

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Theorising labour unrest and trade unionism in the platform economy

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Abstract

The article develops a novel conceptualisation of labour unrest and trade unionism in the platform economy, extending current understandings in two ways. First, we situate platform work historically, in the *longue durée* of paid work under capitalism. Secondly, we introduce a consideration of social structure into debates on union practices often framed in terms of agency. Building on Silver and the Webbs, we highlight the importance in platform work of associational power over structural power; legal enactment over collective bargaining; and geographical over workplace unionism. While mainly a theoretical article, we draw on empirical evidence from research into platform work over five years, comprising interviews, case study, observation and documentary analysis. We conclude that platform labour unrest and unionism bear marked similarities with 19th century forms rather than the 20th century models that often dominate industrial relations perspectives. Consequently, unions organising platform workers should consider adapting their approach accordingly.

KEYWORDS

industrial relations theory, labour unrest, platform economy, platform work, trade unions

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INTRODUCTION

Labour unrest in platform work has attracted increased attention. Most analyses have focused on empirically documenting worker responses to actions by platforms. Such research reveals examples of labour unrest across the globe, including actions such as strikes, demonstrations, legal action and emergent forms of digital resistance. A key point of focus has been to develop an understanding of the specific nature of platform work in different types of market, including remote forms of platform work such as clickworking or microtasking; remote freelancing and project work; and locally based, ‘geographically tethered’ (Woodcock & Graham, 2019) work such as ride-hailing and food delivery. Evidence to date suggests that labour unrest is more prominent in local forms of platform work (Trappmann et al., 2020), but novel forms of resistance have also been documented in remote forms (Woodcock, 2021). Despite these empirical efforts, accounts remain theoretically underdeveloped. Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021, p. 1370), for example, suggest that labour unrest in platform work poses a ‘theoretical puzzle’ due to the absence of an employment relationship. This article aims to address this puzzle, arguing that platform work is similar to many other labour–capital relations and that industrial relations theory can, therefore, offer valuable insights into its key features, including patterns of labour unrest and union responses. In doing so, we develop a new conceptual framework that aids understanding in these areas.

To date, considerations of platform labour unrest have tended to focus on two key conceptual issues. The first focuses on the novelty of platforms as a form of work organisation and work relations. Authors have noted the ‘triangular’ relations of platform–worker–client in platform work, which are seen as distinct from the traditional binary employer–employee relation (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021). The second focuses on the capacities of trade unions to mobilise, organise and represent platform workers. Here, particular emphasis has been placed on trying to explain observed differences in union approaches to platform work (Bertolini & Dukes, 2021; Cini et al., 2021). The main concerns of the article are, therefore, to understand how platform labour unrest should be located historically and the role that trade unions can play in supporting the interests of platform workers. In relation to the latter, the article offers two contributions. First, in recognition that much platform labour unrest is not unionised, we seek to develop a theoretical account that can bridge across both union and nonunion forms. Second, we aim to move beyond agential forms of understanding—notably, union identity and strategy—to bring in a consideration of social structure to explanations of labour unrest and trade unionism in platform work.

To develop our argument, we draw from two well-known sources: Beverly Silver (2003) and Sidney and Beatrice Webb (1897). We combine elements from each to develop a novel framework that understands labour unrest and trade unionism in relation to evolving management methods. We argue that platform work gives rise to distinctive patterns of worker opposition, which tend to generate characteristic patterns of resistance and organisation, and, in turn, of union responses. We thus develop a theoretical understanding of broad characteristics and similarities found in labour unrest across platform work, rather than the more usual emphasis on variation. We conclude that platform worker trade unionism bears marked similarities with 19th-century trade unionism. Here, we echo the conclusion of Milkman (2020, p. 140) for the United States, that union repertoires shaped in the pre-New Deal era can be better suited to 21st-century conditions of ‘fragmented industries and increasingly unstable workplaces’. Such conclusions carry implications for union practice, suggesting that organising approaches aimed at (re)building strong workplace-based

organisation—often based on 20th-century models of factory unions—are less likely to be successful in platform work. Rather, unions are more likely to succeed in organising platform workers where they adopt strategies that incorporate the older approaches we explore below.

The article begins with a critical review of recent literature. We then set out our novel conceptual framework. After a brief methodological discussion, we further develop our framework by drawing on empirical evidence from our own research. Finally, we draw conclusions and outline directions for further research, and briefly consider implications for trade union practice.

