CHAPTER 5

Understanding Platform Resistance

The first strike of platform workers I encountered was in London in August 2016. Deliveroo had announced that it was changing from paying £7 per hour and £1 per drop to paying only £3.75 per drop. Like the statements made to the Rev workers, Deliveroo claimed that this would result in some workers being paid more. However, the feeling from the WhatsApp group was that this represented a huge potential pay cut, particularly with workers no longer being paid if there were no orders coming in. After increasing discussion on WhatsApp groups, like those examined earlier, calls for a strike circulated in response to a change in the payment scheme.

The strike was called and a new meeting point set by workers: Deliveroo's (then) headquarters just off the busy Tottenham Court Road in London. I remember turning up to the protest early with Tim, unsure if anyone else would come. Another worker arrived and we chatted over rolled-up cigarettes, concerned that maybe no one else would show up. A few more workers arrived, all covering their faces. It got off to an awkward start, with many introductions between workers from different zones who had never met before. However, quite quickly more and more workers arrived from different parts of the city. Mopeds and motorbikes were parked along the road, eventually filling all the available spaces. Across from the headquarters a mass meeting of workers got underway. Demands and grievances were discussed, with someone stepping forward to translate speeches into Portuguese for the Brazilian workers. As one worker recounted to me:

> The Deliveroo strike was the most like fun demo I've ever been on … I've got some really good videos of people like, so like there were all the moped drivers and quite a few cyclists as well holding on to the back of the mopeds being like driven along around central London. And the front driver was like this Brazilian dude who was like driving for Uber

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> and he had like a fucking like six by four red flag out of his delivery box and he was just like kicking the bike all over the road jumping around on it from side to side, revving it at lights … it was just really fun. And on the Deliveroo strike, you were there, people just ragging it up and down the road doing burnouts and stuff … it was so playful and it is fun … the thing is I don't think it's a coincidence that it's like coming from migrant workers who don't necessarily share that much of a language because everyone can share taking the piss out of your boss … that is a common language and I think that's something that can be used a lot more than like than like getting motions passed and stuff [as in a traditional trade union].

A small group of workers approached the headquarters and demanded to speak to someone. By this point, the street was filled with green and silver uniforms, packed with mopeds. Organisers from the IWGB were handing out recruitment forms. I took a bundle of forms and held them up in the air, and workers took them, filling them out against walls or leaning against their delivery bags.

Eventually, a manager from Deliveroo came out to address the crowd. As I wrote at the time (Woodcock 2016):

> One manager, surrounded by drivers, tried to control the situation. He was met with booing and jeering, before returning to the headquarters. A small group of managers gathered by the doors, looking at the growing crowd of drivers with a blend of contempt and barely-concealed fear. Here, in this moment, the business model of black-boxed labour was seeing the exploitation and resistance rise to the surface. These drivers, upon whose labour the platform is built and run, were no longer hidden. Instead they were visible outside, organising together, and angry … The negotiations ended with Deliveroo saying that it would be impossible to increase wages. This was met with anger by the drivers who promptly voted to go and visit some of the restaurants Deliveroo works with and return to the headquarters the next day. Over the megaphone someone shouted 'it's only impossible until we win!' And with that a convoy of hundreds of mopeds set off into central London.

On this first day of the strike, which would go on to have reverberations across the platform economy, something had changed. Platform workers were visible and present. However, despite the resistance and solidarity that could be felt on that day, the strike did not end in long-term success. The new payment scheme was delayed, in part, before being brought in throughout Deliveroo in the UK. The aim of this chapter is to try and understand the connections between these moments of resistance and organising and how they might develop in the future.

Forms of Resistance

Resistance can refer to people opposing change, the refusal to accept or comply, an uprising against an oppressive force, protection against something, or relationships between material things involving friction or electrical current. These comparisons can help illustrate how resistance at work comes in a range of forms and intensities. As with electrical current, in practice we find that resistance is always present. This is the case in traditional workplaces as well as platform work. The question is not whether it exists, but how strong it is and what can amplify it.

