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Focus Section

Life is (Not) a game: Racial platform capitalism, exploitation practices and forms of rider mobilization in Milan[1]

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Abstract. This article offers an analysis of the forms of exploitation that affect the work of migrant riders in the food delivery sector in Milan, giving particular attention to the phenomenon of *digital gangmastering*. Through a case study, it investigates the relationship between digital capitalism, racialization, and urban segregation, highlighting how digital platforms rely on a logic of 'predatory inclusion' that simultaneously mobilises and entraps vulnerable migrant subjectivities. The article shows how algorithmic management of labour, seemingly neutral, reproduces racialized hierarchies and relations of domination, fostering a pervasive form of discipline rooted in legal and social precarity. The work of riders – often recruited from reception centres and lacking contractual protection – emerges as a form of 'infrastructural labour': essential yet invisible, sustaining urban life at the cost of the workers' physical and psychological exhaustion. Our analysis also reveals the link between labour exploitation and social isolation, showing how housing marginalisation and unequal access to services reinforce symbolic and material boundaries of exclusion. Nevertheless, urban space also becomes a site of resistance and collective organisation, albeit with differentiated rhythms and modalities.

Keywords: platform racialized capitalism, internal border, migrant workers, food delivery, solidarity.

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DIGITAL CAPITALISM AND RACIALIZATION PROCESSES AT THE CITY'S BORDERS: AN INTRODUCTION

The processes of racialization that have historically shaped capitalism since its inception (Fraser 2019; Jenkins & Leroy 2021) are re-emerging in the digital age in new and complex forms. These mechanisms sustain and intensify both well-known and less familiar modes of exploitation, oppression, and violence, while profoundly reshaping the spatial and social boundaries of urban environments (Gebrial 2024). Urban contexts, in particular, make these mechanisms particularly visible, as spatial, social, and symbolic boundaries proliferate, delineating territories of inclusion and exclusion within the city (Fauser 2024).

Today, the majority of platform workers that provide on-demand goods and services via apps are migrants and low-paid, precarious labourers. These individuals typically reside and/or work in urban areas where access to stable, formal employment is increasingly limited (van Doorn & Vijay 2022). In many cases, this workforce is perceived as cheap, flexible and disposable. Especially in the wake of the pandemic, many have been driven out of other productive sectors and forms of employment. In other instances, platform workers include newly arrived immigrants who join this sector due to its low entry barriers and flexible conditions, or asylum seekers and refugees with uncertain legal status and vulnerable social positions who require immediate income (Prina et al. 2024). By adopting the notion of the *internal boundary* – a concept that operates within everyday spaces (Jones & Johnson 2014) – we can better understand both formal and informal mechanisms that, through exclusionary structures of non-belonging, marginalize and render vulnerable individuals who are instrumentalized for accumulation through predatory logics and practices (Bhattacharyya 2018: 22). These mechanisms tend to intensify during periods of economic contraction and major societal transitions. From this perspective, processes of economic exploitation and forms of discrimination are not merely parallel but mutually reinforcing (Bhattacharyya 2018: 102). Social hierarchies based on class, gender, race, and legal status – though external to the sphere of production – are thus capitalized upon and transformed into sources of value within it (Hammer & Park 2021; Jenkins & Leroy 2021). Digital platform labour, particularly in the home delivery sector, represents a form of low-skilled employment that is especially well-suited to absorbing a flexible, racialized workforce. However, it often traps workers in regimes of hyper-exploitation, with consequences that extend far beyond the realm of work itself (Animiento 2023).

A close examination of confinement processes reveals a map of discontinuous yet interconnected spatial, temporal, and relational scales – an empirical terrain that remains underexplored in the context of contemporary capitalism, especially in the case of Italy. Building on this approach, analysing the intersections between digital capitalism, urban space, and infrastructural networks provides valuable interpretive tools for understanding how the *racial matrix* – which has permeated capitalism since its origins (Mellino 2023) – continues to sustain oppressive systems of social organization.

Although these systems ensure that a wide range of comforts and essential services are provided in Italian cities (Fonseca Alfaro 2024), they are underpinned by a racial logic that cannot be dismissed as a mere ideological superstructure or a side effect of economic relations (cf. Mellino 2023: 719). By contrast, racism has historically been a structural and inseparable element of capitalism itself (Mellino 2012: 85). In this context, relocating the internal border into urban space – and its potential to be controlled or contested «by anyone, anywhere» (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018: 3) – gives this analytical scale significant heuristic value.

Given these premises and drawing on the findings of fieldwork conducted in Milan during 2023 and 2024 through a multi-source data collection strategy (interviews and judicial sources, like investigations by the judiciary and the Italian Financial Guard), this article offers an in-depth analysis of how processes of platformization and racialization intersect and reinforce one another (McMillan Cottom 2020). These mechanisms give rise to new forms of precarity, exclusion, and segregation – emblematically embodied by food delivery riders navigating the fragmented geographies of the contemporary city[2].

[2] The title of the article is inspired by the documentary *'Life is a Game',* directed in 2022 by Laura Carrer and Luca Quagliato. Through the stories of thirteen riders from different European cities, the directors analyse the functioning of digital platforms, high-

Focusing on a specific case study, our analysis examines a particular form of labour exploitation known as *digital gangmastering* or *'caporalato digitale'*[3], exploring the multiple internal boundaries that sustain it and extend beyond the workplace into the everyday and domestic spaces of workers' lives. The theoretical-analytical perspective of the internal border allows us to reconstruct and explain the consequences that the conditions of exploitation to which the victims of digital gangmastering are subjected have on their daily lives. This article also investigates forms of mobilization and solidarity that have emerged in support of these workers' rights within the context of Milan, highlighting the particular involvement of riders caught up in the mechanisms of digital gangmastering.

