

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion: Why Struggles Against Platform Capitalism Matter

This book has argued that there is an emerging new global composition of platform work. It started with three examples that illustrate the dynamics that have underpinned this shift. They are:

1. The increasing connections between platform workers, showing that they are not isolated.
2. The lack of communication and negotiation from platforms, leading to escalating worker action around shared issues.
3. The internationalisation of platforms, which has laid the basis for new transnational solidarity.

These different aspects are driven by the technical composition of platform work. They are also shaped by the shared social composition of platform work, particularly migration. This is underpinned by two key features of this work. The first is that platform work is indeed work, not some kind of flexible self-employment. Platforms exert managerial control over workers, profiting from the surplus value extracted during the labour process. While platforms may pretend not to be employers, the labour process involves methods of control and surveillance that do not represent a break from the employment relationship. In fact, the actions taken by platforms to disguise their status as employers result in a sharpening of the contradictions of the labour process. Platforms minimise training, reduce support, refuse to provide equipment, deactivate workers without appeal, and refuse to negotiate. This means that workers have fewer institutional channels through which to deal with problems that emerge from the labour process. Instead, many workers increasingly turn to wildcat strike action to raise their grievances. The platform's desire not to

How to cite this book chapter:

Woodcock, J. 2021. *The Fight Against Platform Capitalism: An Inquiry into the Global Struggles of the Gig Economy*. Pp. 85–94. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book51.f>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND

appear as an employer instead turns it into an even more hostile employer, sparking further worker resistance.

The second feature is connected to this. Platform workers are workers. They are not disconnected small businesses plying their trade across a range of platforms. Across most platforms, flexibility is touted as a key reason to sign up. There is a pressing need to push back against the conception of flexibility that is promoted by platforms. Some claim that this is a difficult thing to do. However, Jason Moyer-Lee (2017), the general secretary of the IWGB, has put forward a clear response: ‘flexibility that works for the worker is a marvellous thing. What we do say is that these companies need to abide by the law. Just because some of their workers have flexible work arrangements, that doesn’t mean you can deny them basic rights.’ To return to the example from earlier in this book of the Deliveroo riders in Islington, there is clear evidence of what the platform’s ‘flexibility’ means for workers. I met these drivers on a strike called to protest against the inaction of the platform after the death of a driver. As noted earlier, one of the workers explained that:

I spend my whole life on this bike. What kind of life is that? For £2.80 a delivery? I go home, shower and sleep, back out driving all day, seven days I week. I’ve been working since 2014, now I can barely make any money. It has to change ... a rider is killed working for £2.80 a delivery, to risk your life for so little money.

Another worker added ‘we don’t just want to mourn, we want action, change’. We discussed how dangerous it can be working for Deliveroo in this part of the city. Workers detailed the risk of robberies or road accidents. They felt that the police saw them as a problem, harassing them and becoming another risk in the work. Another worker arrived at the picket line outside a restaurant. He explained how he had been knocked off his moped, breaking his arm. He pulled back his sleeve to show the stitches needed after a metal plate was fitted. Deliveroo had done little to support this so-called self-employed independent contractor. He had brought his two young children along to show them the strike, joking with the other workers that now they were not working either.

The claim of self-employment may, for now, absolve platforms such as Deliveroo from the legal requirements owed to workers, but it cannot cover up the callousness of this process. I have met workers in different countries with similar stories: a worker has an accident that was not their fault and they are left to bear the brunt of the platform’s risks. The contractual trick frees capital from its obligations, but it does not prevent the boiling of anger against them. For the owners and managers sitting in plush office spaces, this anger can seem so distant as to not exist. However, on the street corners and outside restaurants it can be seen rising to the surface. I met workers in Islington with an organiser from Hong Kong who was visiting London. Despite organising with workers who

are a twelve-hour flight away, he was able to quickly share stories and discuss the similarities of the work. On the surface, Deliveroo might look different in both countries, but there are shared concerns and grievances. In Islington, the crowd of Algerian workers stood around their mopeds, big coats on against the weather, with helmets tipped back on their heads. The conversation switched back and forth from English to Arabic, staying mostly in English when a Brazilian worker arrived. Echoes of the Algerian revolution could be heard in the conversation. So, too, did the protests in Hong Kong interact with the union organising. In both contexts, workers can find shared experiences.