Taking the example of food platform work, resistance of another kind is present whenever a rider begins to push the pedal. When the worker's legs engage the gears, they need to overcome the resistance of inertia, pushing metal against metal until the bicycle moves. No matter how hard the worker cycles, that mechanical resistance is still present. Parts can be cared for and lubricated, but the friction still grinds them down over time. This can be compared to how workers resist in the labour process. There is an external force that pushes people into work: workers have no other way to get by under capitalism than through work. This might be less obvious than the foot pushing down on the pedal, but anyone who has struggled to find work or feared unemployment has felt this force weighing down upon them. Worker resistance is then present from the moment the labour process begins. The interests of the worker diverge from capital – whether that is embodied in a physical manager or instructions from an algorithm. Platforms only want to pay the worker for the time that is profitable, while expecting workers to take on the costs of the work and the waiting time. Resistance is generated when workers are directed to try harder, cycle faster, drive further, accept a new lower rate of pay, pretend to like a customer, or whatever it might be. The labour process involves the gears of capital grinding against the worker, compelling them to move into activity. At points this process can reach high speeds and work smoothly, while at others it can be felt keenly or even bring the whole process to a halt.

The history of work is full of ways in which capital has sought to lubricate the labour process, attempting to overcome resistance – or at least finding the path of least resistance. However, like mechanical maintenance, these can only ever be attempts. They do not solve the underlying contradiction between capital and labour. As Braverman remarked:

> the hostility of workers to the degenerated forms of work which are forced upon them continues as a subterranean stream that makes its way to the surface when employment conditions permit, or when the capitalist drive for a greater intensity of labor oversteps the bounds of physical and mental capacity. (1998, 104)

Workers, unlike gears, have agency in the labour process. Gears do not come together at work to discuss friction, complain after a shift, and so on. Workers do.

In the previous chapters, we discussed how this 'subterranean stream' of resistance is fed by many tributaries across different kinds of platform work. Despite most platforms relying on the appearance of self-employment, there is still a clear contradiction between the interests of workers and platforms. Rather than resistance in platform work being rcent and unexpected, it has clearly been happening since the first workers signed up to platforms. Here, we can think of resistance in broad terms as 'any individual or small-group act intended to mitigate claims by management on workers or to advance workers' claims against management' (Hodson 1995, 80). This frame is useful, as often the idea of resistance evokes placards, chanting, and picket lines. While the strike (as collective refusal to work until demands are met) remains a vital tool for workers' struggle, this broader definition draws attention to the day-to-day conflicts that proliferate across work.

Using this lens to think about resistance means we can look beyond the obvious examples of action such as strikes – although as the previous chapters have shown, these happen too in platform work. As Richard Hyman argues – building on Goodrich's (1975) work – there is an 'invisible frontier of control' at work, 'a frontier which is defined and redefined in a continuous process of pressure and counter-pressure' (1975, 26). This moving boundary is the balance of power between workers and capital, pushed one way or another at different points. This is a process that is constantly underway, as capital attempts to respond to workers by changing the technical composition of work.

Worker resistance can therefore involve the 'withdrawal of cooperation' (Edwards and Scullion 1982, 154), or more general forms of 'misbehaviour' involving 'anything you do at work you are not supposed to do' (Ackroyd and Thompson 1992, 2), or it may take more militant forms such as 'sabotage' (Jermier 1988). As van den Broek and Dundon argue, a range of 'work behaviours – such as incivility, sabotage, culture, humour, leadership or harassment … for many workers who lack formal collective organisation … may represent the most available forms of resistance and as such should be analysed as acts of resistance in their own right' (2012, 99). These forms of misbehaviour often provide a coping strategy at work to survive the grind of capital's gears discussed above. The conversion of this into forms of individual and collective resistance – as well as developing into organising – moves in fits and starts. However, successful forms of organising emerge from these building blocks in the labour process.

Solidarity and Organising

If these acts of resistance – found across all platforms to a greater or lesser degree – show that there is conflict in platform work, the main question is how and why these can develop into more sustained organising. Of particular

interest here is the emergence of solidarity and collective forms of organising in platform work. Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020) provide a useful model of solidarity with food platform workers. The model starts with the 'sources of antagonism in the labour process', including issues relating to low pay and unilateral changes; insecurity regarding both earnings and working hours, as well as lack of safety nets and health and safety protection; and managerial control, with a lack of clarity on how data is used for performance management and allocation of work, as well as unilateral deactivation – the firing of workers. These lead into 'factors shaping expressions of solidarity', including the 'common facilitating factors' of shared spaces (in-person and online), 'nurturing social relations', the collective identity of workers, and connections developed through shared action; the 'common obstacles' of high turnover of platform workers and differences within the workforce, and the ways that managers respond; as well as 'contextual enabling factors', including trade unions or social movements. Finally, Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020) argue that these lead into 'possible forms of expression of solidarity', which include 'day-to-day mutual support' which involves helping each other, sharing resources, and making complaints to platforms; 'low-risk participation in collective action', mainly involving refusing to work (with a lower risk than in other forms of work given the contracts), sharing publicity, or engaging in what they refer to as 'online "shitstorms"', attempting to damage the platform brand for example; and 'visible forms of collective action', including strikes and picketing, demonstrations, and legal action Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020, 49). All of these can be witnessed, to a great or lesser degree, across platform work.