The first section outlines our theoretical framework, drawing on the thematic areas introduced above. This is followed by a description of the empirical context and the methodology adopted for this research. The third section presents our findings, organized into three sub-sections: the exploitation of riders under the digital gangmaster system; the isolation and social segregation experienced by these workers as a consequence of their employment conditions; and the forms of mobilization and solidarity that have involved this category of workers, particularly those affected by gangmastering. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of algorithmic management – seemingly neutral yet obsessively pervasive – and its impact on the lives of migrant workers. It highlights how such systems reproduce racialized hierarchies and relations of domination, further entrenching the legal, economic, and social precarity of those subjected to them.

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section examines the recent expansion of platform-based labour, with a particular focus on how migrant workers employed in the food delivery sector are organized and managed. It highlights the emergence of production models grounded on the extreme flexibility and the structural precariousness of the workforce, drawing attention to the material and symbolic conditions that render these workers especially vulnerable to intensive exploitation, social isolation, and urban marginalization.

Adopting an interpretive lens that foregrounds the social and political practices shaping multiple dimensions of migrant workers' everyday lives, our analysis explores the layered and often invisible mechanisms of confinement that affect these individuals. These mechanisms reflect new racialized social hierarchies, embedded within the broader functioning of contemporary platform capitalism.

Migrant workers and platforms in the food delivery sector

The post-2008 Great Recession, the Covid-19 pandemic, and increasingly restrictive migration policies have collectively contributed to shaping the social, economic, and political conditions under which digital platforms have emerged and flourished (García 2017; Chicchi et al. 2020; Altenried 2021). Within this context, an innovative model of sales, distribution, and consumption has taken shape, transforming specific segments of the labour market as well as the everyday experiences of urban populations. In order to appeal to financial markets and avoid traditional employer responsibilities, platforms strategically present themselves as mere technological intermediaries – entities that provide services without assuming accountability for the human labour involved[4]. This has given

lighting the growing – and often oppressive – weight of data and algorithms in everyday working life.

[3] In Italian, the term *caporalato* is commonly used to describe exploitative labour intermediation practices, typically involving a parasitic broker who mediates between labour supply and demand with the primary aim of extraction and control. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in sectors such as agriculture and construction. In the context of platform labour, similar mechanisms have emerged – referred to here as *digital gangmastering* – which, as discussed in the following sections, disproportionately affect migrant workers. According to the relevant provisions of the Italian Criminal Code (Article *603-bis*), *digital gangmastering/caporalato digitale* can be defined as 'organized intermediation' that takes place through, by means of or outside a digital platform, characterized by conditions of 'exploitation' and taking advantage of the 'state of need' of workers.

[4] In the literature, this phenomenon has been defined as *the platform paradox;* see Prassl 2018.

rise to a new mechanism of class composition (Rosenblat 2018; van Doorn 2017), one that is functional to the post-crisis restoration of capital accumulation and the reorganization of labour across various sectors (Stehlin et al. 2020). It relies on the availability of a superabundant workforce – hyper-connected, flexible, and easily replaceable (De Stefano 2017).

This model has attracted both individuals seeking supplementary income and, more significantly, those excluded from standard employment opportunities due to the recession (Croce 2020) or for other structural reasons. A substantial portion of these is marginalized migrant groups, such as those examined in this case study (van Doorn et al. 2023). Expelled from the labour market in the aftermath of the crisis and already socialised into conditions of persistent confinement, intermittent employment, and lacking access to social protections (Dorling 2009; Khan 2008), these workers have often turned to platform labour in the absence of viable alternatives.

Cross-referencing qualitative studies with broader quantitative surveys reveals a significant overrepresentation of immigrants in urban-based, manual service sectors: food delivery (e.g., Deliveroo), ride-hailing (e.g., Uber), personal care (e.g., Daze), domestic cleaning (e.g., Helpling), maintenance and repair (e.g., TaskRunner), and home cooking (e.g., Yummy) (Webster & Zhang 2020; Altenried 2021; Berger et al. 2021; van Doorn & Vijay 2021). Although the degree of precarity varies, these jobs are generally characterised by minimal or non-existent protections, low pay, irregular hours, and significant occupational risks. Migrants employed in these sectors tend to work longer hours, derive a larger share of their income from platform work, and are more likely to engage in multi-apping, working simultaneously for multiple platforms (Piasna et al. 2022; Zwysen & Piasna 2024).

In Italy, approximately half of all platform workers are engaged in last-mile logistics, primarily within the food delivery sector (Bergamante et al. 2022). In this domain, platforms connect commercial establishments (e.g., restaurants, pizzerias and supermarkets), consumers ordering home deliveries, and the riders who perform the deliveries. This sector has attracted considerable media and political attention due to critical issues concerning both the formal classification of employment relationships and the working conditions. Key concerns include the lack of transparency in processing workers' personal data and the algorithmic organization of their tasks (Jarrahi et al. 2021); the frequent misclassification of employment status (Halliday 2021); health and safety risks faced by couriers (Boniardi et al. 2024); and the widespread reintroduction of piecework pay.

