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Monographic Section

Decentralised Control, Fragmented Conflict. Dissecting Work Relationships in Food Delivery Platforms

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Abstract. Based on a multi-sited ethnography of the platform-based food delivery sector in Italy, the paper investigates the everyday experience of couriers focusing on the conflictual character that permeates their relationship with the other actors enrolled in the process of production. Drawing on Gandini's (2019) conceptualisation of digital platforms as decentralised points of production, the aim of this paper is to extend the analysis of food delivery work beyond the rider-algorithm nexus, in order to focus on the other sites where workplace control and conflict are manifested. Building on the conceptualization of food delivery platforms as a multi-stakeholder management system, we show that the decentralisation of organisational control corresponds to a parallel fragmentation of workplace conflict dynamics. In particular, the paper addresses three areas of conflict. First, we focus on the relationships among couriers to show how the hyper-competitive model of food-delivery platforms gives rise to tensions and anti-solidaristic practices. Secondly, we explore the conflictual dynamics that characterise the riders' relationship with customers and restaurants. Through a detailed empirical analysis, the paper reveals that the power of platforms also includes their ability to obscure the 'structural antagonism' at the heart of the employer-employee relationship, fragmenting the workplace conflict into multiple *loci* at the periphery of the labour process.

Keywords: multi-stakeholder management, workplace conflicts, food delivery, platform work.

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INTRODUCTION

Today, there is a general consensus that digital labour platforms, once associated with the «promises of the sharing economy» (Borghi 2023), are first and foremost capitalist actors (Srnicek 2016) that have profoundly reconfigured relations of production. According to economic sociologists, digital platforms can be considered a new organizational model, which has intensi-

fied historical processes of job outsourcing, creating economic value upon the activities undertaken by actors who are not formally part of the firm – e.g. drivers, riders, content creators (Stark & Pais 2020). At the basis of the platform model is a distinctive regime of organisational control, based on the use of software algorithms capable of processing large amounts of crowdsourced data. Scholars have placed emphasis on the technological novelty of algorithmic management, situating it within the broader historical context of capitalist labour control and work rationalisation, through the use of terms such as (digital) taylorism (Haidar & Keune 2021), (digital) panopticon (Veen *et al*. 2020) and augmented despotism (Delfanti 2019). While the dynamics of control and resistance between workers and algorithmic technologies have been extensively investigated, however, scholars have overlooked the inherently conflictual nature of the relationship with other agents of organisational control. This is particularly evident in the case of food delivery platforms, which include a third actor in addition to riders and customers: restaurants and, more generally, partners. In order to illustrate the complexity of the food delivery platforms' model, Huang (2023) reframed the concept of algorithmic management as a kind of "multi-stakeholder management". This emphasises that customers and restaurants are not simply enrolled as productive functions of the labour process, but also as agents of control. Building on this conceptualisation, the aim of this paper is to show that this decentralisation of organisational control corresponds to a decentralisation of workplace conflict dynamics. More specifically, we argue that this decentralization of workplace conflicts results from the way platforms structure the relations between the actors involved in the process of production, and is materialised in the physical and digital spaces where the interactions among these actors occur.

To illustrate this argument, we draw on data collected during two distinct ethnographic researches conducted by the two authors in three Italian cities: the first in Milan, the second between Turin and Bologna. Both studies were carried out between 2019 and 2022 and have in common the adoption of «observant participation» (Wacquant 2015) as a central method of inquiry. The two authors worked as food delivery couriers for several months, compiling an ethnographic diary on a daily basis and collecting dozens of in-depth interviews with workers. The empirical material derived from the two studies will be used together to illustrate common features of a rider's work experience, regardless of the specific territorial context in which it is situated. Therefore, this study adopts a methodological orientation inspired by the relational ethnography approach (Desmond, 2014), to explore the conflicts and tensions that permeate the work of food delivery riders.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we reconstruct the debate on algorithmic management in digital labour platforms, highlighting the decisive contribution made by labour process theory (LPT). We draw upon the pivotal contribution offered by Gandini (2019), who has described digital platforms as decentralised points of production. However, as we move through this concise review, we note that scholars have tended to accept a reductive interpretation of this conceptualisation, essentially focusing on the role of algorithmic technologies as agents of control and thus framing the relationship between workers and algorithms as a privileged site of workplace conflict. In the third section, we build on the notion of "multi-stakeholder control" proposed by Huang (2023) to identify the other *loci* of conflicts which punctuate the experience of a food delivery courier. First, we focus on the tensions inherent in the platform model. In this respect, we show that seemingly conflictual practices, such as the use of bots to circumvent the algorithmic reputation system, produce anti-solidaristic consequences and tensions between those working on the same platform. Second, we explore the conflictual dynamics that characterise the riders' relationship with customers and restaurants. In both cases, conflicts emerge in the physical space where actors interact but are encoded in the way platforms transform these interactions into relations of production. Building upon this empirical reconstruction, we conclude that the power of platforms extends beyond an intensification of technical control enabled by algorithmic technologies and includes their capacity of fragmenting the conflicts and discontents at the periphery of the labour process.