The emergence of wider solidarity is also an effect of increasing numbers of workers with a similar technical composition. There are, of course, differences between the experiences of delivering food, transporting passengers, cleaning houses, or working online, but there remain important similarities across platform work. The clearest example of this is the lack of human supervision or management. Unlike many workplaces, there is no one checking up on workers in person. While this checking up is often seen as a means for disciplining and performance management, it also plays an important role in communication in the workplace. It gives the opportunity for workers to raise small grievances or problems or get advice and feedback on the labour process. As noted before, this provides management with an interface to deal with minor problems – whether actually addressing them or just appearing to.

The lack of this management layer means that across platforms there is a lack of communication during the work. The refusal of platforms to provide effective training or support – which stems from the fear of looking like an employer – means that workers must resolve many issues themselves. In response, workers seek each other out to share information and discuss the work. Transport work also involves downtime between jobs in which workers gather in shared spaces. Even if this does not mean face-to-face discussion, Cant and Mogno note that 'workers also spend a lot of time watching their phones whilst they

wait, particularly if they and themselves on their own' (2020, 403). This development of solidarity from the labour process is confirmed by Maffie:

> qualitative data suggested the following pattern: while many gig workers may work alone and enjoy the entrepreneurialism of this industry, when a conflict with a customer occurs, they are often unaware of their responsibilities or how to handle the situation. Without coworkers or a union to ask for support, workers turn to their most immediate community: an online network like Facebook. Once part of this group, however, many find that they share grievances with other drivers and enjoy the comradery and support of their digital colleagues. (2020, 133)

There are also shared cultures – whether of migrant workers or subcultures of couriers – that facilitate the building of these networks. Within some migrant groups, platform work has become popular, with newer migrants being introduced to the work when they arrive in a country. The recruitment practices of some platforms also involve sign-on bonuses, encouraging workers to recruit their friends. Platforms attempt to mobilise existing networks of workers, so when workers are signed up to the platform they may already be part of discussions about their work with others.

The widespread use of digital communication methods, whether WhatsApp, Facebook, or otherwise, can be found across all platform work. This stems from the technical composition of the work, as most platforms deliberately do not include means for workers to discuss with each other. These networks are also built from and overlap with existing networks, drawing attention to the previous and shifting social composition of platform workers. These networks and digital spaces play an important role in building collective identities (Wood et al. 2018b). For example, Maffie has demonstrated that 'frequent social interaction in digital spaces was associated with more positive views on unions and an improved interest in joining a labor association' (2020, 141). These existing networks can therefore be understood as the building blocks from which more formal organisations can be developed. It also highlights how these workers are not unorganised merely because they are not members of a formal organisation. Instead, forms of what Cant (2019, 130) has called 'invisible organisation' at Deliveroo are widespread.

The formation of platform worker identities has also been driven by companies such as Uber. While it has not pushed an image of an organised collective worker through its publicity, it has sought to develop an image of the 'driver', 'partner' or 'driver-partner'. For example, the Uber website explains:

> Earn any time, anywhere: You can drive and make as much as you want. And, the more you drive, the more you could make. Plus, your fares get automatically deposited weekly.