This book has sought to unpick the relationships that exist behind the app and the screen of platform work. Rather than starting with the platform, we have approached from the other direction. As Cleaver argued, we must begin from an 'examination of workers' actual struggles: their content, how they have developed, and where they are headed' (1979, 58). In the context of transport platforms, this has involved tracing resistance and struggles across different national contexts. There is a convergence in the experience of work that can be found here, as platforms 'have recruited large numbers of young and migrant workers, connected them via smartphone applications, ordered them to meet in specific places, attempted to immiserate their conditions without any space for negotiation, all the while claiming not to actually employ any of them' (Cant and Woodcock forthcoming). Transport platform work provides the most developed examples of the three dynamics discussed above. First, there is widespread use of communication methods such as WhatsApp, with overlapping networks of workers that often intersect with migrant communities. Second, there have been waves of wildcat strikes across transport platform work. Third, these strikes have been connected both within countries and internationally. There are the beginnings of organic international coordination and organising in this work.

These three dynamics are driven by the technical composition of this work. Platforms have reorganised previously existing forms of work across the city, removing the traditional workplace, managing the work through a reliance on piece rates and algorithms, while avoiding employment regulation through the use of self-employment status. These features create a shared experience of the work beyond national borders – both in the day-to-day of the labour process and also in how workers fight against it. These dynamics are also shaped by the social composition of many of these workers. Despite the platform's fantasy that workers are isolated individuals and only a temporary inconvenience, they bring their lives and experiences with them into platform work. This includes previous experiences of resistance and struggle, as well as community and solidarity. All these are combining to form a potentially new political composition of platform workers, both in national contexts and internationally. There are, of course, significant differences between Uber drivers in London, Cape Town, Bangalore, San Francisco, and so on. But they are developing a collective

subjectivity as Uber drivers. On this basis, new forms of organisation are coming to the fore. These are not just mobilisations against the injustices of platform work (Kelly 1998), but involve 'labour-process-generated solidarity' (Atzeni 2009, 15).

There are other forms of platform work that require a worker to be in a particular place, for example cleaning and care, which are growing areas of platform work. The dynamics found in transport work are not as pronounced in these forms of work, with little evidence so far of open resistance and struggle. However, this does not mean that capital has succeeded in defeating worker agency. We can consider what kinds of 'blockages' (Roggero 2011) are preventing a political recomposition of workers in this context. The fact that recomposition has happened so quickly in transportation should not be taken as evidence that cleaners and care workers cannot struggle in this way. Instead, it shows that they too could wage a struggle against platform capitalism.

These 'blockages' are clearly also present in the discussion of online work. There are even more challenges here than with cleaning and care work, with many workers physically isolated from each other, perhaps even separated by thousands of miles. However, this new technical composition of outsourced work has not removed the ability of workers to find new ways to connect with each other. Forums, social media, and digital communication have become the new watercooler or street corner for many of these workers. While this might not facilitate building connections as powerfully or as quickly as meeting face-to-face, it has contributed to the development of collective worker subjectivities on these platforms. Through the examples discussed earlier, particularly the Turkothon intervention and the protests at Rev, resistance can be seen rising to the surface in this kind of work. The dynamics present in transport work are also present in online work, albeit taking longer to crystallise and develop. However, what the examples show is that workers are beginning to find ways to organise against platforms in this work.

Why Does This Matter?