THE PLATFORM AS POINT OF PRODUCTION: BEYOND ALGORITHMIC CONTROL

The debate on algorithmic management in the platform economy has been profoundly influenced by the Labour Process Theory (LPT), a Marxist perspective in the sociology of work with a main focus on how employ-

ers seek to increase workers' control in order to maximise the extraction of value from their labour (Edwards 1990; Thompson 1983). The theoretical contribution of LPT to the study of digital platforms has been particularly elicited in a pivotal article by Gandini (2019). In response to the sharing economy narrative, this paper proposed to conceptualize platforms as a «digital-based point of production», that is «the 'place' where the labour process is enacted upon workers» (ivi: 1040), and where mechanisms of value extraction and capital accumulation take place. Gandini emphasizes that, regardless of where the work concretely takes place, the platform «enables the organisation of work and managerial role to be enacted upon workers [based on] the data produced by both parties (consumers/clients and workers) as part of their encounter, and by the metrics resulting from the processing of those data» (ivi: 1046). In other terms, digital platforms define and repurpose social relations between users – usually, a hirer/client and a worker/service provider – and transform them into *relations of production*. Building on this conceptualization, studies rooted in the LPT tradition have been pioneers in demonstrating the exploitation of living labour that underlies the platform model, and the capacity of algorithmic technologies to extend organisational control into new areas of the workplace (Kellog *et al*. 2020). Since the pivotal study on Uber drivers by Rosenblat and Stark (2016), the novelty of algorithmic control has been typically referred to as the irreducible opacity of algorithms-decision making, which are reported to encode «deliberately created information asymmetries» to the detriment of workers (Veen *et al*. 2020). For example, algorithmic-based, non-transparent payment systems have been reported to increase workers' financial insecurity and undermine their agency (Gregory 2020). The opacity of algorithmic systems has been also attributed to the unpredictable allocation of work tasks, particularly in cases where platforms are directly responsible for matching labour supply and demand – e.g. in the food delivery and ride-hailing sectors (Veen *et al*. 2020). Finally, opacity is embedded in the techno-evaluative infrastructure which affects workers' job opportunities (Kornberger *et al*. 2017)

An understanding of 'technologies as agents of control' is indeed central in the LPT tradition, where technological innovation is argued to follow the «imperative of constantly renew[ing] production» to maximise value extraction (Hall 2010: 161) and is usually associated with negative consequences on workers – e.g. deskilling. In this perspective, technologies are conceived as materially embedding and reproducing the *structurally antagonistic relation* between workers and employers. Such assumptions are further amplified in the context of digital platforms, where technologies are not merely the material furniture of an assembly line, or the computers of a call centre. Rather, they constitute the digital infrastructure which defines work rules, patterns of interaction, norms and power structures. However, as noted by Joyce and colleagues, a narrow «focus on algorithmic aspects of platform work mask important nonalgorithmic features that are crucial to its operation and to worker experiences» (2023: 149), such as the disciplining functioning of flexible payment systems based on piecework. In broader terms, while platforms work *through* algorithms, they are not reducible to algorithms. In this light, the point we intend to address in this article is that focusing on the role of algorithms in isolation has led platform labour scholars to identify workers' interaction with algorithms as the main source of workplace conflict. As observed by Kellog and colleagues (2020), algorithms represent a «*contested* terrain of control» where workers resort to various forms of organisational misbehaviour in an attempt to regain autonomy over the labour process. And indeed, a substantial body of empirical research has demonstrated that algorithmic control is not frictionless, as workers are able to exert their agency in relation to algorithmic decision-making, although their goals and interests may differ (see Bonini & Trerè 2024; Bonifacio 2023; Peterlongo 2023). However, if it is true, as Gandini argues, that platforms socio-technical systems do configure social relations into relations of production not only by transforming labour power into a commodity, but also by empowering users «to act as middle managers» (2019: 1049), it is also reasonable to assume that a substantial part of the workplace conflict is decentralised at the core of these social relations. This argument is not radically new. Other scholars have already noted that the novelty of platforms as organizational model lies in their capacity of decentralising control, while keeping a highly centralized power given by the programmability of their digital infrastructure (see Stark & Pais 2020; Kornberger *et al*. 2017). In the same vein, others have emphasized the new role of customers as "managers de facto" (Healy & Pekarek, 2023; Schor *et al*. 2023). The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the tensions that arise from the articulation of centralisation and decentralisation of organisational processes in the context of food delivery platforms,

directing scholars' attention to other *loci* of workplace conflict beyond algorithmic systems, which have hitherto received less attention.

