CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This book is about the struggles of platform workers. The ideas for it began in London in June 2016 when I met a Deliveroo rider. I had heard the name Deliveroo before, but did not know much about it. As is often the case with these things, I then started to see riders across the city. I saw them waiting at traffic lights or outside restaurants. The green and silver uniform became a common sight across the city. At the time, I had just finished writing a book about call centres. These Deliveroo riders seemed to be another category of so-called 'unorganisable' workers. There were arguments from universities and the labour movement that many workers could not be 'organisable'. For example, the Labour MP Siobhain McDonagh argued that Deliveroo workers 'are not in the same workplace and there is not the same unity of cause. There is always somebody who will do it if you don't want to' (quoted in Osborne and Butler 2016). In a similar vein, Alex Wood, who studies the gig economy, argued that 'there's a high turnover of people and there's low market bargaining power. If they go on strike it's not going to bring the economy to a halt, unlike coal miners or rail workers' (quoted in Osborne and Butler 2016). Commentators blamed precarity, youth, the nature of the work, technology, or a combination of these factors. These were all arguments I had come across with high-volume sales call centres in London. This was not the first – and would not be the last – time I would hear that platform workers such as those at Deliveroo could not organise.

Then I met Tim and we discussed what it was like working for Deliveroo. In many ways, Tim was typical of the cyclists working for the platform. He was university educated and did not have much work experience. Tim was first attracted by the idea of earning some extra money while riding around the city. Working for Deliveroo fitted around another job in the evenings. He also found that the work gave him a lot of time to think, both while cycling and between deliveries. One of the things he spent time thinking about was organising at work.

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Tim wanted to start organising with other Deliveroo workers. He had found some people interested in organising, but it was proving hard to get people to commit. So far he had spoken to drivers who worked in the same area of London. What he wanted to do next was meet drivers from other 'zones' and start building a network. We met on a sunny afternoon in central London and set off to find the meeting points for other zones. We started off at London Bridge and walked down the south bank of the river Thames. Along this walk there are many clusters of small restaurants. They include independent restaurants and franchised chains such as Nando's, Wagamama, and Pizza Express. We soon found a meeting point. As Tim explained, Deliveroo originally set these 'zone centres' as locations for workers to wait between deliveries. These were supposedly determined by an algorithm to be the best places to wait, keeping delivery times down.

We stopped at one meeting point. It had a range of restaurants and space to park mopeds. There was even an archway to provide cover from the rain – luckily not needed that day. Over a couple of hours there was a steady stream of moped riders who passed through. Unlike Tim, most of these workers were migrants, and particularly Brazilians. We spent our time chatting with workers. We compared notes about different zones, heard complaints, and shared stories about the work. Far from coming across as 'unorganisable', these workers were already in contact with each other. There were networks across the zone. I remember asking one driver if he was in touch with anyone in other zones. He was sitting on his moped, smartphone secured to the handlebars. He started showing me the WhatsApp groups that he was part of. One of these had hundreds of workers from the surrounding area. He explained that workers used these to share information: the best places to wait, the busiest restaurants to get orders from, warnings about traffic or the police, as well as general information about the work.

Workers invited us to join large and active WhatsApp groups. We found that there were already overlapping groups with lively conversations. Many of the workers we spoke to were angry and there was already talk of protesting against the conditions. The in-person meeting points were like an office watercooler. These WhatsApp groups became digital watercoolers, connecting people during and outside of work. The meeting points and overlapping WhatsApp would become central to organising. They played a key role in publicising the first wave of strikes in 2016.

This experience is one that was repeated, both with workers in London and also in other countries discussed later in the book. The meeting points and use of WhatsApp are an important reminder that workers are not passive actors. Workers engage with and respond to the contradictions of work. To paraphrase E. P. Thompson (2013, 8), platform workers were present at their own making. They had a history before signing up to work for platforms. They bring this with them to the work: the experience of working and resisting elsewhere, existing social networks, politics, and what they wanted from the work.

This book draws attention to these moments of solidarity. It looks at the new ways that workers are finding to resist and organise in the context of platforms. In particular, the book focuses on three dynamics that are driving struggles in the platform economy:

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.