Within the Italian food delivery sector, migrants appear to constitute a growing majority. Recent studies indicate that they are disproportionately concentrated in platforms offering the poorest working conditions and in the informal sector, thereby increasing their exposure to social exclusion, economic hardship, and threats to their physical and mental well-being (Costalunga & Di Cataldo 2025). Moreover, migrant riders often face greater obstacles in accessing trade union support, due to language barriers, intense work rhythms, and/or limited familiarity with union culture.

As in other countries with restrictive asylum and reception policies, migrants in Italy who do not meet the legal requirements to remain often turn to platform work (Mendonça et al. 2023). Some engage in this labour irregularly, using accounts registered to relatives, friends, or intermediaries to whom they pay a daily share of their earnings (Cabras et al. 2024). In other cases, migrants access this work through companies that operate illegally as labour intermediaries, recruiting and managing workers who perform services on behalf of the platforms (Sartori 2022). As will be discussed in the following sections, particularly in the latter scenario, migrant riders are subjected to severe forms of exploitation embedded in systemic structures that take advantage of their vulnerable circumstances.

Processes of racialization and confinement in urban spaces

The borders under examination traverse and regulate a variety of spaces, each governed by distinct rules, from urban areas, which constitute the primary focus of this study, to the most private spheres of everyday life and social relations (Lafazani 2024). Increasingly widespread and stratified practices of confinement contribute to the reproduction of racial and class orders both within and across border zones, infiltrating the core of cities, public spac-

es, residential neighbourhoods, and labour markets (Medien 2023; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2018). These lines of demarcation are conceptualized here primarily as a "sociological fact that manifests itself in space" (Simmel 1982 [orig. ed. 1903]), taking shape through diverse "socio-political-cultural practices" (Brambilla et al. 2015) and evolving through discretionary procedures that extend beyond the strictly spatial dimension. Above and beyond the legal mechanisms that increasingly fragment migrant populations into stratified categories, borders materialize through a range of other strategies and instruments employed by both institutional and non-institutional actors at national, municipal, and local levels. These include access to public services, the residential rental market, and the labour market. Moreover, processes of border externalization and internalization appear to be complementary and deeply intertwined, giving rise to enduring practices of control and exclusion that profoundly affect the working lives and daily existence of those subject to them (Fauser 2024). In other words, our research seeks to analyze the implications of these dynamics of exploitation, control, and exclusion in terms of everyday life. This has led to growing scholarly attention to the physical and symbolic borders operating within specific social contexts, and to the multiplicity of actors who enact, contest, and resist these processes of confinement.

The internal bordering processes discussed here not only relocate boundaries to new areas and expand their reach, but also reveal forms of confinement that are pre-existing and often underexplored. These include urban spaces as well as discursive and digital domains, which – despite their apparent immateriality – generate tangible mechanisms of social exclusion and spatial segregation, which are particularly pronounced in urban settings. The individuals most affected are migrant workers with uncertain legal status, limited educational qualifications, and restricted language proficiency, who increasingly face regimes of «differential exclusion or expulsion» (Animento 2023: 147). These regimes impact multiple spheres – especially employment, housing, and healthcare – resulting in further marginalization and confinement.

Yet, these same spaces also host networks of solidarity and activism. Urban environments offer greater opportunities for encounters through grassroots mobilization, protest, and initiatives led by organized civil society groups, sometimes supported by municipal administrations (Darling & Bauder 2019). The city thus emerges as a dense and heterogeneous space for negotiation, where social actors interact within a multi-scale framework of legal regimes and everyday practices, contributing to the construction or dismantling of the boundaries that traverse it.

Within this often invisible yet potentially transformative landscape, migrants confront and navigate a range of boundaries – symbolic, social, occupational, residential, and health-related. As in other contexts, they do not passively accept the precariousness of platform labour. Instead, they adapt and consolidate strategies previously developed in traditional low-wage sectors. Although these strategies may not always translate into collective agency (Animento 2023: 148), they nonetheless constitute forms of resistance and survival in response to highly unstable and complex living conditions.

THE EMPIRICAL CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in Milan, a metropolitan area often portrayed as a symbol of progress and innovation, yet not immune to occupational, housing, and social segregation, nor to serious violations of labour rights. Milan constitutes an emblematic urban context within the Global North: a major national hub of attraction and a laboratory in which platforms test new services, technologies, and labor-management practices. At the same time, it is a city sustained by substantial migrant labor from the Global South, including many individuals awaiting a final ruling on their legal status, one that will determine whether they are permitted to reside and work in Italy. For these reasons, we argue that Milan's urban environment offers a particularly valuable setting for examining the exploitation of migrant workers within the technological–productive configuration of platform capitalism.

Our analysis focused on the forms of exploitation that have emerged in the food delivery platform sector in recent years, involving a significant number of migrant riders from sub-Saharan African countries (including

Nigeria, Ghana, Niger, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and Gambia), Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and several French-speaking Sahelian states[5].