DECENTRALISING CONTROL, FRAGMENTING CONFLICT

As we mentioned in the previous section, the literature on platform labour has in many ways explored the strategies and informal tactics of platform workers in dealing with the algorithmic mechanisms regulating their work. In both the field of LPT and the field of STS (Science and Technology Studies), numerous studies have investigated the coping mechanisms employed by platform workers to face the opacity of algorithms, with the aim of gaining advantages by resisting their disciplinary power (Anwar & Graham 2020; Bonifacio 2023; Bonini & Trerè 2024; Bucher *et al*. 2021; Chen 2018; Heiland 2022; Kellogg *et al*. 2019; Panimgan 2021; Peterlongo 2023; Tassinari & Maccarone 2020). LPT scholars often consider practices of organisational misbehaviour as forms of worker resistance to algorithms, while STS scholars typically use concepts such as technological appropriation (Eglash 2004; Oudshoorn & Pinch 2008) or reverse engineering (Chikofsky & Cross 1990; Diakopoulos 2014; Kitchin 2017) to highlight workers' ability to cope with algorithmic opacity. Both theoretical perspectives, however, are aligned in their aspiration to elucidate the forms of workers' agency that can emerge even in the context of a pervasive technical control. Some of this research is worth mentioning: Chen (2018), for instance, uses the concept of "algorithmic activism" to understand how gig workers use digital technologies to resist and counteract the algorithmic infrastructures embedded in their work. A similar pattern is also evident in the research of Bonini and Trerè (2024), who examine the way in which workers cope with the platform 'black-boxes' by sharing information and collectively organising though social media. Similarly, Panimbang (2018) highlights the tactics of algorithmic resistance employed by Indonesian platform workers to circumvent the 'rules of the game' or to take advantage of certain loopholes in the apps. These include the use of 'fake GPS' bugs to circumvent the workflow system and the exploitation of promotions and price discounts available in the apps. In the Italian food delivery sector, as reported by some authors and as will be discussed later, the use of pirated software is widespread among riders as a means of obtaining more work shifts and improving performances (Bonifacio 2023; Peterlongo 2023). In sum, the empirical research has extensively demonstrated the numerous ways in which platform workers are able to anticipate the outputs of algorithmic mechanisms, to circumvent their rules, and even to sabotage them.

What has yet to be explored, however, is the role played by other types of relationships, beyond that between workers and algorithms, in reproducing asymmetries and conflicts in the gig economy. In an attempt to recognise them, this paper addresses the other *loci* of conflict engineered by food delivery platforms, focusing on the relationships between riders, platform partners and customers. This multiplication of conflicts is not a peculiarity of digital platforms. For example, the concept of "management by customers" (Fuller & Smith 1991) was coined to highlight the increasing use of customers' feedback to monitor, evaluate and discipline service workers during the 1980s and 1990s. However, in the platform model, customers assume a central role as agents of control due to the algorithmic embedding of their evaluations within the ranking systems, which affect workers' performances and serve as a dispositive of labour control.

In the context of food delivery platforms, this degree of complexity is further augmented. As argued by Huang (2023: 197), food delivery platforms enable different types of stakeholders to participate in managerial tasks and activities, thus configuring a «multidimensional supervision network» over workers (Figure 1). In particular, food delivery platforms enrol in the supervision process also a third type of actor in addition to customers, namely restaurants and partner businesses. Like clients, partners are also entitled to evaluate the riders' work – while the opposite is not possible – creating, as we shall see, an additional source of tension within the labour process. In fact, customers' and partners' evaluations directly affect riders' working conditions – e.g. their possibility of booking work shifts – and can even lead to accounts' disconnections. In Huang's multistakeholder management scheme, the author also considers the role of government, which is responsible for regulating what happens in the urban space (e.g. road safety measures) and, where present, the potential involvement of labour supplies companies. To