> Set your own schedule: Only drive when it works for you. There's no office and no boss. That means you'll always start and stop on your time – because with Uber, you're in charge.
>
> Signing up is easy: Sign up to gain access to the app. After your account activation is complete, you can start getting connected with customers.[7]

Another page puts it slightly differently:

> Set your own schedule: You're in charge. You can drive with the Uber app day or night. Fit driving around your life, not the other way around.
>
> Make money on your terms: The more you drive, the more money you can make. When demand is higher than normal, you can make even more.
>
> Let the app lead the way: Just tap and go. You get turn-by-turn directions, suggestions to help you make more money, and 24/7 support.[8]

There is a common theme in this framing of Uber drivers: you will be your own boss, have flexibility and control, make money, and so on. The top of the webpage even proclaims: 'Opportunity is everywhere.' This pitches Uber as something far from work. Of course, much of this is down to avoiding and evading employment regulation, but it also creates an expectation of this work that is far beyond the reality that many drivers find in practice. As has been discussed previously, the draw of so-called flexibility is an important reason why many people start working on platforms. However, after workers start, they find that Uber's claims (and indeed those of other platforms) ring increasingly hollow. You might be free to work whenever you want, but taking on the risk and costs often requires working at peak times to make enough money for it to be worthwhile.

The attempt to forge an alternative self-employment identity for drivers has provided a common reference point for many Uber workers, regardless of location or country. Instead of a huge number of individual entrepreneurs plying their trade through platforms, each with their own messaging and branding, people enter into platform work through this Uber identity. Across a wide range of interviews in different countries, drivers explained that they 'worked for Uber' or that they were an 'Uber driver', rather than claiming that they had their own business. The reality for drivers in India, South Africa, the UK, the US, and elsewhere is that workers rely on a particular platform. Many workers use a combination of two, perhaps including Lyft in the US, Ola in India, or Bolt in South Africa. However, the ubiquitous branding of Uber has become a stand-in for platform work in many cases. When using other platforms there might be differences in how the work is conducted – for example, Bolt accepts cash trips in South Africa, with all the additional risks that this involves – but

on the whole the experience of working via a smartphone app remains relatively constant.

This lays the basis for solidarity beyond the immediate connections that workers make through the labour process. The model outlined by Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020) provides a framework to explore how moments of resistance that emerge from the contradictions of the platform labour process are shaped by the availability of communication and common relationships to develop into forms of collective solidarity. These can be expressed in ways that are easy to observe from outside, such as strikes and protests, as well as the more granular activities that workers engage in day-to-day to get by as platform workers. This also provides a much more solid basis from which we can think about what organising at work means. Too often, organising is seen as something that can be inferred from institutional markers, for example by asking whether there is a recognised trade union, a collective agreement, how many members there are, and so on. However, this provides only a surface reading, which can miss the realities of what is happening at work – and sometimes can reflect the results of previous waves of struggle and even mask a lack of current organising.

With some forms of platform work there have not been open struggles like those discussed so far in this book. As noted earlier, these have been conspicuously absent from cleaning and domestic work platforms. In part, this mirrors the low level of open struggle in the non-platformised sectors that these platforms are seeking to 'disrupt'. Using Tassinari and Maccarone's (2020) notion of 'factors shaping expressions of solidarity', we can see that there are particular challenges in this sector when compared with transport platforms, for example. There are far fewer opportunities for workers to come into contact with each other in the course of the work, since there are neither meeting places nor regular encounters on the road. The 'contextual enabling factors' of either trade unions or social movements are much less common too. However, care needs to be taken not to read 'unorganisable' features into these sectors, as academics and trade unionists previously did with both transport platform and online workers. Instead, more attention needs to be paid to the emerging class composition of the different groups of platforms workers. As Gigi Roggero has noted in another context: 'our challenge is to begin once again from the blockages experienced by the struggles of the precarious … to use *operaismo*'s classic terms, the political composition of the class is crushed within the sociological mold of its technical composition' (2011, 23).

There is nothing automatic about the leap from technical and social composition to new forms of political composition. While resistance can be found throughout platform work, the emergence of collective solidarity and forms of organising is uneven across different sectors. This is where more attention is needed – not because it is academically interesting (although to some it will be), but because it is politically useful. These 'blockages', as Roggero calls them, are the result of the counter-offensive of capital against workers. They are designed

to prevent the leap into organising, but they do not solve the contradictions of the workplace or eliminate resistance. If we imagine resistance as Braverman's (1998) 'subterranean stream', these blockages may be focused in one part of an underground system. As water has carved through these systems, so too can new routes be made. However, this does not happen in a short space of time. While these blockages might frustrate the leap into political recomposition, they cannot hold back workers indefinitely. The process shifts and diverts energies, often hidden and sometimes in sight, and can re-emerge at other points and times.