The study initially concentrated on the exploitation and segregation experienced by these workers, before broadening its scope to include the forms of mobilization that have taken shape in the city, as well as the various actors engaged in roles of control, solidarity, and resistance. Using a specific case study – the well-known multinational platform Uber Eats, active in sixty Italian cities until 2023 (Di Cataldo 2023) – the research examined the first documented case of *digital gangmastering* in Italy, understood as the organized and illegal intermediation of labour through or outside a platform (Peterlongo 2023: 123). The case drew the attention of the Milan Public Prosecutor's Office, prompting a judicial investigation in 2019[6], which revealed the existence of an irregular labour intermediation network coordinated by an organizational structure operating across the country. This network supplied the platform with migrant riders who worked in the name and on behalf of Uber Eats. The labor was supplied by two Milan-based companies, owned and operated by Italian citizens, that had previously provided various services within the last-mile logistics sector. Within a matter of months, these firms recruited large numbers of asylum seekers, many of whom were residing in reception facilities, including extraordinary reception centers (CAS) across the Lombardy region. No specific requirements were imposed on migrants to begin working or handling deliveries, enabling even those without the legal qualifications to remain and work in Italy to take up employment. This channel was presented by the gangmasters under the name Uber Flash precisely to indicate the possibility of working immediately, bypassing all formal steps, including registration and verification of documents relating to the right of residence. Uber provided its brand, IT infrastructure and application software – installed on the riders' smartphones – and controlled the financial flows, while the intermediaries were responsible for recruitment and management. Workers were offered handwritten contracts and paid on a piece-rate basis, receiving three euros per delivery. This remuneration was not aligned with the national collective agreements signed by the largest trade unions and was disproportionate to the work performed, with repeated violations of working time regulations and health and safety standards. The platform was used to continuously monitor workers' movements. Those who failed to meet algorithmically determined performance thresholds (Key Performance Indicators-KPIs) were subjected to financial penalties, such as the withdrawal of customer tips, or to temporary or permanent account suspensions. Both the investigation and the subsequent trial revealed the existence of a well-established system of exploitation that, through extreme forms of control and multiple violations of labour rights, sustained the operations of Uber until 2023, when it withdrew from the country following the judicial scandal.

Informed by the judicial investigation, a qualitative study was conducted in Milan over the course of one year (March 2023-March 2024). The research involved 19 semi-structured interviews with migrant riders[7](n. 4), trade unionists (n. 6), activists (n. 4), and various experts, including magistrates (n. 1), lawyers (n. 1), psychologists, and psychotherapists (n. 3). Access to migrant riders was facilitated by the New Generation Workers' Union of the 'Unione Sindacale di Base' (SLANG-USB), which supported those involved in the investigation through

[5] According to data reported in the judicial investigation that will be analysed in the following pages, the examination of email accounts allowed the Guardia di Finanza (Italian Financial Police) to compile a list of 1,429 names of riders who, during the period covered by the investigation, had carried out home delivery activities for the Uber Eats platform in the cities of Milan, Rome, Turin, Florence, Reggio Emilia, Rimini and Bologna: see Guardia di Finanza, Economic and Financial Police Unit of Milan (2021). *Criminal Proceedings No. 41492/19 RGNR-Mod. 21, Summary of the results of the investigation by the Public Prosecutor, p*. 82.

[6] Court of Milan, Criminal Case No. 41492/19. The proceedings ended with the conviction of the legal administrator of the companies that recruited and managed migrant riders on behalf of Uber Eats. The director was sentenced to three years and eight months' imprisonment, accompanied by a fine of €30,000, in relation to the crime of labour exploitation and tax offences under Articles 2 and 8 of Legislative Decree 74/2000. In the proceedings, however, two other defendants who had participated in various capacities in the activities of the companies agreed to a sentence of two and three years. Gup, Court of Milan, Judgment No. 2805 of 15 October 2021; a former Uber Eats manager, charged with illegal hiring, agreed to a plea bargain of one year and four months, suspended sentence, with a fine of €21,000: see Court of Milan, Criminal Section IX, 5 February 2025.

[7] The interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and saved with an identification code. Each interviewee was asked to sign a privacy form and an informed consent form, both approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Milan during the hearing held on 18 January 2023.

mobilization efforts and collaborated with a law firm in Turin to defend their rights. In addition to oral sources, participant observation was conducted at various legal aid offices established by SLANG-USB in the city, during which ethnographic fieldnotes were collected. Finally, the analysis drew on judicial documents made available by the Milan Public Prosecutor's Office, which led the investigation.

The integration of judicial sources with the interviews constitutes a methodological triangulation that yields novel insights into the first judicial case of *digital gangmastering* in Italy. This approach combines the documentary robustness of judicial evidence with the interpretive depth of oral sources, capturing not only the legal and organizational dimensions of the phenomenon but also everyday practices and power relations that remain invisible in institutional sources alone. The daily experiences of migrant riders subjected to *digital gangmastering* were analysed according to three main analytical elements – spatial, occupational, and relational – with the aim of overcoming the partial and dichotomous distinction between the productive and reproductive spheres, so as to explore the implications by the conditions of exploitation to which they are subjected in terms of daily life. The study sought to explore the phenomenon in greater analytical depth, capturing the multiple internal and external boundaries encountered by migrant riders within and beyond the urban context of Milan.

THE RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

This section examines the conditions of exploitation faced by migrant workers subjected to forms of *digital gangmastering* within the urban context of Milan. It focuses on the intersection between *racial capitalism* and mechanisms of differential inclusion and exclusion operating in the food delivery sector. The analysis seeks to shed light on the experiences of exploitation and social segregation encountered by riders both within and beyond the city's boundaries, highlighting the discretionary confinement practices in which various actors engage. These practices affect multiple dimensions of migrant workers' lives, including housing, employment, and social relations. In addition, this section explores the mobilization efforts that have emerged in response to these conditions, involving associations, trade unions and activist groups from civil society in Milan. These initiatives have given rise to solidarity networks aimed at supporting riders subjected to severe forms of exploitation.