PLATFORM WORK AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

Empirical research has established key features of labour unrest and trade unionism in platform work. Workers have taken action over pay, working conditions, unfair algorithmic management practices, health and safety issues and employment status (Trappmann et al., 2020). Protests combine familiar tactics such as strikes and demonstrations with newer methods such as ‘critical mass’ ride-outs, coordinated log-offs, shrewd social media and legal action (see Drahokoupil & Vandaele, 2021; Haidar & Keune, 2021). Worker organisation tends to emerge at the town or city level (Chinguno, 2019; Cini & Goldmann, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). Action is often organised informally in public spaces or online (Cant, 2020; Maffie, 2020). Most platform worker unrest does not involve unions—especially in the global South—although unions feature in around one-third of protests (Bessa et al., 2022). While traditional unions are not entirely absent (Bessa et al., 2022), platform work has seen a significant growth of radical, grassroots unions (Woodcock & Graham, 2020). Overall, recent literature documents the energy, resourcefulness and ‘organisational creativity’ (Vandaele, 2021) of platform workers.

Theoretical development, by comparison, has been slower. As noted above, some commentators see labour unrest in platform work as ‘a theoretical puzzle’ (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021, p. 1370). For these accounts, platforms are a ‘distinctively new form of economic activity’ (Vallas & Schor, 2020, p. 11) or ‘new economic relationship’ (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2019, p. 3), because they lack a traditional employment relationship. Accordingly, Wood and Lehdonvirta (2019) conclude that platform work—especially its more freelance varieties—is outside the reach of established industrial relations theory, which is ‘overly focused on the employment relationship’. However, this is to conflate employment as a social relationship and a legal relation. For much of the classic period of industrial relations in the global North, legal and social employment relations largely (although not entirely) coincided, which left a lasting mark on the literature. Nevertheless, most industrial relations scholars saw the field much more broadly.

Classically, industrial relations was the study of ‘job regulation’ (Bain & Clegg, 1974, p. 95; Flanders, 1965, p. 86)—where ‘regulation’ means the rules governing work and work relations, both formal and informal. Marxists such as Hyman (1975, p. 12) expanded definitions yet further to include ‘processes of control over work relations’. Edwards (1986) incorporated insights from Marxism in his field-defining notion of ‘structural antagonism’, centred on ‘the basic split between capital and labour’ (Edwards, 1986, p. 55): ‘there is a structured antagonism in all work organisations in which workers’ ability to work is deployed in the creation of a surplus that goes to another group’ (Edwards, 1986, p. 5). It is not difficult to see such a relationship in platform work (Joyce, 2020), and Edwards and Hodder (2022, p. 235, no. 13) recently noted that ‘the concept of structured antagonism is still relevant’ in platform work.

Labour unrest in platform work is much less puzzling when it is recognised that the labour–capital relation forces workers to hand over a significant part of their earnings to a capitalist corporation that controls their access to work, and which sets sometimes unfair conditions on that access. Marxist-influenced approaches thus find no mystery in the spread of labour unrest among platform workers (Cant, 2020; Cini & Goldmann, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Woodcock, 2021). For such scholars, not only can industrial relations theory account for platform worker unrest, it also predicts it.

Attempts to explain variation in worker and trade union responses to platform work often distinguish between two types of union. Terminology varies, but researchers commonly contrast ‘traditional’ (Bertolini & Dukes, 2021), ‘longstanding’ (Cini et al., 2021), or ‘mainstream’ (Joyce & Stuart, 2021) unions, with ‘alternative’ (Bertolini & Dukes, 2021), ‘rank-and-file’ (Cini et al., 2021) or ‘grassroots’ (Joyce & Stuart, 2021) unions. Indeed, the emergence of new grassroots unions is a striking feature of platform work. Elsewhere, these have been termed ‘indie unions’ (Woodcock, 2021) or even ‘alt-unions’ (Vandaele, 2021), although it should be noted that ‘alt-labour’ in the US context carries a somewhat different meaning, linked to phenomena such as worker centres rather than more traditional labour unions. Hereinafter, we refer to *mainstream* and *grassroots* unions. For some, grassroots unions offer hope for union renewal after decades of decline (e.g., Woodcock, 2021). Nevertheless, mainstream unions have also had success in organising platform workers; for instance, in parts of northern Europe, where they have incorporated methods associated with grassroots unions alongside more conventional methods (Joyce & Stuart, 2021).