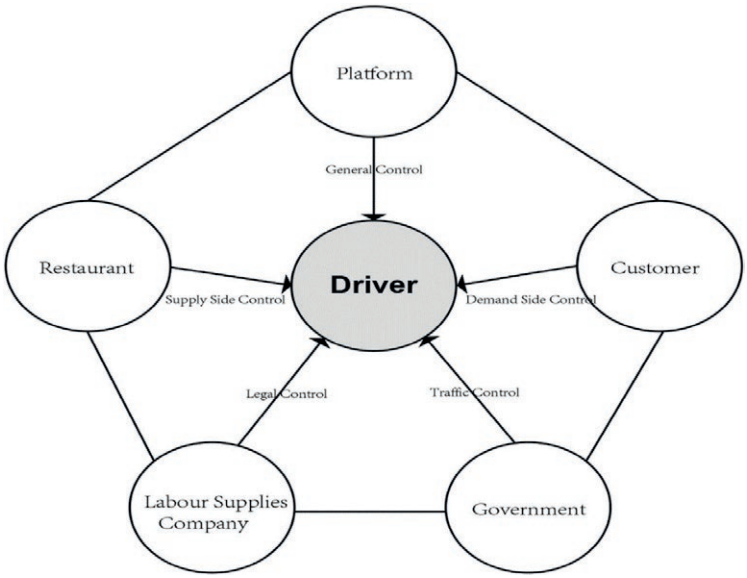

Fig. 1. Multi-stakeholder control system of food delivery work (Huang 2023).

further complexify Huang's scheme, we argue that the competitive relations between riders themselves are also a source of tension and a form of work discipline. In fact, as noted by Anwar and Graham (2020), the hyper-competitive model of the gig economy fosters a race to the bottom that has often the consequence of weakening workers' bargaining power and forms of collective action.

In sum, while it is clear that the interaction between workers and algorithms in the gig economy is a crucial aspect to understand the logics of platform power (Graham & Ferrari 2021), if we take seriously Gandini's argument that platforms represent a digital based point of production, it is equally imperative to delve into the broader social dynamics that these platforms engender. This requires the examination of the intricate social relationships among workers, customers and partners that platforms like Uber Eats, Glovo and Deliveroo are able to orchestrate.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical data contained in the paper derive from two distinct ethnographic researches on the food delivery sector conducted in Italy. The first research focused on the context of Milan, while the second is a multi-sited research conducted between Turin and Bologna. Both fieldworks covered a time frame from 2019 to early 2022. The paper therefore benefits from the methodological and epistemological advantages of multi-sited ethnographic research: the use of multiple research contexts (Milan, Turin and Bologna) allows us to avoid the possible biases associated with the particularities of each city – the so-called 'synecdoche problem' (Amin & Graham 1997) – and thus to arrive at richer results. The three studies employ a similar methodology, based on the use of qualitative and ethnographic research techniques. Much of the empirical material derives from the direct participation of the two authors in the delivery work. For several months, riding a bicycle, we have worked for two of the most important food delivery platforms present in Italy, taking note of conversations and short interviews in the course of our daily work. Moreover, we conducted 50 in-depth interviews with riders across the three cities. In some cases, we were also able to conduct interviews with union delegates, restaurants' managers, and platform managers. Another crucial part of the ethnographic work has been carried out online, through the analysis of public and private groups on social media and instant messaging chats. In this case, the research approach was that of non-participant observation, following as far as possible the ethical and methodological indications of online ethnography (Caliandro

2018; Kozinets 2010). Whenever possible, we have contacted the authors of online contents to obtain their permission of using them for research purposes; otherwise, we have proceeded to anonymise the sources and contents of the textual materials. Ultimately, the direct engagement of the two researchers enabled an in-depth analysis of the apps' functioning, through the generation of screenshots at multiple stages of the labour process.

Based on these empirical sources, the following three empirical sections present the *loci* of conflict that emerged from the fieldwork. These include tensions between riders, conflicts with platforms' customers and with employees of restaurants and other partner businesses.

RIDERS VS RIDERS

Conflicts among riders in the food delivery sector reflect the broader tensions inherent in the gig-economy model, which sees workers competing with each other in a precarious environment where orders are placed through opaque algorithmic procedures and earnings fluctuate wildly based on mechanisms that are difficult to predict and control. Of course, this insecure job environment gives rise to forms of mutual aid, as work precariousness can also represent a shared condition of vulnerability from which to experiment with forms of solidarity and collective action (Bonini & Trerè 2024; Marrone 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone 2020). However, in this section we highlight some of the conditions fostering conflictual dynamics among colleagues that emerged from the fieldwork.

A major source of conflict concerns the competition for work. The abundance of riders vying for limited opportunities creates an atmosphere of tension, where competitive pressures can lead them to work longer hours or to accept unsafe conditions in order to secure a higher income. The competitive nature of this model of work organisation is particularly pronounced during periods of significant labour inflow, as was the case during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is due to the imbalance between food delivery demand and the supply of work, which has a detrimental impact on the latter. It increases the sense of competition, risking the exacerbation of conflict and intolerance among colleagues.