Domestic work might seem to be the example that disproves the widespread recomposition of platform workers. However, there are differences between these kinds of platform work, and workers will find different ways to struggle. Rather than focusing on the lack of struggle here, what is surprising is the speed with which workers have recomposed in platform work more widely. Previously, when new technical compositions of work have been introduced, there have been long periods in which workers have experimented with and found new ways to successfully convert resistance into sustained and successful organising. For example, the introduction of factories involved long periods during which workers searched for tactics and strategies to fight within the new technical composition. With platform work this has not taken generations of struggle, but rather a new and complex political recomposition has emerged in a matter of years.[9] There is still plenty of time for blockages to be swept away by other platform workers.

Building Worker Power

The technical and social composition of transport platform work has created conditions in which wildcat strike action has become a widespread tactic. It might appear that there is something very different happening with this kind of work than either domestic or online work. However, this line of thinking can collapse some of the challenges that transport workers face in building power and taking effective action. For example, strike action in workplaces with a fixed location allows for picket lines. This provides a space in which strikers can try to convince other workers to join the action (with varying levels of intensity). Some forms of platform work do not have these spaces – or in the case of restaurants for food delivery or parking lots for transportation, they may be spread out across the city. Highlighting this problem, Magesan (2019) argues that during a strike 'you could make a lot more money than you normally would by being the only Uber driver in Los Angeles with her app on'. This goes beyond the 'free rider' (Olson 1971) problem that workers might choose not to engage in collective action, as they would enjoy the benefits either way. Given the use of dynamic pricing, workers who do not participate stand to make even more money than usual by scabbing on a strike. In this light, the

strikes of platform workers that have taken place look even more impressive. However, there remains an important question regarding how these strikes and other forms of collective action can successfully build power and win demands.

As I have written about elsewhere (Woodcock 2020b), inspiration can be taken from other kinds of work that have not been reorganised on to platforms. In 2019 I travelled to Athens with Callum Cant. As part of our trip, we spent International Workers Day with the Driver Workers' Informal Assembly (SVEOD). They had recently held a 24-hour strike of delivery drivers (ANA 2019). However, this work differed from Deliveroo or other food platforms as it remained organised on a restaurant basis. Spread across the entire city are restaurants that hire a small number of delivery workers. Unlike Deliveroo, there was no antagonism with a single platform that organised and distributed the work. This case therefore provides an important example of how workers' power can be built, despite the challenges and potential blockages of the technical composition.

At first glance, this appears a difficult kind of work to organise in. Organising could easily become individualised around particular restaurants, fighting to change things in one workplace at a time. Despite the clear antagonism that many workers had with restaurants, they also sought to find a single point around which to focus the action. There were two demands made as part of the strike: the first was that the state should reclassify the profession of delivery driving as hazardous. This would mean that these workers would be entitled to higher rates of pay, improved conditions, and additional changes such as a lowering of the official retirement age. Reflecting the danger of motorbike delivery in a built-up city such as Athens, they also demanded that protective equipment, as well as the motorbike itself, should be provided by the employing restaurant. These demands provided a focus for the action, on a city and nationwide level. Victories on this level could then be fed back into local organising, ensuring that restaurants provided the motorbikes, equipment, and improved pay and conditions. The drivers also produced propaganda directed at customers. As well as publicising their demands during the strike, they produced a poster with a simple recipe for an evening meal. The tongue-in-cheek message was that while they were striking over their conditions, safety, and pay, customers could make do without souvlaki for one night.

The process of getting to this national strike involved long-term, committed organising. We met some of the SVEOD organisers in their office in Athens. The small office was filled to brim with leaflets, posters, placards, motorcycle helmets, as well as a political library. Over many cups of coffee and cigarettes we exchanged experiences of organising with delivery drivers in London and Athens. The conversation ranged from the minutiae of organising to politics – and quite a lot in between. Like the couriers in London, there was clearly a shared culture around delivery work in Athens, mixed with radical Greek politics. What became clear was that SVEOD was much closer to

an anarcho-syndicalist organisation than a mainstream union. Their radical politics was reflected across the office, as well as in how they organised. To demonstrate this, one of the organisers suggested that we take a ride through the city. On a few evenings a week, a group of organisers would ride around Athens, stopping at restaurants to speak with other drivers. This was a key part of their organising strategy. Given spare helmets, Callum and I were invited to ride pillion.