Some researchers have outlined more theoretical accounts, using concepts such as strategy and union identity to account for different approaches to platform work. While the relationship between union identity and strategy, and the actions of unions in practice, is complex and mediated rather than deterministic, the introduction of strategy and identity offers ways to link debates around platform work with established frameworks for understanding variation between unions. Concepts of union strategy and identity have been used widely to examine changing union practices in a variety of settings, including other areas of precarious employment (Martinez Lucio & Perrett, 2009; Però, 2020), and historical and transnational variation in union characteristics (Hodder & Edwards, 2015; Hyman, 2001). Thus, for platform work, Bertolini and Dukes (2021, p. 662) compare ‘the partly different strategies adopted by traditional and alternative unions’, based in part on the Webb & Webb (1897) model of three union methods: mutual insurance, collective bargaining and legal enactment. Focussing on the United Kingdom, Bertolini and Dukes find that traditional unions have been slow to adapt to the emergence of platform work. Both traditional and alternative unions have found it difficult to establish collective bargaining agreements with platforms. Alternative unions have, however, been more willing to pursue campaigns of legal action. Bertolini and Dukes also emphasise the heightened importance of legal issues in platform worker organising. Meanwhile, Cini et al. (2021) develop a theoretically informed account based on union identity to explain differences in the organising methods adopted by food delivery platform workers in Britain and Italy. Building on Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020), Cini et al. (2021, p. 2) emphasise ‘agential and contextual factors’, including ‘the political tradition of militant organising ... within which gig workers are embedded’ (Cini et al., 2021, p. 3). Here, agential differences are seen as closely linked to contextual factors, including union capabilities and institutional settings at national and local levels. This account is thus compatible with more general accounts, such as Wright et al. (2019), which see evolving union responses to non-standard forms of work in terms of ‘institutional experimentation’.

However, given the global nature of platform worker unrest, it is important to have understandings that go beyond national—or even subnational—institutional settings. Furthermore, while recent accounts examine *variation* in platform worker unrest, there is a pressing need to establish its *commonalities*; the broad characteristics shared across cases, which can be expected to be useful for trade unions and policy-makers. Moreover, debates around union identity and strategy centre on aspects of *agency*, even where these are linked to institutional settings. By contrast, we wish to introduce a consideration of social *structure* into the understanding of platform labour unrest and trade unionism, to help develop a fuller theoretical account. In doing so, we return to a tradition of industrial relations analysis that sought to understand differences in trade unions in terms of the types of workers that were organised; the classic analysis being Turner (1962). While we do not aim to reproduce Turner's analysis, the advantage of such an approach is that it can bridge across both union and nonunion settings, telling us something about patterns of labour unrest beyond union strategy. Nevertheless, an understanding of the principal characteristics of labour unrest in platform work would, we think, be useful to unions in developing appropriate organising strategies—on the assumption that a fit between union strategy and structural tendencies would be more likely to generate success.

Therefore, we broaden the scope of discussion in two directions. First, we extend analysis historically, situating platform labour unrest and unionism within the *longue durée* of paid work under capitalist relations of production. Second, we examine how characteristics of platform work as a mode of labour management shape the ways that worker organisation and contestation develop. To do this, we integrate insights from Silver's (2003) *Forces of Labour* and Sidney and Beatrice Webb's (1897) *Industrial Democracy*.

PLATFORM INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

To set platform work within the *longue durée* of paid work in capitalism, we adopt the 'leading industry' framework of Silver (2003), which captures the historical development of work organisation and labour management, and corresponding patterns of labour unrest. These industries are leading in a dual sense. First, they pioneered methods of work organisation and management that were subsequently applied in other sectors. Thus, Silver identifies the textile industry, which pioneered factory labour management, as the leading industry of the 19th century, and the auto industry, which developed methods such as the moving assembly line and lean production, as the leading industry of the 20th century.

Second, leading industries give rise to characteristic forms of labour unrest. Silver (2003) analyses the disruptive capacity of workers in terms of associational power and structural power. Associational power is based on workers' efforts of collective organisation and action. Structural power, by contrast, does not depend solely on workers' organisation. Silver identifies two forms. *Market bargaining power* derives from workers' position in the labour market, such as possession of scarce skills or labour shortages, which unions may leverage. *Workplace bargaining power* arises when workers are 'enmeshed in tightly integrated production processes' (Silver, 2003, p. 13), such as auto-workers on assembly lines. Historically, textile workers lacked significant structural power in either the workplace or the labour market; they relied on associational power and, although often militant, found it difficult to make gains in direct confrontation with employers. By contrast, auto-workers have considerable structural workplace bargaining power, with union organisation based on workplace strength. Silver thus

links patterns of investment and evolving management methods to show how labour unrest varies over the *longue durée*.

