

Special Issue Proposal

# Platforms in the City: spaces and alliances for the renewal of social movements in the platform economy

## Guest Editors

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## Context/Theoretical framework

A growing number of recent analyses have focused on the impact of digital platforms on the reconfiguration of markets and work conditions — known as the ‘platform economy’ (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Schor et al., 2020), ‘sharing economy’ (Schor and Atwood-Charles, 2017), ‘gig economy’ (Vallas and Schor, 2020) or ‘platform capitalism’ (Srnicsek, 2017). The companies that own these platforms are advocating a new economy and work relations based on ‘sharing’ and ‘community’ (Ravenelle, 2017; Kirchner and Schüssler, 2019), hiding the fact that platforms evolve from simple digital tools for professional activities and market intermediaries between supply and demand to create a new category of immaterial and impalpable employers (Aloisi, 2016; Friedman, 2014). The market power and information asymmetries of these platforms raise questions about the emergence of the atypical forms of labour that they generate and the regulation of working conditions that they impose (Fabo et al., 2017; Todolí-Signes, 2017; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2017).

The impact of digital platforms on forms of labour, observed across the globe, is receiving considerable attention, calling for public intervention as well as raising political protests (Fabo et al., 2017; Stewart and Stanford, 2017; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2017; Newlands et al., 2018; Dif-Pradalier and Dufresne, 2019; Dufresne A and Leterme, 2021). Worker dependence on platforms

raises controversies, particularly legal, around employment status and lack of social protection, linked to imposed self-entrepreneurship (De Stefano, 2016; Gomes, 2018). In departures from the standard employment relationship, platform workers are characterised as self-entrepreneurs, without the benefits linked to employee status (Stanford, 2017). Algorithms often organise and control their work, placing them in fierce competition (Moore and Joyce, 2020; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Stark and Pais, 2020). In addition to lack of trade union organisation (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2017), this job dimension makes collective mobilisation unlikely (Abdelnour and Bernard, 2019). Platforms are thus instilling, particularly in cities, unprecedented fronts of inclusion and exclusion, participation and division, social and political aggregation and disaggregation. Labour is being reconfigured through new categories of actors, and new forms of relations and bargaining.

It is in **urban spaces** that the scale of the economic and social transformations caused by the platform economy is most clearly observed. It is here that greatest activity of platforms is taking place — whether for home meal delivery (Deliveroo, UberEats, Foodora, etc.), chauffeur-driven vehicles (such as Uber) or temporary apartment rentals (symbolised by Airbnb). It is also on this scale that the first grassroots initiatives for the improvement of working conditions have recently emerged, such as the *Charter of fundamental rights of digital labour in the urban context*, signed in Bologna on 31 May 2018. It is here that public authorities deploy their efforts to regulate certain types of platforms, particularly in the field of short-term accommodation rentals (Aguilera et al., 2019; Serrano et al., 2020). Two of Europe's cities more hit by overtourism, Florence and Venice, have recently launched a 'Decalogo' — a list of Ten Commandments addressed to the Italian national authorities, including a claim for regulating short-term rentals<sup>1</sup>. The junction between urban spaces and platforms captures the essence of a technologised urbanity and a relational process that implies 'negotiating new tactics, new players, new governance models and new data-driven business strategies, and new interfaces for everyday interaction' (Barns, 2020). Driven, both financially and ideologically, by the growing value of data accumulation, this ongoing process of 'platform urbanisation' is transforming urban citizenship (Hanakata and Bignami, 2021 forthcoming).

The **COVID-19 pandemic** has reignited these controversies and can be seen as an accelerator and an indicator of ongoing transformations and initiatives (Pirone et al., 2020). As measures taken by the authorities forced many businesses to close (ILO, 2020), the use of platforms in several sectors increased. Moreover, the pandemic has made the precariousness and vulnerability of platform

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<sup>1</sup> CNN (2021) Venice and Florence demand a curb on Airbnb. 25 March. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/venice-florence-airbnb-restrictions/index.html>

workers even more visible (Rani and Dühr, 2020; Valencia Castro et al., 2020), despite emergency exceptional support measures decided by governments, but also by platform companies themselves (OECD, 2020). Platform workers' mobilisations, especially in the logistics and food delivery sectors, have also become more numerous and stronger (Trappmann et al., 2020). In this regard, for the first time in Italy, almost 40,000 Amazon workers from the whole supply chain (including its hubs and delivery drivers) held a national strike on 22 March 2021 to demand better conditions from the online shopping giant<sup>2</sup>.