Setting off in convoy, we rode quickly from restaurant to restaurant. At red traffic lights, an organiser would hop off the back of one of the motorbikes, quickly stapling posters to lamp posts. Outside restaurants, the organisers would get into discussions with drivers. These were a mix of case work – going over issues at work and responses – as well as arguing about politics. In Athens, there is a long and somewhat complex history of political organising (Kretsos 2011), specifically in relation to anarchism within delivery work. Through this process, we saw how these networks were made and remade during the convoys. Tools such as WhatsApp played less of a role, but these detailed in-person discussions could go much further than instant messaging. Every two weeks workers would meet at the office to discuss organising, strategies, demands, and politics late into the evening.

These workers face clear challenges. They have small workplaces spread across the city, different employers and conditions, and so on. However, the long history of political organising has provided methods and tactics to overcome this. SVEOD has no paid staff and little infrastructure beyond the office. However, through politically driven organising methods, they have found ways to develop workers' power in their industry. The rides around the city and the collective discussions are a form of workers' inquiry in practice: discovering shared conditions, exploring them, and moving into action. Here we can see how previous waves of struggle feed into new compositions. In Athens, the technical and social composition of this work shape, and are indeed then shaped by, the political composition of these workers. It also shows how the leaps from technical and social composition are neither automatic nor mechanistic.

In the case of platform work, there is an ongoing question about how emerging political compositions can be translated into worker power. The point here is that across the waves of strikes and protests, demands have often pointed to the lack of communication or negotiation with the platform. As noted before, many platforms will not enter into any kind of official negotiation, fearing that this will indicate an employment relationship. Therefore, many strikes have not ended in successful negotiation, or changes have been attributed to something else.

To address this, it is worth first – and only briefly – narrowing the horizon to only examine workers' bargaining power. In academia, this is a dominant way of thinking about workers' power that misses much of the potential of new forms of class composition. However, it does point to some important features of platform work. Starting with Erik Olin Wright's (2000, 962) formulation of

'associational' and 'structural power' (inspired by Perrone's [1983; 1984] work on positional power), Beverly Silver argues that:

> A useful starting point for differentiating types of workers' bargaining power is Erik Olin Wright's … distinction between associational and structural power. Associational power consists of 'the various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organization of workers' (most importantly, trade unions and political parties). Structural power, in, contrast, consists of the power that accrues to workers 'simply from their location … in the economic system'. Wright further divides 'structural' power into two subtypes. The first subtype of structural power (which we shall call marketplace bargaining power) is the power that 'results directly from tight labor markets'. The second subtype of structural power (which we shall call workplace bargaining power) is the power that results 'from the strategic location of a particular group of workers within a key industrial sector'. (2003, 13)

There are instances of associational power being developed through coalitions of platform workers with other worker organisations and political parties. For example, across food delivery and private hire transport platform work, there has been engagement with mainstream and alternative trade unions, as well as some engagement in public discourse and political parties. This has fed into legal struggles around classification or other forms of regulation, but is removed from the direct conflict between workers and platforms.

In terms of positional power (to use Perrone's definition), this is more complicated. Perrone's argument is that 'a measure of the "disruptive potential" of workers … is derived from their varying positions within the system of economic dependencies' (1984, 413–414). This is not the same as identifying strike statistics, but is rather a matter of trying to understand the potential power of workers within the economic system. Platforms are, by their nature, closely interconnected with other parts of the economy. For example, food delivery platforms involve buying food from restaurants and reselling it to customers (while the platform would prefer to disappear into the background, this is, in effect, what is happening), private hire keeps urban transportation moving, and online workers keep the internet working behind the scenes. However, there is clearly less potential for economic disruption than with a strike that stops food manufacturing and logistics, or shuts down public transportation or power networks.

The development of the framework of structural power is part of a project to understand working-class 'bargaining power'. As Cant has noted, this is a narrow trade union conception of power that differs significantly from class composition.[10] However, trade union bargaining – despite missing most of the potential of new class compositions – is one form of power that can provide some insights into organising against platforms. Structural power is that which

develops from workers' (and their workplace's) position within larger divisions of labour. Structural power therefore involves disrupting the process of production. Cant proposes that this idea of structural power can be developed by making two distinctions: first, 'internal power', the ability to disrupt the workers' own workplace; and second, 'external power', the capacity to disrupt production beyond the workplace. While these may go together, they do not have to. Cant applies this to food delivery platforms by arguing that food delivery workers have a high level of internal structural workplace power. If they do not make deliveries, the food cannot be transported to customers, preventing the realisation of value from the commodity. However, beyond the platform and local restaurants, there is a low level of power. As the Greek delivery drivers joked, customers can make their own dinner. This can be compared with other kinds of transport workers, such as port workers who have very high levels of both kinds of power, with a strong knock-on effect on other workplaces that rely upon deliveries arriving from their workplace. Cant argues that Perrone's analysis shows us how we can measure external power on a more macro level by looking at the inputs and outputs of commodities from one workplace or sector. However, to understand internal workplace power, we need a much more detailed examination of the labour process and the technical composition of work.