Silver's framework has been widely cited in research on union renewal—in platform work and elsewhere—giving rise to ‘power resources analysis’ (PRA) and a proliferation of different types of workers’ power (Schmalz et al., 2018). However, PRA has been criticised for its formalistic conception of power resources and a problematic rational choice model of how these are deployed (Gallas, 2016; Nowak, 2018). Applications of PRA to platform work often focus on structural power. Vandaele (2018) argues that food delivery platform workers have structural power because these platforms operate a ‘just-in-time’ (JIT) system. Woodcock (2021) argues that transport and delivery platform workers have ‘internal’ structural power to disrupt the operation of a platform, but little ‘external’ power to impact other companies. However, these approaches mistake the general capacity of all workers to disrupt production with the more specific, *enhanced* power of Silver's auto-workers. Significantly, as Fox-Hodess (2022) notes, structural power is a poor predictor of outcomes since the struggles of workers with apparently very similar structural power can have very different results. Overall, the preoccupation of PRA with new forms of structural power has led to the neglect of associational power; something we return to below. We, therefore, retain Silver's original version, in which associational and structural power offer broad characterisations of historical trends rather than prescriptions for union policy.

The other source for our theorisation is Sidney and Beatrice Webb's (1897) *Industrial Democracy*. In an analysis described by Bertolini and Dukes (2021, p. 662) as ‘seminal’, the Webbs identify three ‘Methods of Trade Unionism’: ‘mutual insurance’; ‘legal enactment’; and ‘collective bargaining’ (1897). In practice, unions tend to use a mix of these methods, but some are characteristic of particular unions and historical periods. Mutual insurance was prevalent in early craft unions, where skilled and relatively well-paid workers could afford large membership contributions to provide benefits in times of financial distress. As the organisational base of unions shifted towards poorer workers, however, mutual insurance became less feasible (Reid, 2004) and unions adopted different methods. The 20th century saw the prominence of collective bargaining, which effectively became the *sine qua non* of postwar industrial relations.

Despite the passage of time since Webbs's pioneering study, its analysis remains relevant. Indeed, the large-scale return of insecure employment and emergence of new forms of trade unionism arguably render it more relevant today than for long periods of the 20th century. Two methods of trade unionism identified by the Webbs—collective bargaining and legal enactment—continue to be key resources of contemporary trade unions across many sectors of employment. However, the resurgence of insecure work has taught industrial relations scholars an important lesson about the need to historicise industrial relations concepts. Notably, it has been recognised that ‘standard’ employment was historically far more limited than previously assumed (Van der Linden, 2008). In the same way, collective bargaining and legal enactment must be reconsidered in a historical context. Although the term collective bargaining was coined by Beatrice Webb, the long postwar boom saw its rise as a central concept—perhaps *the* central concept—of industrial relations scholarship. At the same time, legal enactment was reduced to a minor subsidiary role (for instance, Flanders, 1954). Yet, the postwar position of collective bargaining can now be recognised as historically specific, nurtured by conditions of full employment, supported by employers as well as unions and often encouraged and protected by state policy (Howell, 2005). The erosion of established collective bargaining arrangements has seen the return to prominence of legal means of regulating employment

TABLE 1 Characteristics of leading industries

	Textile industry	Auto industry
Structure of industry	Many small firms, labour intensive, workers widely distributed	Fewer larger firms, capital intensive, large concentrations of workers
Management methods	Principal elements of factory labour management	Production line, lean production
Type of workers' power	Associational power	Workplace structural power
Typical methods of trade unionism	Legal enactment	Collective bargaining
Union organisation	Geographically based	Workplace based

relations—the well-documented ‘juridification’ (Heery, 2010). Indeed, the ebb and flow of collective bargaining and legal enactment during the 19th century is documented in the Webbs’s analysis. While we cannot expect contemporary conditions simply to repeat previous patterns, the greater mistake would be to assume this process has ended. Thus, on both historical and theoretical grounds, a return to the Webbs’s understanding of methods of trade unionism is justified.