Each of these stems from the new technical composition of platform work. The first example, of increasing connections between platform workers, can clearly be seen in the example at the start of the book – Deliveroo workers in London. Platform workers are increasingly connected to each other, often via WhatsApp.

The second dynamic involves a lack of communication from platforms. Increasingly platform workers are taking wildcat strike action over similar issues. I noticed this when meeting delivery drivers in Bangalore in 2018. It was a hot day in the city, with heavy traffic. I had set off with researchers from a project I was working on at the time: Mark Graham, Pradyumna Taduri, and Mounika Neerukonda. We wanted to speak to food delivery platform workers. There is no Deliveroo in Bangalore, but Swiggy and Zomato operate on a similar model. We started by looking for places that could serve as meeting points. This meant searching for busy restaurants with space outside. After struggling to find any good locations, we decided to ask an Uber driver. After all, they spent their time driving around the city. At first, he thought it was an odd request. After all, it was not exactly one that you could put into the app. He then called over another auto rickshaw driver and they drove us to a popular meeting place. Of course, given that they spent much of their time on the roads they already knew where to find these spots.

This meeting spot was a row of restaurants at a busy junction. Between the entrance of the restaurants and the road there was a wide flight of stairs. This provided ample space for drivers to gather and sit. At the bottom of the steps was a thick row of motorcycles. Each had either the orange Swiggy or red Zomato bags waiting for food. I was particularly struck by how similar the working conditions were to those of drivers in London. Despite the different surroundings, Pradyumna and I began talking to one group. Pradyumna translated parts of the conversation, switching between Kannada and English. As I have noted in another account (Woodcock and Graham 2019, 74–75), the drivers' wages had fallen from 60 rupees for a delivery to 30 rupees. The platform told the drivers of these changes when they happened. As with other examples, there was no space for negotiation. We had heard no stories of platform strikes in Bangalore from the news. Yet these workers told us they had taken wildcat

strike action recently. After a strike of 300–400 workers, they had won concessions from the platform on a local level. I asked what issues they had with the work. We discussed the usual things such as safety equipment, the danger of the roads, insurance, deactivation of workers, and so on. All agreed that what they wanted was 'more money' from the platform. Wages were the key issue.

These were the same demands I have heard from platform workers in different countries over the past four years. For example, I discussed issues with Deliveroo riders in Islington in early 2020. These focused on pay in relation to the recent death of a driver. As one worker explained:

> 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.

The strikes in 2016 opposed changes in payment rates, which were also the target of later strikes. There is a pattern of food delivery platforms putting pressure on wages. First platforms move to pay only for deliveries, then further reduce these fees. These changes are not negotiated with workers. Workers are only notified through the app once the changes have gone through. This means there is little opportunity for negotiation with the platform. Workers have few, if any, channels through which to express their concerns. Instead, complaints escalate fast. This often results in wildcat strike action becoming the preferred method of protest for drivers. In London and Bangalore, as well as many other cities, drivers use this method to voice their concerns.

The third dynamic is the internationalisation of platforms and the experience of work. Workers having shared conditions or concerns is nothing new across national borders. However, the internationalisation of platforms means that there is now a shared focus for these grievances across countries. I first came across an example of this in the back of an Uber in Cape Town. After landing at the airport, I ordered an Uber to take me into the city. The driver who picked me up was, like most Uber drivers in Cape Town, keen to talk. We chatted away as we made our way into the city. Fighting back the jetlag, I brought the conversation around to working conditions. In my experience, drivers would be open about their conditions and issues with Uber. Once we had discussed what it was like to be an Uber driver in Cape Town, he asked how it was for Uber drivers in London. We compared the kinds of cars, the minimum fares and rates for distance, the way Uber operated, the kinds of jobs that were common, and so on. The driver then asked about the protests of workers in London. It was clear that this was something he had heard about before. We compared these with protests in South Africa, discussing issues such as employment status. At the time, this conversation felt like a normal discussion about working conditions. Yet after the journey, it left me thinking that something interesting

was happening. I thought about whether I would have had a similar experience before Uber. Would a local cab driver in Cape Town have wanted to hear about the conditions of a minicab driver in the east end of London? From this first encounter I had the same experience in more cities: Bangalore, San Francisco, New York, São Paulo, Toronto, and so on. As the waves of protest and worker actions increased, these discussions became more frequent too.