One of the areas of tension where forms of resentment between colleagues are revealed relates to space management. It is not uncommon for riders to adopt spatial strategies that bind them permanently to certain urban areas, such as squares, streets and crossroads, where partner activities are concentrated. Therefore, the arrival of new fleet members in such areas may be experienced by more senior riders as a threat to the smooth running of their work and the continuity of orders received. For example, a rider who had been regularly frequenting a little square in the centre of Turin for approximately one year observed with concern the arrival of new colleagues.

> I have been here for a long time. And you know I'm here all the time. There is good work here, there is a lot of demand from this restaurant and there are others around. I started coming here and we were few, very few, just me and a few other riders, like my friend Kian. Now, I see more people. Every day it's starting to get too crowded! I don't want to be forced to look for another place. I hope not because I like this place. This is my office! (Uber Eats rider, Turin, 2021).

The opaque nature of the system for allocating orders is also a contributing factor to the aforementioned divisions between riders. This phenomenon is particularly evident in cases where a ranking system is employed to distribute work hours. In platforms such as Glovo, for instance, riders with lower ratings are unable to access the same number of working hours as those with higher ratings. Hence, they are forced to scroll through the apps' internal work-shifts calendar in search of available slots. This particularly alienating activity is avoided through the use of bots, which are illicit software programs designed for replacing human labour in the activity of looking for working hours. Such pirate apps are now widespread in Italy and all over Europe and cost tens of euros per month. Their functioning is relatively simple: once downloaded in the rider's smartphone, they can communicate in the background with the platforms' official apps.

While the use of these bots might be understood as a form of organisational misbehaviour against the coercion of algorithmic management, or as a resistant form of technological appropriation, it is also one of the more vehe-

ment source of tensions among workers. From the riders' perspective, the existence of bots creates an unfair competitive advantage for those who have and use them, as opposed to those who do not. The use of bots ensures that riders with low ratings receive sufficient working hours, thereby eroding the advantageous position of those with higher ratings – for instance, riders with a high number of orders delivered, a high number of good ratings received from clients and restaurants, etc.

An emblematic example of how conflict between riders is exacerbated by the presence of bots comes from a Telegram chat between a group of Glovo riders. In the case reported below, a novice rider asks for information on how to obtain a bot and is harshly criticised by three colleagues who comment as follows:

> A) «It's illegal and harms all the other riders. Here everyone is getting upset because there is someone who uses the bot to take hours, but it's not good. If you can't find hours, it is also because in your area there are people who use bots. They use them almost all over Italy. Sooner or later, they will ban everyone who uses them in my opinion».
> B) «Using bots is stupid and, above all, you hurt your colleagues. Bots are made to enslave us and blackmail us even more, you pay to get them. If they were free, it would be different. [...] To use it you spend a certain amount per week, it's a system to make bastards rich who profit from the competition of the underclass like the riders».
> C) «If you think about using them, you are taking away and stealing bread from people who don't even get four hours a week. I would feel like shit exploiting this system».
> (Group chat, 20/02/21).

The rider replies, trying to justify himself by saying that he has no choice and that «actually everyone is using bots now»; the diatribe in the chat continues with numerous messages until one participant offers to provide information on how to buy a bot privately. Bots therefore represent a parallel informal market that increases inequality among riders and exacerbates their already precarious working conditions. For this reason, and in light of the ineffectiveness of platform companies in countering the phenomenon, riders' collectives and informal unions have been denouncing the presence of bots. The use of bots is often stigmatised by many riders, who perceive them as a threat to their working conditions and a source of conflict internal to the workforce.

RIDERS VS CUSTOMERS

As stated in section 2, a notable absence in the empirical literature on food delivery platforms is the relationship between riders and customers. At the heart of this relationship lies multifaceted power dynamics, where the platform exerts considerable influence in shaping interactions and dictating the terms of engagement between the worker and the customer. Although food delivery platforms keep a certain degree of direct control over crucial managerial functions – e.g. price-making and work tasks allocation – they rely on customers' ratings to evaluate riders' performances. While ostensibly designed to guarantee a high quality of service, the rating system serves as a tool of control, fostering a dynamic where workers are subjected to the whims of the customers – and, consequently, of the platform itself. As anticipated in the previous section with reference to the algorithmic distribution of work tasks, a low rating leads to lower job opportunities or even to accounts' disconnections, thereby placing great pressure on workers to prioritize customers satisfaction over their own well-being. In fact, as highlighted by Bucher and colleagues (2021) in their study on digital freelancers, the «extra work» performed by platform workers to «pacify the algorithm» is typically directed towards enhancing the customer experience.