The argument of this article is that the Webbs’s methods of trade unionism can be mapped onto Silver’s leading industries to yield a more developed framework for understanding variation in labour unrest and trade unionism. As Table 1 shows, this recombination produces a framework incorporating five dimensions for comparing leading industries: structure of the industry; management methods; type of workers’ power; typical methods of trade unionism; and form of union organisation. These dimensions capture important differences between the textile and auto industries beyond the original conceptualisations of either Silver or the Webbs. Thus, the chief method of auto industry trade unionism has been collective bargaining, based on strong workplace organisation. Auto-workers also epitomise the long-term shift from geographical to workplace-based union organisation. During the 20th century, many unions—especially in countries with more voluntarist traditions—eschewed legal methods in favour of collective bargaining (Ackers, 2007). Legal enactment was often seen as a ‘cut price’ form of resistance compared with collective action such as strikes (Gall & Cohen, 2013). Historically, however, textile workers were more likely to rely on legal enactment. In 19th-century Britain, union demands for legal reform—notably including textile unions—were integrated into mass campaigns and mobilisation (Ward, 1962). For geographically dispersed workers with little structural power, the benefits of legal enactment are especially clear (Reid, 2004). The resurgence of legal activism in platform worker unionism allows us to revisit this historically important method of trade unionism.

The remainder of the article seeks to apply this framework to platform work. First, as is well established, the structure of capital investment means that platforms typically operate with a dispersed workforce and no fixed workplace. Second, platforms are developing distinctive methods for managing labour, including algorithmic allocation and monitoring of work; integration of customer ratings into performance management; self-employed or independent contractor status; legal and regulatory arbitrage; requirement for workers to use branded uniforms and equipment; setting of prices for services provided; and the extraction of commission on each transaction (Moore & Joyce, 2020). Platforms may not use all these

methods, but together they comprise a recognisable portfolio from which individual platforms combine elements according to their business model. Furthermore, these methods are already spreading beyond platform work into more standard forms of work (Woodcock, 2021). In terms of labour management, then, platform work is consistent with Silver's conception of a leading industry. As we show below—after an outline of the research design and methodology—platform worker unrest and unionism also take characteristic forms.

METHODS

The conceptual framework summarised in Table 1 identifies five dimensions for comparing platform work and previous 'leading industry' models. In the discussion thus far, we have noted the main characteristics of platform work as a system for organising work and managing labour: namely, the structure of firms—and consequently, of employment—and management methods. Now, we turn our attention to primary evidence concerning the three remaining dimensions: types of power; methods of trade unionism; and forms of union organisation. To do this, we draw on evidence from 5 years of research utilising a mix of data collection methods at two levels.

Our main source of empirical evidence is a case study of grassroots union organisation of platformised couriers and delivery workers—the Couriers and Logistics Branch (CLB) of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB)—which enabled us to trace the development of platform worker union organisation from 2017 to 2021. The CLB was established in 2015, as a union branch 'run for couriers and by couriers' (Independent Workers Union of Great Britain, 2022), seeking to build a network of couriers throughout the UK campaigning for better conditions, pay rises and worker status for couriers, as well as providing legal support for members. We conducted semistructured interviews with nine CLB members and officers between 2017 and 2020. Alongside this, there was, and continues to be, ongoing dialogue with key individuals in the CLB and wider IWGB, adding a longitudinal dimension. Given the small size of the union, to maintain assurances of anonymity provided to participants we provide only basic descriptions of the sample in Supporting Information: Appendix. All interviewees were workers in the industry. Interviewees were recruited via email and WhatsApp messages circulated by IWGB officers and snowballing and received small payments to make up for lost earnings. The sample of interviewees and other participants is inevitably small, given the nature and size of the union. Nevertheless, the case study produced a considerable depth of evidence, and the analysis of transcripts revealed saturation on key issues.

Second, our case study is contextualised by evidence from a study of social protections in platform work conducted in 2017. Semistructured qualitative interviews ($N = 43$) were conducted with stakeholders across seven European countries—Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom—thus, including 'old' and 'new' Member States, one country in the process of exiting the European Union (EU), and a representation of Northern, Southern and Central/Eastern Europe. Interviewees were selected purposively within each country, grouped into eight main types: government officials/policy makers, unions, nonunion worker representatives, employer representatives, professional associations, platform company representatives, experts/researchers and lobby groups (for details see Supporting Information: Appendix). The interviews were structured to provide insight into the nature of platform work, regulation and protection; the role of organised labour and

unions; grievances; resistance and disputes; and the bases (legal, institutional, sectoral, informal) for labour conflict and worker organisation.