Despite the increasing evidence of resistance in platform work, whether in transport or online, there remain important questions about how this can develop into worker power. The chapter on understanding platform resistance discussed the challenge of moving from strikes and protests to sustained forms of organisation and tangible victories. In many cases, this work could be assessed as having low bargaining power, with issues relating to low structural and associational power. Capital's use of platforms has involved introducing a new technical composition that has sought to destroy – or limit – these forms of power. This includes refusing to employ workers, breaking up the labour process, the use of technology, new management techniques, and attempts at isolation. It is also exacerbated by the threat of automation, whether real

or imagined, that hangs over much of this work. However, it is worth noting Callum Cant's conception of 'internal' structural power. Despite all of these changes, platforms still rely on the labour of workers: no pizzas are delivered by algorithms, after all. Workers can still find and develop forms of disruptive power to strike back at capital.

There is also a risk of posing workers' struggle solely in terms of the power they can wield in conventional terms at the bargaining table. If workers are found to be lacking these capacities, they can be written off as 'unorganisable'. However, this misses how platform work – like other forms of work – is not a given but is produced by the conflict between workers and capital. It narrows these workers' experiences and struggles to the platform they work for, cutting them off from other workers' movements more widely. As Cant (2019) has argued, platform work is a laboratory for capital. It provides a testing ground in which new technical compositions are being experimented with. The success or failure of these tests has implications far beyond the platform economy. This is not to say that platform work should become the sole focus of attention. As Kim Moody warns, this could 'trivialize the deeper reality of capitalism, its dynamics, and the altered state of working-class life' (2017, 69).

Workers' inquiry, outlined in this book through the idea of digital workerism, provides a way to develop a deeper understanding of what is happening in platform work. This means understanding the struggles against platforms and their potential, but also learning how to fight new technology in the workplace. While platforms have transformed limited sectors of work so far, there are many other kinds of work that could be reorganised in this way. In particular, there are many public sector workplaces where platforms could be introduced. For example, universities increasingly rely on a supply of precarious workers to provide teaching, often in response to student numbers. It would not require much of a stretch of the imagination to see teaching being provided on a platform basis, with workers brought in just for classes or marking, and receiving numerical scores (as many already do). Similarly, with health and social care there has been an increase of precarious contracts. Platforms could offer a way to further drive down labour costs here.

The fight of platform workers therefore matters beyond the immediate platform they are resisting. The 'refusal' (Tronti 2019) of these workers when they strike against platforms shows how these forms of technological surveillance, control, and attempted domination can be resisted. This shows up the strengths and weakness of capital's use of technology in the workplace. It highlights how the imperatives of capital are written into the software and algorithms of these platforms. As Berardi reminds us, 'in the beginning someone is writing the code, and others are supposed to submit themselves to the effects of the code written by someone' (2013, ix). As he continues, 'the pragmatic effects of the code are not deterministic, as far as the code is the product of code writing, and code writing is affected by social, political, cultural, and emotional processes' (Berardi 2013, x). We are not trapped by algorithms, nor have they found a way to prevent

resistance in the labour process. They are a product of the social relations within which they are made. As struggles of platform workers develop, they provide the opportunity to ‘reveal some of the contradictions over production involved in working with code, in parallel to labor conditions and class struggle more broadly’ (Cox 2013, 40). Here, new alliances across the supply chain are possible that can provide a glimpse of how technology could be used differently, while providing powerful weapons to disrupt capital’s technology.

This book has also provided an example of experimentation with the ideas of digital workerism. Rather than starting with the platform or technology, it began from workers’ experience. From this perspective it is possible to develop a new understanding of platform workers’ struggles and the directions they are heading in. It also breaks the distinction between online and offline, showing that workers use a combination of these relationships to resist their work. Digital organising is no replacement for face-to-face organising, but it can be used to facilitate worker organising in new ways. Collective subjectivities and networks can be developed between workers located across the world. This highlights that ever ‘since hackers led digital systems on a line of flight from their military origins the Internet has had an ambivalent political virtuality’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2012, 2). Clearly, the internet has been used to develop a new technical composition of platform work, but it can also form part of ‘an electronic fabric of struggle,’ used by workers against capital (Clever 1995).