This is also the case of food delivery platforms, where the rider-client relationship turns into a main terrain of conflict. The possibility for customers to rate riders gives them considerable influence over their conduct, which is often used to demand exceptional service or express dissatisfaction. In order to satisfy customers' requests, riders engage in constant relational work, which includes the acceptance of long waits, lack of attention and inaccurate information. This power imbalance between workers and customers can give rise to frustration, abuse or exploitation, whereby workers feel compelled to meet unreasonable requests or risk negative repercussions on their ratings, which in turn have an adverse effect on their work opportunities. A young Uber Eats rider in Bologna, for exam-

ple, articulates this widespread perception of exploitation by saying that: «I don't feel exploited so much by the algorithm as when I'm treated badly or with condescension by customers». Another rider clearly explains that the perception of exploitation and the resulting frustration stems from the relationship with the customers – especially the younger ones – who sometimes makes him feel like their slave:

> For example, I see a big difference between young and old customers. The older ones always get off at the door, and often leave tips, while the younger ones don't even walk two meters to the lift. Not even a thank you, a goodbye. Many customers have never learnt to respect work, to show respect for those who work, and they only see a number, an ID and not the person behind the rider. For me that's ok, no problem, this is my job and I do it. However, I often feel like we are their slaves (Uber Eats rider, Turin, 2021).

As noted by other scholars, this deterioration in workers' social relations may be attributed to the transformation of the institutional meaning of work, from a source of rights and recognition to a mere service provided to customers in gig economy platforms (Arcidiacono *et al.* 2021). Furthermore, this transformation reinforces the more general obfuscation of the invisible labour required to maintain digital infrastructures (Star & Strauss 1999), which is also central to platform work (see Bruni & Esposito 2019).

In this vein, an emblematic case of conflict between riders and customers concerns a specific detail in the process of production: the access to the floor of the buildings for the delivery. This practice is perceived as detrimental to riders for several reasons. First, it represents an additional waste of time, which impacts on riders' wage – as they are based on piecework. Second, it constitutes a safety risk to their vehicles, which are usually left unlocked on the road, risking being stolen or fined. Furthermore, going up to the floor is perceived as an extraordinary service and an unreasonable demand by a significant number of the workers interviewed. Some workers claimed that reaching the customers' floor should be formally recognised by the platform as an additional service and therefore formally compensated with an increase of wage. Moreover, riders also express critiques for customers' reluctance to leave tips:

> I think that if you make us go upstairs, you should at least leave us a tip. I understand that you may be in your pyjamas, but if you make me waste my time, and maybe take three floors of stairs without a lift, you should at least leave me a tip. Or the platforms should consider introducing floor delivery as an option, at least by charging an extra 0.50 or 1 euro by default. Since tipping is common in other countries and not in Italy, platforms should include delivery options! If you make the rider go to the customer's floor, then you have to pay more, which seems normal and acceptable to me (Glovo rider, Milan, 2020).

Other couriers, on the other hand, feel that going up to customers' floors is completely outside their job responsibilities and often testify that they refuse to do so. In these cases, riders compare themselves to other workers in last-mile home logistics (e.g. courier services, postal services, etc.) who are not accustomed to reach customers' floor. In short, as evidenced by the following extract from an online conversation, many workers claim that if Amazon couriers and postmen do not go upstairs, there is no reason for a food-delivery platform's rider to do so. Nonetheless, while some couriers categorically refuse to access the floor, many others prefer to go up anyway to avoid receiving bad ratings and compromising their position in the ranking.

> We have to fight to have it written into the contract that we are not going up. Just like the postmen and couriers from SDA, DHL and the others. We already lose a lot of time picking up deliveries. Then, we are on our bikes or in our cars, which is always a risk between theft and fines. Getting out should be an obligation for customers. With Uber I get them out. Not with Glovo, because of the score thing. We can argue endlessly about the convenience of not having to take your nose out of the house, it seems to me that it doesn't cost you anything, but these are personal opinions and I think everyone has good reasons for them. But when the parcel arrives from Amazon, who knows why they all get out without a hitch! (Group chat, 13/03/2021).