Evidence from the EU study offers wide insight and generalisation, especially into mainstream union methods and union organisation. One notable aspect is that it gives insight into an emergent challenge for mainstream unions at a time when they were, and to some extent still are, grappling with the challenges of platform work. In discussions in and around this study, the role of the IWGB was often held up as an exemplar of a new and novel type of unionism that may be applicable to the platform sector. Indeed, there is wide recognition, in the research literature and beyond, of the IWGB case in this regard. Consequently, the CLB was an ideal case for us to look at in more detail.

The third component of the research comprised gathering and analysing data from online news media reports of CLB activities. From the GDELT database¹ of broadcast, print and web news, we identified 564 reports mentioning the IWGB between January 2015 and March 2020. Visual screening removed coverage of other IWGB branches and duplicate reports, and we selected for reports of union actions and direct quotes from IWGB members or representatives, to give a final sample of 75 reports. Of these, 43 concerned legal cases over issues such as employment status and collective bargaining rights, and 32 concerned strikes, demonstrations and other forms of collective action. This evidence enabled us to further contextualise and triangulate evidence from other sources.

Finally, a fourth, longitudinal layer entailed attendance and observation at platform worker union events, meetings, and presentations from 2017 to the present, including mainstream unions as well as CLB and other grassroots union activists. This important but often overlooked element of research strengthened the contextualisation and triangulation of evidence from other sources through long-term familiarisation with the platform activist milieu. We were able to trace ongoing debates, campaigns and organising efforts over a period of some 5 years—mainly in Britain but also elsewhere in Europe, the United States and to a lesser extent in parts of the global South—giving us a view of CLB actions and initiatives over time and in a wider platform activist context.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min. Interviews not conducted in English were transcribed and translated before analysis. Data from interviews and from online news reports were analysed thematically. Themes were identified using a combination of ‘foreshadowed problems’ (Malinowski, cited in Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) and standard scrutiny techniques to identify ‘indigenous typologies or categories’, ‘similarities and differences’ and ‘linguistic connectors’ (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

With this combination of research methods, we were able to utilise a range of data sources, thereby avoiding problems from overreliance on any source in isolation. The case study gave us good depth on key issues in the research, while the online stage enabled us to contextualise and triangulate evidence from interviews. Evidence from the European stage permitted the identification of emergent issues and allowed further contextualisation. Empirical findings were strongly contextualised by an in-depth exploration of relevant historical and theoretical literature.

FINDINGS

In this section, we set out our empirical findings. First, we present evidence concerning forms of union organisation. Since our findings on this issue largely coincide with previous research, the discussion here is less extensive. The remainder of this section addresses the two remaining

parts of our model: types of power and methods of trade unionism. These aspects are treated at greater length.

Union organisation

Our findings concerning patterns of union organisation in platform work are consistent with previous research that documents platform-worker union organisation as geographically based—usually, at the town or city level—rather than workplace based (for instance, Cant, 2020; Chinguno, 2019; Cini & Goldmann, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). This is not surprising, given the tendency for many locally based workers to work on several platforms. In our CLB case study, workers from several platforms coordinated activity in particular localities. Interviewees usually talked in terms of platform worker organisation in their town, rather than at their firm or workplace—as would be expected in more mainstream union settings. This pattern of local union organisation was also apparent in evidence from news media, which included numerous reports of CLB actions taking place in town-centre locations, involving protests aimed at platforms or regulatory authorities, or at a particular restaurant or restaurant chain, but involving workers from several platforms. Out of 32 reports of CLB collective actions, 15 mention participation by workers from other platforms, other unions or wider supporters, including, for instance, one report describing ‘many Deliveroo workers turning out to support striking UberEats drivers’.

By contrast, mainstream unions tended to maintain a more conventional, workplace-based approach, and consequently found it much more difficult to orientate towards platform workers. Difficulties included the obvious lack of a traditional workplace and legal frameworks that specified recognition procedures at the workplace (or enterprise) level. As one mainstream union respondent told us:

we still need time to clarify our policy [about platform workers] ... Because to date, we organise workers at company level. We meet the people in the company... .
(Bulgaria, TU 1)

Unions adopting a conventional, workplace-first approach thus experienced greater difficulties in organising platform workers, compared with their grassroots union counterparts.

An interesting variation in our findings came from CLB members at a specialist medical courier company, *The Doctors' Laboratory* (TDL). As discussed below, these workers successfully used legal enactment to achieve ‘worker’ status (the third, intermediate classification in UK employment law), which resulted in increased employment security and a partial evolution towards more company-based industrial relations. Although it is not possible to foresee how these arrangements might develop, this case suggests a more general linking of insecure work—including platform work—and geographically based union organisation.