Digital technology also provides new ways to undertake and circulate workers’ inquiry – as well as workers’ struggle. Despite the challenges of the technical composition of platform work, the use of technology also brings workers into contact with each other. As Romano Alquati (quoted in Roggero 2010) has argued previously, ‘political militants have always done *conricerca* [co-research]. We would go in front of the factory and speak with workers: there cannot be organization otherwise.’ Therefore workers’ inquiry (or co-research) should involve finding the factory gates for workers today. For Deliveroo this might mean street corners or restaurants, while for other workers this might be located online. Digital technology provides opportunities for workers’ inquiry beyond just doing inquiries with digital workers (Brown and Quan-Hasse 2012). The widespread use of smartphones and messaging – alongside posting on social media more generally – indicates that many of these workers are producing and consuming information in new ways. WhatsApp groups are filled with commentary on the work, as well as discussions of struggles against it. The co-writing projects in *Notes from Below* have been able to use digital tools to facilitate writing and editing with workers without being located in the same room. Similarly, technology allows for these inquiries to be widely read and shared.

Digital workerism needs to be alive to the strengths and weaknesses of technology. This means critically analysing the way technology emerges from existing social relations and the acts within them. In relation to platform work, this

means understanding how different technologies have been used to discipline and control workers, while also seeing that they have played a role in facilitating new dynamics of international solidarity and struggle. Technology is understood within the specific technical composition of platform work. However, the use of this technology has also revealed a counter-tendency in which workers can take advantage of this new technical and social composition to recompose politically on a higher level. There is, however, nothing automatic about tendencies. As Roggero argues:

From the revolutionary point of view, tendency doesn't mean the objectivity and linearity of the path of history, and doesn't have anything to do with foreseeing the future. It's best to leave meteorologists to predict the rain, as militants we must create storms ... So tendency means the capacity to grasp the possibilities for an oppositional and radically diverse development within the composition of the present. Tendency is like prophecy: it means seeing and affirming in a different way something which already exists virtually. (2020, 8–9)

Digital workerism is not just about analysing the role of technology within the technical composition of work (although this is, of course, important), but is also about the role of technology in class struggle. This is not an argument that platform work and automation have broken the contradiction between labour and capital. That is clearly not true. Instead, the leap to a new political composition can show the different potential uses of technology.

Where Next?

Alternatives to platform capitalism will come from the struggles of platform workers. However, one of the common arguments about platform work is that capital has made itself redundant through the setting up of platforms. For example, so the argument goes, now that the model has been established, why is it necessary for capital to own and control the platform, seeking monopoly rents? The response has been a call for platform coops (Scholz 2016), using alternative apps. This is often presented as a shortcut to another way of working: just kick capital out of the relationship and workers will be free from the problems of the platform labour process. The first issue with this is that a platform coop would be very unlikely to get the levels of investment that capitalist platforms have had – and even if it did, this would denature its worker-led values. As argued by Englert et al., a platform coop:

would have to compete with – and indeed out-compete – a capitalist platform like Uber. While an ethical platform might seem to be an easy

sell versus a company like Uber, the latter has a vast marketing budget and already has the user base. The ability for venture capital platforms to run at a loss to ensure monopoly (or near monopoly) status, means that they have the resourcing to be vicious competitors. The only successful alternatives have been able to operate when regulators or legal changes have banned capitalist alternatives. (2020, 141)

This approach, as well as many other ideas cooked up by academics and other commentators, understands the current organisation of platform work as a problem. It involves proposing an organisational and technological, but not a political, solution. To use Hal Draper's (2019) terminology, these are interventions devised and implemented 'from above'. They often care little about workers' experience or their struggles. It is worth noting that there are examples of worker-driven coops, but these are few and far between.