The issue of access to the building floor was also particularly exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, many riders felt imprudent to enter the buildings, take the stairs, use lifts or meet customers indoors, as it increased the risk of exposure to infection compared to meeting outside. On the other hand, many platforms introduced guidelines to allow 'contactless deliveries', simply leaving food on the customer's doorstep, but had never

indicated a preference (far from unnecessary) for outdoor exchanges. Other riders have tried to solve the problem by themselves, for example by leaving the delivery in the lift rather than going up into the building.

In conclusion, the relationship between riders and customers is riddled with numerous tensions that contribute to deteriorating working conditions and reinforcing perceived forms of exploitation, due to the unreasonable requests and exceptional services that are often demanded by customers. The asymmetry of power between riders and customers inscribed in the platforms' architecture plays a key role in this respect.

RIDERS VS PARTNERS

As we already noted, a defining feature of food delivery platforms compared to other digital labour platforms – such as Helpling in the domestic work sector or Uber in the ride-hailing sector – is the involvement of a third stakeholder in addition to customers and service providers, which is commonly referred to as *partner*. This encompasses restaurants, grocery stores, pharmacies and other businesses that use platforms to deliver their goods. This section focuses on restaurants, which are quantitatively the most significant component of partner businesses and are also the most frequently observed in both ethnographic studies.

As noted by Richardson, riders' behaviour within restaurants «falls outside the account of the algorithm, lying in between the data points marking the arrival of the rider at the restaurant, and their collection of the order» (2020: 13). This implies that the interaction between riders and restaurant employees, similarly to that with clients, is not formally regulated or monitored by the platform, which leaves them with a relative discretion in terms of how to interact. Restaurants are distinct from customers, however, in that they are themselves an organisational unit, with specific rules and a physically delimited structure. This has important consequences for couriers. As riders are not formally part of their organisational logic, they are compelled to adapt to the specific routines of each restaurant. First and foremost, this concerns the occupation of the restaurants' space. Prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the majority of restaurants did not have a dedicated waiting area for orders' pick-up. With the onset of the pandemic, many restaurants began to regulate the presence of couriers to comply with government healthcare measures and to adapt to the rapid increase in food delivery demand. This spatial regulation included the introduction of separate queues for couriers and restaurant customers and the creation of dedicated waiting areas. Furthermore, numerous partners, particularly those with a higher daily volume of delivered meals, have employed additional staff to check orders' identification codes, facilitate interaction between kitchens and riders and generally monitor the couriers' conduct. The arbitrary regulation of the space occupied by riders transforms the management of the waiting space into a privileged terrain of conflict between couriers and restaurants' employees. This is well exemplified by the following ethnographic fieldwork collected in Milan:

> The restaurant where I am waiting to collect my order has changed the layout of the waiting area. Now, you no longer go inside to show the code to the waiter. You must show it to the security man in the pick-up area, in the street, who communicate it directly to the kitchen through a window. From the same window, he also receives the orders and distribute them to the couriers. [...] It is no longer clear where to leave our bikes. We are told to move them away from the main entrance so as not to obstruct customers' access to the restaurant. For the same reason, we cannot leave them between the two marquees outside. [...] After a few minutes of waiting, another rider arrives. He leaves his bike in the middle of the entrance and goes straight to the kitchen to show his order's identification code. The security worker stops him and asks him to move his bike so as not to block the way. The tone of the conversation gets quickly aggressive. «What the hell do you want?», replies the courier, «I just wanted to check if my order is ready. If it's not ready, I'll leave. It's not a problem. And anyway, this is a public space, you don't have to annoy me». [...] When I finally pick up the order, the McDonald's employee confirms that the argument had to do with the management of the waiting area: «We now place you riders at the left and the right of the entrance, in order to leave the centre to the customers. If you put the bike here, how will they get in?» (Fieldnote, 18/05/2020).

In the previous fieldnote, the haste of the rider attempting to collect the order is indicative of the frenzied atmosphere that characterises couriers' experience inside restaurants. Beyond space, time management is another conflictual dimension inherent in the rider-restaurant relationship.

> There is always a lot of nervousness in restaurants, which is usually about long waits for the orders' pick-up. Because if you make a rider wait half an hour... you're eating half of his hourly wage. He gets angry, and of course he is right. It happens all the time. Sometimes restaurants forget the orders. So there is no fun in waiting. It's just a waste of time. While you are waiting for an order to be taken, you only keep thinking that you are not going to get paid for that time, and that you will have to deliver the food to a customer who has been waiting for you for 40 minutes, who is probably nervous too (Glovo rider, Bologna, 2020).