The argument of this book builds on these three examples and the dynamics they involve. Each of these show new tendencies that are emerging with platform work. The first example shows how connected these workers are, despite the surface appearance of isolation. Digital (as well as face-to-face) communication is bringing workers together. The second example shows the lack of communication from the platform. This prevents the mediation of grievances about work and leads workers to escalate protest action. This has particularly taken the form of wildcat strikes. The third example is an important illustration of the global features of this work. The international scope of platforms has laid the basis for new kinds of transnational solidarity. Taken together, these three examples provide the basis for the argument of this book. Rather than being 'unorganisable', these workers are participating in the start of a global struggle against platform capitalism.

Understanding Platforms

Platforms have become a well-worn metaphor for how our lives, work, and culture are being transformed. As Marc Steinberg has argued:

> platforms are everywhere. As digital objects we have social media platforms … chat apps are platforms … e-commerce platforms … streaming platforms … and smartphones. As places we have bookstores as platforms, storefronts as platforms. We have educational platforms, political platforms, business platforms. As we have gone from the era of platform shoes as a distinct genre of footwear to platform everything. And this list does not even scratch the list of what is called a platform, or what is retroactively redescribed as one. The greatest success of *platform* within our language ecosystem is to have become something of a universal translation device. Almost anything can become a platform, if one merely calls it such. (2019, 1)

Steinberg traces the roots of the platform economy to its emergence in Japan. This has gone on to have an impact far beyond work. Yet as Tarleton Gillespie (2010, 360) explains, 'we do not have a sufficiently precise language' to unpick the effects of platforms. As Gillespie continues, 'the discourse of the "platform" works against us developing such precision, offering as it does a comforting sense of technical neutrality and progressive openness' (2010, 360). If

'platforms are eating our world' (Moazed and Johnson 2016, 17), they are having a particular impact in work. Another definition can be useful here. As Steinberg (2019, 2) explains, in Chinese the term *píngtái* is used, meaning a flat platform or a stage. In the context of digital technology this can mean the software on which other things run. Yet the different meanings of *píngtái* are also useful for thinking about how the platform can also be a stage. Platforms involve a range of actors, including workers, capital, customers, regulators, and so on. We can think about how these actors have different interests. They have different motivations, dialogue, and even fight scenes on the stage.

This book focuses on one actor in particular: the platform worker, whether Deliveroo riders or online workers, whether on the streets of London or across the world. It starts with a critical analysis of the organisation of platform work. The aim is to try and better understand the struggles of workers against platforms. I have chosen to focus on this kind of work because it provides a platform – to push the metaphor a little further – upon which we can make sense of other changes, those happening across different workers' struggles and sectors of the economy.

It is also worth pointing out here that much of the work that happens on platforms is not new. Instead, platforms are a new way of connecting workers and employers. They introduce 'tools to bring together the supply of, and demand for, labour' (Graham and Woodcock 2018, 242). Before Uber we had taxis. There was takeaway food delivery before Deliveroo and cleaners before SweepSouth. Care workers existed too before care.com. Freelance work precedes Upwork. Transcription happened in a different way prior to Amazon Mechanical Turk.[1] What is different now is how the work is undertaken and completed.

Platforms are a novel organisational form. They use digital technology to position the company (or 'platform') between the worker and consumer. This means they mediate the relationships between them. Yet there is a risk in seeing the newness of digital technology as making a clean break from the past. Work has involved both technology and mediation before. For example, in the UK there is a long history of taxi services, going back to the seventeenth century. Legalisation of horse-drawn carriages started in 1635, and they were offered for hire by innkeepers. The first taxi rank was outside the Maypole Inn on the Strand in 1636. The stand provided a way to mediate between drivers and potential passengers. There was a queuing system so that the longest waiting driver would be available first. In 1654 there was a legal intervention to limit the number of drivers, which was restricted to 200 'hackney-coachmen' in Westminster (Firth and Rait 1911, 922). Over time, new technologies have transformed the distribution of taxi work beyond the customer having to go to the taxi rank. For example, call boxes at taxi stands allowed drivers to contact a despatch office. From the 1950s, radio despatch provided two-way communication between the taxi and the operator. Since then there has been an increasing

digitisation of communication, including mobile phones, GPS tracking, computerised despatching, and so on. Historically, data collection has been an important part of taxi provision, for example using meters to calculate the cost of journeys.