Labour exploitation and digital gangmastering

The four migrant delivery riders involved in this system of exploitation, whom we had the opportunity to interview, shared life histories marked by overlapping traumatic experiences in their countries of origin – Ghana, Gambia, Nigeria, and Cameroon – as well as along their migration routes. Persecution[8], political and social instability[9], detention[10], emotional deprivation and various forms of hardship have profoundly shaped their lives[11], influencing their perceptions of the world around them, as will be further explored below.

The material collected through interviews offers insight into the methods and dynamics employed by *caporali* to recruit these workers. Labour was sourced from reception centres through informal word-of-mouth networks. The migrants involved had no prior knowledge of how digital platforms operated, and for many, this represented their first job in Italy:

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[8] Interview with a rider of Nigerian origin, Milan, 19 June 2023.
[9] Interview with a rider of Ghanaian origin, Milan, 3 November 2023.
[10] Interview with a rider of Gambian origin, Milan, 31 October 2023; Interview with a rider of Guinean origin, Milan, 4 November 2023.
[11] Interview with a Nigerian delivery rider, *op. cit.;* Interview with a Ghanaian delivery rider, *op. cit.;* Interview with a Gambian delivery rider, op. *cit*..

> There was a guy, he was also in a reception centre in Mortara but we didn't live in the same centre (...). One day I saw this guy with a big backpack and I asked (...), I understood that it was a job, but I didn't understand what kind of job (...) the next day we took a train to go to Uber (...) (Interview with a rider of Gambian origin, Milan, 31 October 2023).

> I started in 2018 as a rider with Uber (...) it was my first job in Italy (...) I was at the reception centre and I saw someone who had started this job (...) I said 'I want to do that too' (...) he gave me the boss's number and I went (...) (Interview with a rider of Ghanaian origin, Milan, 3 November 2023).

The deceptive practices used by employers played a significant role in drawing migrants into the food delivery sector. Although no formal requirements were imposed for recruitment or to begin working, some riders were unaware that they were engaged in irregular employment. This was partly due to misleading information provided by employers, who claimed that such work could serve as a legitimate pathway toward obtaining a permanent residence permit:

> I didn't know how the job worked or what to do to get the documents (...) they knew this and lied to me (...) they said they would take part of my money to get the documents and pay the taxes (...) that these things were needed in court to get me the documents right away (...) but in court they said that wasn't true, that they had cheated me and that this happens to many foreigners (...)[12] (Interview with a rider of Gambian origin, Milan, 31 October 2023).

Other riders, however, tend to place the blame on themselves, interpreting their entanglement in this system of exploitation and violence as a consequence of their precarious personal circumstances – such as the uncertainty of their legal status, limited proficiency in Italian and the lack of alternative opportunities. Several interviews poignantly reveal a widespread normalization of exploitative conditions and a tendency to internalise responsibility. In some cases, the platform is perceived less as a key actor within the infrastructural system that enables domination, and more as a source of support – an interpretation that will be explored in greater detail below:

> (...) I found out about Uber Eats while I was in a reception centre (...) I didn't speak Italian (...) I didn't know Milan or the streets (...) starting work was difficult (...) Uber helped me because I can see the street (...) if I make a mistake, they tell me 'you're doing it wrong' (...) I can read in French (...) the platform does a lot for me (...) when I arrived at McDonald's, I didn't speak, I waited for them to call my number, and when the customer arrived, I just said 'good morning' or 'good evening' (...) (Interview with a rider of Guinean origin, Milan, 4 November 2023).

By cross-referencing the data collected through interviews with the documentation produced by the Milan Public Prosecutor's Office, we were able to reconstruct in detail the distinctive role played by technology in this new generation of illegal labour intermediation. Contrary to the logic of gamification – where algorithmic management seeks to influence worker behaviour through a repertoire of incentives and penalties while preserving a degree of operational discretion (de Krijger 2023) – the platform's system enabled a rigid mechanism of command and control that can be characterized as assiduous, pervasive, and, in some respects, all-encompassing. Riders were ordered to behave in certain ways, their behavior was constantly monitored, and if they did not comply, they were subjected to verbal and financial abuse. The technology facilitated real-time surveillance of the couriers' behaviour: through the application software installed on riders' smartphones, the system continuously tracked their location, allowing *caporali* to monitor movements, ensure that breaks were not prolonged, and verify that riders were not engaging in activities unrelated to deliveries.

Interviewees reported being physically compelled to work excessive hours at particularly intense rates, without the means to escape the remote surveillance imposed by the *caporali*. Riders were forced to remain logged into the platform for extended periods – often averaging around eleven hours per day[13] – both during daytime and nighttime shifts. The effects of this pervasive surveillance regime, which will be examined in the following section, are succinctly captured in the words of one of the riders interviewed:

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[12] A similar account emerged in another interview: Interview with a Ghanaian delivery rider, Milan, 3 November 2023.

[13] Guardia di Finanza, op. *cit.*

> (...) we had to stay on the road all day (...) they watched closely where we were and where we were going (...). If you didn't behave yourself, you were threatened on WhatsApp (...) they told you they wouldn't pay you (...) not even tips (...) they told you wouldn't work for Uber anymore (...) (Interview with a rider of Guinean origin, Milan, 4 November 2023).