This internal power is something that has been discussed in detail throughout this book. There are examples in which a lack of external power can prove challenging for workers seeking to organise. Silver (2003, 13) also discusses structural power in terms of 'marketplace bargaining power'. This refers to three different aspects that can shape workers' power: whether the workers' skill is in high or low demand within a labour market, the rate of unemployment and therefore the reserve army of labour available, and whether workers can reproduce themselves through other means than work. The risk is that an analysis could read off from these factors stacked against workers to conclude that they have little chance of building power. This has been the case in many areas of precarious work. So, the argument goes: if the work is 'low skilled' and there are many people looking for work, workers are easily replaceable. However, while this might involve starting with lower power at the bargaining table, this does not mean workers cannot build power. The waves of struggles of migrant cleaners in London (Woodcock 2014b) have shown how workers can find other sources of workplace power, collectively forcing changes in their work.

Wright's (1984) development of Perrone's ideas of positional power involved combining this with what he called 'organisational power'. This is the way in which positional power is organised by workers as leverage to win demands. It is useful, in this context, to think about 'organisational' power in its original form, particularly in light of the Greek delivery drivers' example discussed above. This issue of other kinds of power is captured in the broad notion of 'associational power'. Again, as Cant notes, this is often collapsed into discussions of trade unions, political parties, and movements. Class composition

attempts to connect these to the workplace, understanding the relationship between work and struggle, and providing a way to read leaps from the technical and social to the political. This is not a question of whether workers are able to get a better bargain for selling their labour power, but of understanding the struggle of workers against capital.

Making Sense of Platform Struggles

If we focus on bargaining power, we risk missing the processes unfolding in platform work. While platform worker struggles have shown incredible ingenuity, creativity, and passion, few have won sustained demands. There have been flashes of power, caught in a moment of political recomposition. As a Deliveroo worker explained to me:

> The problem is how do you translate that into, that just resistance into, into like productive resistance, because I do think that like the resistance that's happened so far has been effective and people are aware of it, Deliveroo drivers are well aware of the strike that happened and what can be done and I know that's what IWGB are trying to capture that momentum and turn it into like workers' rights and that's difficult. But I still think that like there is more that can be done to rock the boat and get people on board with it.

These examples of wildcat action are becoming increasingly widespread. For example, Joyce et al. surveyed 300 examples of platform worker protest since 2015, finding that 'the main cause globally for labour protest is pay, with considerable geographical variation when it comes to other causes for dispute' (2020, 3). Clearly, low or falling pay is a key platform worker grievance. We could, using Kelly's (1998) formulation, see these wildcat strikes as mobilisations against injustice. However, there is a risk of narrowing the understanding to see these strikes as specific responses, losing the details of the labour process. Maurizio Atzeni argues that the conflictual nature of work provides the context from which struggles emerge. As Atzeni points out, 'the contradictions produced by the capitalist labour process, often in combination with a favourable political and cultural climate, create the room for moments of collectivisation, largely based on solidarity' (2009, 13).

Solidarity provides an important backdrop to platform workers' struggles. However, when taking in the scope of different forms of platform work discussed in this book, there are significant internal differences. As Nick Clare has argued, 'class analysis must also consider relationships within and not just between classes, as these influence political (in)activity of the working classes … class composition analysis is particularly attuned to this internal heterogeneity' (2020, 5). That heterogeneity is abundant in and across different kinds of

platform work. As Marx and Engels (1848) noted when discussing the workers' struggles of their time:

> Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers. This union is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralise the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes. But every class struggle is a political struggle. And that union, to attain which the burghers of the Middle Ages, with their miserable highways, required centuries, the modern proletarian, thanks to railways, achieve in a few years.