It is no surprise that the private hire taxi industry has become a focus for platforms. From the start, transportation involved the problem of how to connect the people offering the service to the customers who want a journey. It has also involved a range of different ways in which capital organised drivers, from operators that charged drivers commission or upfront fees to lease a vehicle, to those that employed drivers and paid them a wage. It is a highly regulated industry, with many, many regulations having followed the restrictions introduced in Westminster in 1654. The predecessors to platforms were also somewhat resistant to technological change. For example, when Uber started operating in London in 2012 there was a choice of either trying to flag down a black cab or calling a minicab office. I rarely used taxis at the time, even though I could see a minicab office from the window of my flat. The booking process involved calling the office. This was then often followed by calling back to check, as the cabs were always later than promised, with the repeated reply that it was 'just a few minutes away'.

The latest application of technology involved a smartphone interface for customers and drivers. This made the process of using the service much easier. Drawing on Silicon Valley expertise with user experience (UX) design, platforms make booking a taxi quick and easy. They provide the impression of transparency, with a countdown timer and predicted fare. I say this not to evangelise about how great the Uber app is, but instead to highlight that this did offer something new to customers. It opened up the market both to people frustrated with previous offerings, but also to people who otherwise might have taken public transport. This is not because it did something new. People paying for transport has a very long history. Instead it provided a new way to effectively mediate the exchange. So, Uber 'has neither invented the role of the driver, nor the need of the passenger, but rather a new way to connect them' (Woodcock and Graham 2019, 46). This process has even produced a verb: 'to Uberize'.[2] Indeed, many later platforms have positioned themselves as the 'Uber for X' (Srnicek 2017, 37).

This is the 'platform' aspects of these companies. They provide a way for two groups (in this case the driver and the customer) to easily connect with each other. As with the taxi industry, there is a long history of other kinds of platforms to connect customers with sellers. For example, shopping centres provide a platform for companies and their products. Newspapers feature adverts and often have classified advert sections. Local shop windows have long placed adverts in their windows, and lamp posts carry tear-off contact numbers. What is different is the 'digital' part of platforms. Instead of having to go to the shopping centre or have the newspaper delivered, digital technology allows these

adverts to be hosted online. For work, digital job boards provide a way to find jobs, or for workers to post their CVs. These platforms did not change the kind of work, but provided a new way to advertise and recruit. Early analysis talked of a new 'sharing economy' emerging (Sundararajan 2017). The reality was quite different and quickly came under sustained criticism (Slee 2015).

Nick Srnicek's analysis of 'platform capitalism' was an early critical account of platforms. Particularly important for this book is his identification of the 'lean platform economy' (Srnicek 2017, 91). Srnicek focuses on the way that low-wage work is being reorganised through platforms. This involves triangular business models between workers, customers, and platforms (Roy-Mukherjee and Harrison 2020). As I have written with Mark Graham, platform work represents a shift in the organisation of work. Three key factors are driving this. The first is a set of changes in the economy often attributed to neoliberalism. Broadly, these entail a general attack on working-class organisation and the deregulation of capital. The second is technology. New forms of connectivity have facilitated capital recruiting and managing workers at scale. The third is flexibility. This is important for many workers searching for different ways to work or to escape their local labour market. Capital has also sought to exploit increasingly precarious workers (Woodcock and Graham 2019). It is in this context, across different regions and countries, that platforms become established.

Platform work (and the broader gig economy) has become a popular site for research, much more so than other forms of low-paid work. As Ravenelle (2019) notes, many academics can find access through their own use of platforms or within easy reach of the campus. Uber is a prime example of this. It has been the focus of a good deal of critique (Hill 2017; Scholz 2017). Uber has become a brand name recognised across the world. It operates in an increasing number of countries, both in private hire and food delivery. But it is important to note here that its visibility can hide other kinds of platform work. For example, Hunt and Samman (2019) argue that the focus on transportation platforms reflects the gendering of platform work. This has meant that care, cleaning, and domestic work receive much less attention (see Anderson 2000). For example, there has been much more published on Uber than on domestic work (see Hunt and Machingura 2016; Ticona and Mateescu 2018).