By analysing the information note from the *Guardia di Finanza* provided by the Milan Public Prosecutor's Office and cross-referencing it with the interviews conducted, it is possible to reconstruct the role played by personal data processing and real-time profiling in the management of the workforce. The platform used this data to differentiate riders based on their performance against a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPI)[14]. Failure to meet specific thresholds triggered a range of coercive responses, including heated and offensive verbal reprimands, frequent instances of blackmail, threats of job loss, and various forms of punishment. These punitive measures included financial penalties – such as deductions from weekly wages and the withholding of customer tips paid through the platform – or, in the most severe cases, the deactivation of the rider's account, essentially cutting off access to work[15].

Further analysis of the materials obtained from the Milan Public Prosecutor's Office – particularly wiretapped communications between *caporali* and managers of the multinational platform Uber Eats – reveals clear evidence of both awareness of the workers' vulnerability and the unlawful nature of the practices employed. Uber managers had been explicitly warned by legal advisors about the discriminatory treatment of workers and the violations of their fundamental rights[16]. At the same time, the wiretaps repeatedly reference "hunger" as a strategic lever used to compel riders to comply, with the threat of exclusion from the platform equated to exclusion from their only means of subsistence – thus resulting in the total loss of income (Gebrial 2024: 1181): *'Try to put him on a ride tonight so he doesn't waste the day, he's* hungry' [17], *'block him and take his* bag away' (alluding to the damage that would be suffered by the rider unable to work)[18] , and again *'in my opinion, if you don't pay them in the afternoon and they have to connect in the evening to eat, you'll see that they'll connect'*[19] .

Isolation and social segregation

The migrant riders involved in digital gangmastering who participated in this study are predominantly young men, many of whom are asylum seekers. Their experiences in Milan are shaped by ongoing encounters with confinement and exclusion, which manifest across various aspects of daily life, beginning with housing. Although they traverse the city extensively during working hours, they rarely establish residence within its boundaries. Unlike other platform workers, the riders involved here – most of whom reside in reception centres located outside Milan or in neighbouring provinces – commute to the city on a daily basis, often covering considerable distances.

Even those not housed in reception centres are frequently relegated to peripheral urban areas, which are not only economically inaccessible but also subject to housing exclusion rooted in widespread prejudice. Fieldwork reveals that landlords and real estate agents, as well as public transport personnel such as drivers and inspectors, often position themselves as gatekeepers of urban space. On the one hand, they refuse to rent private housing to migrant riders; on the other, they exercise discretionary authority over who may transport bicycles on buses, trains or metro systems. In both cases, these actors enact selective and discriminatory practices that reinforce spatial and social exclusion:

> (...) Housing is a problem in Milan (...) Prices are high and even higher for foreigners. If you call the number in an online ad and they hear a foreign accent, they say the place is already rented. Several people hung up on me as soon as I spoke (...) Many riders live

[14] Guardia di Finanza, op. *cit.*
[15] Guardia di Finanza, *cit.;* these aspects have been confirmed and further clarified by the statements of the riders interviewed.
[16] Guardia di Finanza, *cit.,* p. 56.
[17] Guardia di Finanza, *op. cit.,* p. 61.
[18] Guardia di Finanza, *op. cit.,* p. 79.
[19] Guardia di Finanza, *op. cit.,* p. 64.

> outside Milan, in reception centres, at Caritas or at home in Bergamo, Lecco or Como. Riders are people who travel back and forth to work, covering many kilometres every day just to work. If you live far away, there can be a problem because you have to do what they tell you (...) they don't care what your hours are (...) if you have to catch the train and you're tired (...) If you leave, you lose your job (Interview with a delivery rider of Cameroonian origin, Milan, 13 June 2023).

> (...) many live outside the city because you can't live in Milan on what you earn (...) finding a home for foreigners is very difficult because no one wants them (...) so they live crammed together in very dangerous conditions (...) in addition to this, there have been tensions with public transport staff who have refused on several occasions to allow bicycles on trains or buses (...) (Interview with a USB Migranti activist of Nigerian origin, Milan, 13 June 2023).

For these people, Milan functioned exclusively as a site of labour, an urban space marked by restricted accessibility, beginning with the frequent challenges posed by public transportation. Their temporal experience of the city was structured around delivery shifts, after which workers were returned to the hinterland and neighbouring provinces. Within this framework, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic rendered the services provided by riders increasingly indispensable. During this period, they emerged as one of the most vulnerable categories of workers, exposed not only to heightened risks of infection but also to potential breaches of contractual agreements, exacerbated by the surge in demand for delivery services under mobility restrictions.

Unlike their colleagues (cf. Di Cataldo 2021), migrant riders who were victims of digital gangmastering did not benefit from any type of protection, being forced to procure personal protective equipment at their own expense. Occupational health and safety, particularly in relation to the psychological and physical toll of road-based piecework, has proven to be a contentious issue under conditions of overworking and intense rhythms (Boniardi et al. 2024). Nonetheless, riders rarely reported accidents or work-related illnesses. This phenomenon cannot be solely attributed to unequal access to welfare provisions and healthcare services, although these do constitute internal boundaries within the urban landscape (Bonizzoni & Dimitriadis 2024). Rather, the threat of algorithmic surveillance and potential retaliation by the platform may have discouraged riders from reporting incidents, given that absence from work would entail significant financial losses under contractual arrangements that exclude provisions for sick leave or injury compensation.