Therefore, while the platform worker struggles discussed here have not always resulted in a better bargaining position or institutional settlement, they represent an important unfolding of a historical process. The technical composition of platform work has created conditions that (like the railways before) facilitate the circulation of workers' struggles at a greater pace and intensity. This means that struggles ripple outwards from one platform or location, but also forge new shared subjectivities against platform capitalism. As noted earlier, this has happened much faster with platform work than other forms of paradigmatic work such as that in the factory. As Maffie has argued, 'the same technology responsible for the emergence of platforms appears to be connecting workers in new ways as well, and in doing so, may change the way workers view the role of unions in emerging types of work' (2020, 142).

In this light, as Callum Cant and I have argued (Cant and Woodcock 2019), there are three questions opening up for platform workers' struggles. The first involves workers starting to form new connections from their own workplace to the rest of the industry, both along the supply chain and with the platform itself. As has been highlighted in previous chapters, platform workers are connected with both consumers of their services and other workers, such as those in restaurants. In London, one example involved Uber Eats drivers coming into contact with McDonald's workers who organised a strike in 2018, but there are other points at which workers come into contact with each other. There has been a rise of tech worker organising over the past few years. For example, Tech Workers Coalition (TWC) has shown how an increasing number of these workers are becoming aware of the impact of their work. While this has particularly focused on the relationship with the military and police, there is the potential for connections to other workers too (Woodcock 2019b). There is an emerging dynamic of tech workers in Silicon Valley supporting the organising efforts of service workers (Prado 2018), and these connections can be developed with platform workers. This highlights how tech work influences the work

and conditions of other workers along the supply chain, with the potential to build solidarity. While platforms like the idea of outsourcing all of the work, there often remain teams of in-house software developers who are needed to keep the platform operating.

The second question relates to the forms of organisation that are beginning to emerge. Across the platform economy there are a variety of different organisational forms developing for platform workers. These include informal networks, more formalised worker networks, new trade unions, or branches of existing ones. Many platform workers' struggles have been led by what Alquati called a kind of 'organized spontaneity'. In practice, there has been a split between these less formal or alternative forms of worker organisation and the entry of platform workers into mainstream trade unions. As Roggero argues, Alquati's formulation is a rejection of an understanding that there is a:

> division between the cult of spontaneity and the fetish of organization, or saw them as operating within a dialectic following stages of development: first there is spontaneity, then there is organization. Alquati definitively broke with this dialectic and proposed an apparent oxymoron: at Fiat there was no external organization that produced conflict, but neither was it simply spontaneity that created it. A sort of 'invisible organization' had been created through which the workers communicated, prepared struggles, scheduled their attacks and blocked the factory. It was this invisible organization that posed itself as the avant-garde of the recompositional process, while the party militants were left behind, following hesitantly and in fact often acting as an obstacle. (2020, 8)

The 'invisible organization' of platform workers is therefore key to understanding this new moment of political composition. These networks are expressing themselves in different forms. As Cant and I argued (Cant and Woodcock 2019):

> At present, the new and alternative unions are proving successful, but lack the capacities and resources of the mainstream trade unions. Which of these forms of organising becomes dominant is part of the moment of political recomposition – each of which has challenges and opportunities. For example, greater resources from mainstream trade unions could intensify the struggles as well as share experiences within the wider labour movement, but also brings the risks of bureaucratisation and lack of democracy.

The third question is one that relates to the new political composition of platform workers. New class compositions cannot exist in isolation from the wider working class and capital. While new forms of resistance and struggle are emerging, with international connections to other platform workers

and new possibilities for organising across the supply chain, there is also the potential for reshaping working-class struggles more widely. Many of the issues that platform workers face beyond the work itself – including access to housing, racism and oppression, thr relationship to the state, and so on – bring platform workers into contact with other groups of workers with a shared social composition. This remains an open question, but one with exciting possibilities for how struggles against platform capitalism can encourage and nourish other working-class struggles. It is therefore fitting to end this chapter with the same conclusion that Cant and I have made previously (Cant and Woodcock 2019). While there may be many questions:

> One thing is clear for now: we need to stop talking about resistance as emerging in platform work!
>
> Resistance is clearly already happening, from Deliveroo riders in London, Uber drivers in Bangalore, to Meituan workers in Guangzhou. A working class recomposition is rapidly under way. The key question now is understanding what forms of struggle can be successful beyond the short term and how these can be generalised more widely by the working class, both logging off platforms and breaking away from capitalism more broadly.