Types of power

As expected, we found little evidence of platform worker structural power in either the labour market or the workplace. Even skilled freelance workers emphasised how their labour market

position was undermined by platforms enabling global competition between workers. Some respondents in our CLB case study told us that more experienced riders could gain access to marginally more stable and better-paid work, but others reported declining skill levels across the sector as a result of platformisation. Platform workers also lacked workplace structural power. While collective action was able to disrupt platform operations, workers were not able to shut down platforms. This is not to say that workers were powerless, but there was no evidence of the kind of amplification effect captured by Silver's notion of structural power in relation to auto-workers.

Consequently, platform worker resistance relied on associational power. The CLB case study enabled us to investigate in detail the 2015–2016 pay campaign of London bicycle couriers, which featured riders working for several companies in the city—that is, organised geographically rather than on a company or site basis—and which resulted in remarkable rises of 20%–30%. The IWGB already organised precarious workers, such as outsourced cleaning and security staff at London university, when a group of couriers joined and began the campaign for a pay rise. Activists adopted a strategy of targeting one company at a time, starting with CitySprint, the largest courier firm in London. When letters to the company were ignored, workers from across the sector organised protests outside CitySprint's office, which saw managers lock themselves in—to the amusement of riders—and attracted sympathetic media coverage. Further protests included 'critical mass' ride-outs, where groups of couriers cycled slowly around London, visiting the offices of CitySprint customers, with demonstrations and photoshoots outside each. Nevertheless, the CLB approach was not simply a media-based campaign of reputational damage. Indeed, our analysis of news media shows that this campaign received relatively little coverage: our search of online news sources found no reports of the pay protests. Here, publicity supported a campaign of direct action rather than substituting for it.

Subsequent tactics became more disruptive. Activists organised flashmob protests in the lobbies of major CitySprint clients, including Google, a law firm and a TV company. At these events, 30–50 people would 'go in with our drums and trumpets and cause a scene' (UK TU3). The intention was to put pressure on CitySprint through customer complaints. Again, protests involved couriers from several companies, not only CitySprint. After 9 months of campaigning, CitySprint offered to increase basic pay by £0.50 per delivery and to amend other pay practices. Overall, pay increased by £10–20 per day: a very significant rise.

Following this success, CLB couriers targeted other companies in turn, using similar tactics. After 3 months, the second company offered a pay increase of more than 20%, followed by the third. Two more companies made similar offers to preempt union action. After some 18 months of campaigning, cycle couriers across London gained pay rises of 20%–30%. Consequently, many couriers opted to work fewer hours per week due to the physically exhausting nature of the work. Reduced working hours also meant that activists could spend more time on union activities, which allowed the union to refocus organising around Deliveroo. One respondent described lessons of the campaign:

You actually have to take the company by the scruff of its neck and hang it over a cliff and shake the money out of it. Because they're not going to ... give us a pay rise because they like us or care about us. They're only going to do it if they're going to lose money over the long run. (UK, TU 3)

The success of this campaign, conducted by workers with very little structural bargaining power, demonstrates the considerable potential of associational power: the ‘organisational creativity’ that Vandaele (2021) highlights.

Evidence from CLB respondents gives insight into how their associational power was developed. In part, it was built on pre-existing collectivities. Respondents described a culture of solidarity among cycle couriers reminiscent of Webb & Webb’s (1897) ‘mutual insurance’, although far less formalised due to the low wages prevalent in the industry (cf. Reid, 2004). One respondent had previously run a support scheme—funded by rider contributions—which made small payments to riders injured at work, who received no sick pay due to their self-employed status. Numerous respondents were active in social media groups linking delivery riders from different platforms in their home city. A respondent in Bristol described informal gatherings of platform riders at a cycle café, which migrated online after the café closed. A respondent in Edinburgh was active in an online group of some 280 riders. We also found evidence from online media of platform workers organising in online groups: one report cited a delivery rider organiser saying, ‘Everything is done in WhatsApp groups’. Taken together, these findings are consistent with previous research noting the prevalence of informal groups—online and off—among platform workers, for exchanging information and advice about the job. For CLB respondents, these groups also offered opportunities to frame grievances. The IWGB built on this tradition of informal self-organisation, using online discussion groups within the CLB and across the wider union. In 2019 (prepandemic), the CLB adopted online branch meetings, which increased opportunities for participation for geographically scattered workers. The capacity of the IWGB to graft union organisation onto pre-existing patterns of collectivism was a feature of their approach that provided numerous opportunities to develop solidaristic links, thereby further strengthening associational power.