Fieldwork evidence furthermore reveals pervasive forms of isolation, including relational isolation, which particularly undermine riders' capacity to maintain transnational family ties. The extreme working conditions characteristic of digital gangmastering not only hinder the formation of new social relationships but also severely limit the time available for familial interactions in countries of origin, reducing them to digital and telephone exchanges:

> A problematic picture emerges, where material poverty and exploitation generate social and relational impoverishment (...). These are people driven to this form of employment by the need to meet pressing basic needs, forced to work beyond all limits by a pervasive control system that tracked their location at all times and monitored their behaviour (...). The pay they received was so low that they were forced to sacrifice every day and every moment of their lives to obtain the essentials and send something back to their families in their country of origin (...) (Interview with a psychologist and psychotherapist, Transiti.net, Online, 13 November 2023)[20].

This pervasive system of control, long hours and low pay caused friction between the riders and their families and, in some cases, with their wives, who were concerned about their husbands' unavailability and the amount of their remittances, which they felt did not correspond to a job of this magnitude (Interview with a psychologist and psychotherapist, Transiti.net, online, 13 November 2023).

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[20] Transiti is a social cooperative whose main mission is to offer online therapy services by qualified psychotherapists in Italian to patients living abroad. Transiti's professionals have conducted over fifty individual assessments of riders who have been victims of *digital gangamastering* in order to ascertain any existential damage suffered by the workers. For further details, see the cooperative's website: https://transiti.net.

Forms of solidarity and mobilization

Scholars of non-standard labour union representation have interpreted the growing interest of traditional unions in platform workers – particularly delivery riders – as a belated attempt to restore legitimacy amid a broader crisis of representation, rather than as a genuine commitment to organizing a new segment of precarious labour (Borghi & Murgia 2022). Since 2016, in response to the selective and often symbolic inclusion of platform workers by Italy's major trade union confederations (CGIL, CISL, UIL), grassroots collectives of riders have emerged in several cities (Borghi 2023). These groups have self-identified as "metropolitan unions," a label that both distances them from conventional unionism and signals a specific urban and political field of action (Borghi & Murgia 2024). The most prominent of these include Deliverance Project in Turin, Deliverance Milano, and Riders Union Bologna. These collectives have played a crucial role in fostering initial forms of socialization among riders, offering legal assistance, and raising public awareness about the exploitative conditions embedded in the food delivery sector. Their development – both in Italy and internationally – has been facilitated by alliances with other social movements and struggles (Borghi & Murgia 2024), contributing to the formation of solidarity networks, collective identities, and mobilization practices that span both digital and physical spaces (Tassinari & Maccarrone 2019; Cini & Goldmann 2020).

However, migrant riders subjected to digital gangmastering have remained largely excluded from these initiatives. Their condition of hyper-exploitation has often coincided with profound social isolation, which has also manifested in their lack of engagement with local trade unions. This exclusion is strongly reflected in the interviews conducted during fieldwork:

> (...) I didn't know what a trade union was (...) in Ghana I had never heard of trade unions, I don't have a mother or father, I didn't go to school and I always worked as a mechanic (...) when I first arrived in Italy, I didn't have much time to find out about these associations (...) I was always out on the streets working (...) when I finished my deliveries, I would go back to the reception centre (...) no one came to us at the reception centre to ask if we needed help (...) (Interview with a delivery rider, Ghanaian citizen, Milan, 3 November 2023).

> (...) we don't have time to get to know the associations (...) we couldn't leave work even for a moment (...) they immediately understood if we went in a different direction from the one indicated by Uber (...) I didn't even know where to go to look for a union (Interview with a rider, Gambian citizen, Milan, 31 October 2023).

According to information obtained through interviews, metropolitan trade unions have facilitated contact between some riders involved in digital gangmastering and legal advocates, who have subsequently collaborated with other trade union organizations to initiate a broader process of representation, mobilization, and legal defence[21]. In Milan, SLANG-USB has committed to providing multiple forms of support, including assistance with residence permit applications, access to social services, and legal action aimed at defending the rights of these workers.

Although the field of representation remains contested – between traditional trade unionism, grassroots unionism and initiatives framed as metropolitan unionism – these diverse collective actors acknowledge, in different ways, each other's contributions to fostering worker solidarity and processes of socialization:

> Metropolitan collectives have the great merit of having initiated a process, by no means a foregone conclusion, of transmitting trade union and associative culture to a new category of workers, characterized by a growing presence of migrants and also by very high turnover, although this is becoming less marked (...) they have experimented with creative methods of struggle based on the specificities of platform work (...) there has been a sincere relationship of support with urban collectives based on a community of intent (Interview, USB representative, Milan, 28 April 2023).

[21] Interview with a labour lawyer, Milan, 27 November 2023.

Starting from this alternation between various kinds of collective actors in the struggle for the representation of riders in Milan – as in other Italian cities – hybrid organizational practices and repertoires of action are gradually consolidating. These practices blend elements typical of trade union activity in standard employment with others drawn from the experiences of social movements, which advocate for broader values and interests, or from the world of freelance professionals. In certain circumstances, riders have taken part in unconventional forms of mobilization, such as flash mobs[22]; in others, they have engaged in direct actions and strikes[23]. At other times, initiatives targeting riders have focused on service provision, training activities, and the strengthening of opportunities for peer exchange[24].