The last interview's excerpt demonstrates that waiting inside restaurants is not an isolated occurrence, but rather a regular aspect of the work of a rider. This is due in part to the organisation of restaurant work, which involves a relative degree of unpredictability. Restaurants may suddenly receive a surge in home delivery orders or be flooded with customers on site. However, riders' waiting times also result from the conflicting interests inherent in the way the platform structures the relations of production. On the one hand, as riders' wages are based on piecework, they have an interest in saving as much time as possible. On the other hand, however, restaurants have an incentive to minimise the waiting times in order to avoid wasting food in the case of riders' delays. A rider may take longer to get to the restaurant than the platform expects, because he does not know the roads well, or he is handling multiple orders from different platforms at the same time. As restaurants lack direct authority over riders' conduct, many of them deliberately attempt to delay the preparation of food – especially that which perishes quickly – close to their arrival. This is particularly relevant for riders working with Glovo, which impedes them to automatically reassign deliveries after they have been accepted. As a Glovo rider from Milan notes in the following excerpt, this results in a situation in which couriers are compelled to repeatedly solicit the restaurant staff to accelerate the preparation of food, a practice that frequently gives rise to tensions.

> There are restaurants where they say you: «I will bring it outside» and they just completely forget. So they pretty much force you...to constantly boost their nuts: «hey, where is my order? Where is my order?». Because otherwise they forget...this is when even me, that I am very patient, I am very polite, I can get really angry...[...] because I trust your words, and then you completely forget [...] And they know that we work with time...the longer we wait, the more we lose, it's some kind of a battle against time, the more you deliver, the more you win, so you need to save as much as possible when it comes to time (Glovo rider, Milan, 2020).

The last interview excerpt illustrates the frustration experienced by riders when waiting for an order. Soliciting restaurant employees is another crucial aspect of the invisible work (Star & Strauss 1999) performed by riders to align the interests of the restaurant with their own, and to reduce the waiting time, which in most cases is unpaid.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we tried to investigate the experience of food delivery riders, shedding light on the micro-conflicts that permeate the relationships with the other actors involved in the process of production. Drawing on Gandini's (2019) conceptualisation of digital platforms as decentralised points of production, the aim of this paper was to broaden the analysis of food delivery work beyond the rider-algorithm nexus, in order to highlight the other *loci* where workplace control and conflict materialise. Firstly, the relationship among workers was examined in order to demonstrate how the hyper-competitive model of platform work can give rise to tensions and anti-solidaristic consequences. Secondly, we highlighted how a decentralisation of the exercise of organizational control to peripheral agents of the process of production, such as clients and restaurant employees, produces a parallel decentralisation of workplace conflict. Both in relation to customers and restaurants, we showed that conflict is primarily a matter of time and space management. It raises from the fact that interactions between the parties transcend a direct algorithmic monitoring, providing the actors with a certain degree of discretion in terms of how to interact with each other's and how to evaluate riders' conduct.

In this vein, our paper tried to shift the attention from the role of algorithmic systems as agents of control to the more complex political economy of relations configured by digital platforms, and to show how trajectories of conflict are multiplied beyond the employer-employee relation. However, it is crucial to highlight that this analytical shift does not imply a return to the idea that platforms merely facilitate a neutral intermediation between users.

Rather than occurring spontaneously, the conflicts described in this paper are engineered by digital platforms and reflect the power structure that shapes the relations between the actors involved in the labour process. This is particularly evident when examining the asymmetric configuration of platforms' reputational system, which allows customers – and, in some cases, also restaurants – to evaluate riders' performances, but not *vice versa*. As we noted in this paper, the uneven possibility of evaluating the performance of counterparts reflects a power structure that limits the riders' space of action to the benefit of customers and partner businesses. In this sense, when we contend that a decentralisation of organisational control results in a fragmentation of workplace conflict, we are not denying the centrality of platform power. On the contrary, this fragmentation is closely dependent on the ways in which platforms enrol the actors in the process of production. Or, echoing Gandini (2019), it depends on how digital platforms repurpose social relations between users into relations of production. This is because platforms are much more than employers, they are infrastructures capable of organising dispersed processes of production and thus structuring asymmetric power relations between the actors involved in these processes. Platforms' power, therefore, lies in their ability to amplify the employer-employee relationship by constructing new forms of hierarchisation among riders, partners and customers. While this is particularly pronounced in the case of food delivery platforms due to the presence of a third actor (partners), the fragmentation of conflict described in this article is potentially characteristic of the platform organizational model more generally.

In conclusion, this paper contributes to our comprehension of the power of digital platforms, showing that their influence does not only manifest in an increased algorithmic surveillance of workers. It also reveals the capacity of platforms to obscure the "structural antagonism" at the heart of the employer-employee relationship, fragmenting the *loci* of conflict and dispersing it at the periphery of the labour process.

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