This approach misses the potential of platform workers' struggles to contribute to a wider fight against capital. Englert et al. (2020) have pitched this as contributing to a struggle for digital socialism. Drawing again on Draper we can identify 'socialism from above' that is '*handed down* to the grateful masses in one form or another, by a ruling elite which is not subject to their control' (2019, 10). On the other hand, 'socialism from below' begins from the 'view that socialism can be realized only through the self-emancipation of activated masses in motion, reaching out for freedom with their own hands, mobilized "from below" in a struggle to take charge of their own destiny, as actors (not merely subjects) on the stage of history' (Draper 2019, 10). The struggle of platform workers can contribute to the formation of a digital socialism from below. These workers are fighting against the leading edge of capitalist technological innovation, often subjected to the most advanced forms of control. As argued before, these workers are not isolated test subjects, but instead are forming new subjectivities against platform capital. They can build alliances along the supply chain, both with other workers involved in the services they are providing, but also with the tech workers needed to develop these new technologies. This highlights the class nature of digital technology. Platforms cannot be understood simply as something neutral that needs to be taken into cooperative ownership. Instead this is about wrenching technology and all of its missed potential away from capital and the 'Californian ideology' (Barbrook and Cameron 1996).

Instead of platform coops, we could imagine 'platform expropriation':

The hypothesis of this strategy is that a transferal of capital ownership from bosses to workers in the platform sector, achieved through an escalating cycle of political struggle (a cycle that has already been the subject of significant inquiry), would be the optimal way to prevent market competition from undermining different forms of worker-run platforms. This transformation of ownership, however, is not enough

in and of itself. Management of the platform has to be placed in the hands of both tech and delivery workers, in conditions of workers' control. But rather than commodity production under workers' control, which would remain just a strange form of distributed ownership capitalism, the real socialist possibility in such a reorganisation lies in the decommodification of the platform through its integration into a programme of universal basic services. Rather than maintaining the current market niche of food delivery to relatively well-off urban white-collar workers, this people's Deliveroo would be actively re-designed to produce the greatest possible social use value. By taking control over their daily activity, exploited platform workers could increasingly become the co-producers of a decommodified urban food system – one premised on the socialist transformation – and collectivisation – of the relations of social reproduction. (Cant, quoted in Englert et al. 2020, 141–2)

These are latent possibilities in the struggle against platform capitalism. But these kinds of changes could only be won through a sustained struggle from below. Here we can imagine platforms coops across a range of versions, from those proposed 'from above' as a solution to the problems of platform capitalism, to class-struggle-driven platform coops 'from below', with a whole range of alternatives in between.

Instead of focusing on the particular form of the alternatives, it is helpful to understand the process of getting there. This might involve forging new alliances between platform workers, the labour movement, and other currently 'unorganisable' workers. There are experiences and important lessons that can be shared between each of these groups. Workers' inquiry can provide snapshots of these different struggles. It can provide insights into the struggles of transport platform workers from London, Bangalore, São Paulo, Cape Town, San Francisco – and how these are beginning to converge. Online workers, too, are finding ways to overcome the technical composition of platform work.

It is not the role of this book to chart the future of the fight against platform capitalism, or indeed what comes after it. This fight will be led and shaped by platform workers themselves. Their struggles might take the form of waves of strike action, starting cooperatives, seizing the means of production, or creative tactics and strategies yet to be seen. They might focus on building worker power within or beyond platforms. Only one thing can be said for certain: it is through the struggles of platform workers that alternatives can be articulated and won. To return to a crucial but too often overlooked argument from Marx: the worker 'acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature' (1867, 283). As Lebowitz has argued, this 'coincidence of the changing of circumstances and self-change' provides the basis through which the 'old subjects, the products of capital, go beyond capital' (2003, 180). This is why there can be no shortcuts in the struggle against

platform capitalism. It is precisely through the process of fighting against platform capital that it can be overcome.

The labour process and the technical composition of platform work, as well as the social composition of workers beyond the platform, has laid the basis for a powerful new political composition. Throughout this book, the framework of digital workerism has been used to highlight the increased communication between platform workers, a propensity to resist and take action, and increasingly international connections being forged in practice. It also provides a way to connect with the resistance and organising that is beginning to emerge across platform work. After all, the stakes of these struggles matter both for platform workers and the workers' movement more widely. To again paraphrase E. P. Thompson (2013, 8), platform workers were present at their own making. They are present now, leading the fight against platforms, and their struggles will shape the future beyond platforms as well.