With the focus on Uber, the role of the algorithm has taken centre stage (Lee et al. 2015; Rosenblat and Stark 2016; Scholz 2017; Rosenblat 2018). Driving is one form of work that many think automation could take over, whether in the near or far future, depending on who you believe. Transport platforms are a site of struggle over algorithms at work. This ties in with the broader rise of algorithms across society (Pasquale 2015; Schneier 2015; Kitchin 2017; Cheney-Lippold 2017; O'Neil 2017; Turow 2017; Eubanks 2018). Algorithms play an important role in platform work. This does not mean that algorithms are fundamentally changing capital and labour relationships. For example, some accounts argue that algorithmic control takes away the possibilities of

work agency, solidarity, and collective action (Veen et al. 2019; Mahnkopf 2020). There is a risk of reading only the surface relationships on many platforms. Platforms have an interest in claiming that platform workers are self-employed. This frees the platform from many requirements of employment law and regulation, minimising the risk of having a large number of workers on record, and making the company look attractive to investors. I take the position that regardless of the employment status that platforms claim, the people doing the work on platforms are workers (see Aloisi 2016; De Stefano 2019; De Stefano and Aloisi 2019).

Workers provide the services that platforms claim to be disrupting. No matter how complex the algorithms or well developed the apps, workers still do the work. They drive the vehicles, deliver the food, clean the houses, and categorise the data. The claim of self-employment status is an attempt to deflect attention, hiding workers behind the app or screen. The reality of the dream of automation is that the need for online workers will increase. Even with the threat of technological mass unemployment, in the here and now there are platform workers. Their experience of work matters for making sense of these changes. This book contributes to the growing literature in this area, particularly building on attempts at worker writing including Waters and Woodcock 2017; Fear 2018; Briziarelli 2019; Gent 2019; Cant 2019; Leonardi et al. 2019; Cant and Mogno 2020; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020.

Structure of the Book

The first chapter details the framework of digital workerism that underpins this book. It outlines the threefold framework of class composition developed by *Notes from Below*, involving the technical (the organisation of work), social (the organisation of workers into class society), and political (the forms of workers' resistance and self-organisation) composition of work. Building on this, it outlines an argument about workers' inquiry in the context of platforms, particularly focusing on new labour processes and the potential for new forms of struggle.

The second chapter focuses on the struggles of transport workers on platforms. It discusses food delivery workers, starting with the strikes of Deliveroo riders in London in 2016. This draws on the longest-running project that has contributed to the book. The dynamics of these struggles are analysed through the framework of class composition, unpicking the changing technical, social, and political composition of this work. It then moves through examples of subsequent waves of strikes across Europe, as well as the formation of the Transnational Federation of Couriers. This analysis is then developed through an increasingly global network of food delivery driver organisations (including both unions and networks), reflecting on the successes and limitations of

different models of resistance and organisation that drivers are experimenting with. The chapter then moves on to discuss private hire drivers, focusing on the coordinated strikes and protests in the run-up to Uber's IPO. These went beyond the coordination of days of action or alignment of strikes, leading to the formation of international networks, with two conferences having been held so far.

In Chapter 3 the focus shifts towards online workers. It first differentiates between microworkers and online freelancers, discussing the role of automation and the technical composition of these kinds of work. The chapter contrasts the challenges of organising in this kind of work with transport platforms, particularly the lack of opportunities to meet face-to-face. The chapter draws attention to the digital networks that form around this work in response to the challenges of the labour process. Recent struggles involving Amazon Mechanical Turk and Rev (transcription) workers show the potential for these workers to coordinate and build shared subjectivities through online communication. This case study is explored as an example with a significantly more challenging technical composition, yet shows how new moments of struggle are still coming to the fore.

The fourth chapter draws back from the examples to consider resistance against platform capitalism. It shifts the analytical lens to consider these issues in a wider context, including considering how workers build power in different situations. This involves developing the three parts of the book's argument: the role of technology and the technical composition of work, the importance of social composition for understanding how workers engage with work and resistance, and the varying forms of struggle that constitute political composition.

Finally, the conclusion draws together each of the examples of platform work and the analysis, emphasising and reiterating the key argument of the book: that rather than undermining worker agency, platforms have instead provided the technical basis for the emergence of new global struggles against capitalism.