While platform workers have to deal with a very high degree of individualisation of their working and employment conditions and are deprived of collective representation, they still have demonstrated their capacity in organising and defending their rights, gaining notable media visibility particularly during the pandemic (e.g. Polkowska, 2020; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020). Platform work and workers confront trade unions, which were historically built on the defence of the core of standard employment, with many challenges in terms of categories of workers represented, skills recognition, alliance strategies, levels of regulation, repertoire of action, etc. Historically, trade unions remain attached to their national sphere where they control both language, political culture and decision-making processes (Martin and Ross, 1999). Mobilisations and collective actions are therefore most often organised according to political agendas and rhythms that are distinct from one country to another (Tarrow, 2005): thus, mobilisation is most often lacking a transnational dimension. In this sense, the first pan-European assembly for workers from hot meal delivery platforms (such as Foodora, Deliveroo, UberEats, Stuart and Glovo) held on 25 and 26 October 2018 in Brussels, or the internationally coordinated strikes during the summer of 2020 in the food-delivery sector, are of great interest, both for social movements and academics, as potential new structures for revitalising trade unionism (Dufresne and Leterme, 2021).

The links between platform workers and trade unions are however very different from one country to another: they range from collectives of self-employed workers, linked to institutional unions (sectoral or inter-professional), to independent or even to autonomous unions. The 'grey zone' (outside labour law) developed by the delivery platforms can thus be considered as an 'opportunity structure' for an international social movement in the making. **This call welcomes studies illustrating the potential of these new structures for revitalising trade unionism and ensuring social justice.**

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<sup>2</sup> *The Guardian* (2021) Italians urged to boycott Amazon to support day of strikes. 22 March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/22/italians-urged-to-refrain-from-buying-from-amazon-to-support-day-of-strikes>

The different categories of actors confronted with the platform economy (workers, unions and public authorities) encounter many difficulties in organising at the international level. Most of the time, workers mobilise at the city level, while unions are organised at the national level. As for public authorities, their scope of action and the actions they take vary greatly from one city and country to another (see Aguilera et al., 2019 about Airbnb; Thelen, 2018 about Uber). However, efforts in this direction seem to be able to move the lines, as demonstrated by the proclamation of a *Transnational Federation of Couriers*, in October 2018, which includes 12 states and 34 organisations. Collectives of delivery workers, trade unions and researchers are also multiplying in several European countries, such as the [Don't Gig Up](#) project and the [Digital Platform Observatory](#), both funded by the European Commission, or the journal [Notes from Below](#) led by British researchers.

This special edition focuses on the issues of platform work and is structured around **two main themes**:

- i) the levels at which political participation, social mobilisations and modes of regulation of the employment relationship are constructed and observed in the platform economy, whether these levels are geographical (city, national, transnational) or political and institutional (sectoral or inter-professional, formal or informal);
- ii) how alliances among actors involved in or impacted by the platform economy are built and re-combined, the objectives around which these mobilisations are constituted and their conditions of possibilities. Those involved include platform workers, trade unions, independent/autonomous collectives and other social and political actors participating in 'new social movements'. They also include public authorities, especially at local/city level, and academics who can accumulate different statuses by being at the same time platform workers, activists and researchers.

The call invites contributions crossing these lines of research and addressing them from a comparative perspective. The comparative perspective can be whether geographical or sectoral or by taking into consideration the resources and skills mobilised for and in (collective) action. Special attention should be paid to the dynamics occurring in urban contexts, where most platform-mediated activities and worker mobilisations are concentrated, and where local public authorities are trying to regulate the activities and employment relationships of platforms.

## Main questions addressed

- Who are the actors involved in platform work regulation and how do they interact?
- On what scale is the regulation of platform work undertaken and with what effects?
- What are the levels where mobilisations are built? With what results?
- What kind of skills are mobilised and how are they used as a means of advocacy and as levers for action?
- How can repertoires of action and discourse and union/professional mobilisations be renewed in connection with the reconfigurations of urban space caused by the rise of non-standard labour?
- What are the ways and means for internationalising conflicts and claims? Can alliances lead to stable transnational networks? Is this a key condition for the emergence of new trade-union representativeness at the transnational level? Do the alliances ensure social justice?

## Origin of the proposal

This special issue arises from the activities carried out within the H2020 project PLUS — Platform Labour in Urban Spaces: Fairness, Welfare, Development (<https://project-plus.eu/>) — that investigates in an interdisciplinary way the multiple effects of platforms on labour, social reproduction and everyday life in seven European cities (Barcelona, Berlin, Bologna, Lisbon, London, Paris, Tallinn).

## Timeline

- 20 December 2021: publication of the Call for papers
- 22 July 2022: first submission deadline for the articles
- 26 September 2022: return of the reviews to the authors
- 24 April 2023: final versions of revised articles for Online publication
- September 2023: print-publication

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