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has offered an empirical investigation into the exploitation of riders employed in the food delivery sector in Milan, through a case study situated at the intersection of digital capitalism, racialization processes and urban segregation dynamics. Our analysis has highlighted how forms of predatory inclusion contribute to both the containment and mobilization of migrant labour within the platform economy.

In this complex scenario, the racialized structure of the Italian labour market has been further entrenched by new forms of segregation, where traditional mechanisms of control are compounded by more pervasive and less visible forms of surveillance, enabled by algorithmic technologies. Urban gig economies – of which Milan is a paradigmatic case – are structured around the availability of migrant workers who, in their pursuit of better employment and life opportunities, face multiple forms of confinement, including within the urban space itself. These multifaceted and widespread practices of confinement contribute to the production and reproduction of racialized and class-based social orders, which materialize through spatial, social, and symbolic boundaries. These boundaries, constantly negotiated and contested by a range of actors, delineate territories of inclusion and exclusion that take on specific configurations in the urban context.

Here, the effects of migration policies and racialization processes are capitalized upon within labour management models that aim to ensure, on the one hand, the economic efficiency of platforms and, on the other, the subjugation of a workforce rendered vulnerable and expendable. The article has examined this dynamic through the lens of digital gangmastering in the food delivery sector, a phenomenon that affects over a quarter of platform workers in Italy and provides access to low-skilled employment for many migrants who do not meet the legal requirements of national regulations.

Our findings underscore the complicity between immigration, asylum, and reception policies and the logic underpinning the platform economy. These policies produce precarious, legally marginalized subjects who are then absorbed into exploitative labour regimes. In Milan, digital gangmastering has drawn its workforce from reception centres, often through word-of-mouth recruitment and the deceptive promise of a residence permit. For these riders, work is not gamified play, and the exercise of authority is not hidden behind the existence of formal but effectively inconsistent margins of discretion reserved for the worker – it is governed by a logic of command and control, enforced through the apparent neutrality of algorithms that treat workers as interchangeable units. This

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[22] On 17 June 2020, a flash mob was held in Milan to demand the right of riders to board regional trains with their work bicycles. The demonstration followed the news of the arrest of a rider who had protested against Trenord staff who refused to allow his bicycle on board.

[23] On 26 March 2021, NoDeliveryDay was held, a national strike day to demand equal treatment for workers.

[24] The projects aimed at providing *homes* for riders are part of this set of initiatives and consist of providing these workers with a protected space during their working days in various cities. In these spaces, workers can rest, repair their vehicles, find drinking water and toilet facilities, but also be informed about their rights and access trade union support. Among the projects that have been launched and those still in progress, see: in Naples https://www.casarider.it/2021/12/07/sportello-consulenza-rider/, in Bologna https://www.cgilbo.it/tutte-le-news/nasce-casa-rider-a-porta-pratello-un-punto-di-riferimento-per-i-rider-di-bologna.html, in Florence https://cgilfirenze.it/2025/02/a-firenze-linaugurazione-di-casa-rider/.

system reinforces rigid hierarchies between commander and commanded, superior and subordinate, master and servant. The technological infrastructure of surveillance – pervasive, continuous and in some respects totalizing – enabled *caporali* to monitor riders in real time, prevent them from resting, and ensure constant productivity. Digital control thus became a disciplinary mechanism that exploited the legal, economic, and social vulnerability of migrant workers.

The complicity between migration governance and irregular subcontracting practices is further shown by the *caporali*'s strategic use of hunger as a tool of coercion, pushing riders to accept any condition in order to keep working. This dynamic legitimised and reinforced a racialised labour hierarchy that placed the most vulnerable migrants in positions of extreme subordination.

Secondly, our research highlights the strong link between labour exploitation and social isolation in various social and practical dimensions, as of the housing aspect, referring to the daily lives of the migrants involved. Work consumed nearly all aspects of daily life, leaving little time for maintaining transnational family ties, building new social relationships, learning about rights or engaging with trade unions. This isolation was compounded by housing segregation and limited access to public transport, where landlords, real estate agents and transport personnel acted as gatekeepers, denying access to urban resources.

As a result, riders involved in digital gangmastering were long excluded from the solidarity networks and mobilization efforts that have emerged in Milan around platform labour. Nevertheless, the urban context – characterized by greater opportunities for encounter and protest – has gradually enabled these workers to organise collectively, albeit at a slower pace than other segments of the rider workforce.

The working and living conditions of riders are shaped by exploitative social relations and multiple forms of segregation. They are sought after and exploited in urban areas as low-cost service providers – essential during the pandemic – only to be returned to reception centres once their shifts end. Their tasks, repetitive, underpaid, and in violation of collective bargaining rights, resonate with the concept of *infrastructural work* (Stokes, De Coss-Corzo 2023): labour that sustains collective life while rendering workers themselves as infrastructure, reproducing capitalist domination even in the digital age. As increasingly central actors in the time economy and providers of essential services, riders support urban accumulation and contribute to the social reproduction of metropolitan populations.

Thus, in continuity with historical patterns, platform capitalism relies on racially differentiated social hierarchies to sustain oppressive production regimes, allowing metropolitan populations to enjoy essential services delivered by human supply chains that obscure social marginalisation, rights violations and physical and psychological exploitation (see Martin 2007; Williams 1994; Mintz 1985).

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