength of the local self-organized informal union. Yet, the study points to the potential for a *temporally variable* local geometry of resistance (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017), where the labour front can change from being fragmented (comprised of distant 'old' and 'new' labour actors) to becoming a synergetic reconfiguration of the forces of resistance. In Bologna, connections among the labour actors were established and deepened through collaboration on court cases, but for this to be acceptable for the self-organized collective RUB, CGIL had to position itself as a non-adversarial ally. This was, in effect, in line with its traditional orientation as a class actor less concerned by membership than worker inclusivity. As the episode moved towards a progressive re-embedding of labour relations in the debated sector, initially with court cases and then with the restoration of employment relations, the role of traditional unions became more prominent not because they actually represented workers, but due to the 'unofficial' informal nature of the self-organized unions. Consequently, this raises an additional important

question as to the sustainability of the organizational forms built by grassroots groups of self-organized workers beyond traditional union structures. Especially this is the case when employment relations are finally re-embedded in conventional industrial relations environments.

Yet, it would be a mistake to think that RUB's legacy, in terms of solidarity created among its members together with the *fighting repertoires* necessary to struggle within the sector, has been lost in the convergence between the two labour actors. RUB's legacy is now active within the structures of Italy's largest traditional labour union, where self-organized workers who hitherto had been the driving force of RUB, continue to 'wage war' on the platforms. The 'listening' position adopted by CGIL from the beginning of the episodes of contention, and since the merger, to some extent still practiced, can be seen as a winning strategy in two respects. Not only has it led to a quantitatively coherent and robust constituency in a new sector, but the new CGIL membership also brings important expertise with respect to novel *repertoires* of contention including solidaristic actions.

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