The IWGB also fostered associational ties across different groups of workers. One courier provided detail about the pay campaign flashmobs:

we were joined by all these, you know, Latino cleaners ... from the University, who were [laughs] really, really militant ... making loads of noise ... they were a really big help to us. (CLB 2)

This solidarity was returned, with couriers attending protests of IWGB Uber drivers, as well as London University cleaners and security staff. The focus of these organising tactics did not centre on efforts to identify and leverage structural power, but rather on a strategy of an imaginative building of associational power through linking workers across companies and across sectors.

Methods of trade unionism

As noted, the Webbs outlined three methods of trade unionism: mutual insurance, legal enactment and collective bargaining. Recent literature suggests that platform work has seen legal enactment gain in importance, alongside a relative deprioritisation of established forms of collective bargaining (Vicente, 2019). Our evidence supports this proposition, but adds greater depth concerning divergent approaches of mainstream and grassroots unions (cf. Bertolini & Dukes, 2021).

Evidence from our European research indicated that mainstream unions tended to frame platform worker organisation in terms of institutionalised collective bargaining processes, with little attempt to devise alternative approaches more suited to the context of platform work. In 2017, respondents from mainstream unions in Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom couched their approaches in terms of the application of established collective bargaining methods to platform work. For instance, a Polish trade unionist explained:

We always focus on collective labour law and collective bargaining ... The collective agreements and possibility of covering self-employed could constitute a space for the discussion about their rights. (Poland, TU 3)

However, none of these respondents could offer examples of actual collective agreements being reached. Subsequently, a small number of agreements have been signed, in Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom. However, these agreements are often problematic, omitting important issues or not covering all workers, or leaving employment status unchanged (Ilsøe, 2020; Rolf et al., 2022). Unions also face challenges in sustaining these agreements in the face of competition law (Joyce & Stuart, 2021). Mainstream union respondents often understood the difficulties. Many cited restrictions on collective bargaining for self-employed workers:

[The] challenge is that most crowd workers are self-employed. Up to now only employees were considered by law as vulnerable who would need [union] protection. (Germany, TU 3)

While some respondents favoured lobbying the government to change the law, the general approach was that organising activity could only take place where legal frameworks permitted. In addition, several respondents from mainstream unions cited a lack of knowledge about platform workers as a barrier to organising. One told us:

regarding the organising of people, that too is quite difficult because, to a great degree, it is not known who they are ... there is no way to find them so we can organise them. (Bulgaria TU 1)

In short, then, the method of collective bargaining—at least, in the institutionalised forms typical of mainstream European unions—was not only poorly suited to platform work settings; it was an actual barrier to organising those workers. This evidence may go some way to explaining the absence of mainstream unions from the platform sector noted by other research. Moreover, difficulties continue: to date, mainstream unions have made more progress where platform workers have employee status and can more easily be fitted into established collective bargaining arrangements (Joyce & Stuart, 2021).

By contrast, the method of legal enactment figured strongly in our findings. The IWGB has been active in pursuing legal action over misclassification, and CLB members had been involved in these cases. A court ruling in 2017 found that CitySprint couriers were workers (the UK's third employment status, between employee and self-employed), but the company subsequently changed parts of their contracts to try and get around the ruling and launched a series of appeals. The union lost a case against Deliveroo over collective bargaining rights, but was also appealing. Couriers at TDL successfully achieved a change of status following legal

action, with most classed as workers and some as employees. The scale of legal activism by the IWGB is further indicated by evidence from online media: of our sample of 75 articles, well over half ($n = 43$) concerned legal challenges mounted by the union.

For CLB respondents, though, legal action was integrated into organising activity rather than substituting for it. All CLB respondents reported that legal action was a topic of discussion among union members, and between members and nonmembers. Court hearings were seen in collective terms, with individual participation seen as standing up for the wider group. Successful claims for worker status could trigger substantial claims for backdated payments, such as holiday pay. Again, CLB activists saw these in collective terms, as part of wider organising efforts. One described a campaign at a food delivery platform:

[We ran] a big recruitment drive ... on a backdated holiday [pay] claim, as a way of taking the company to court to try and force worker status. But it also means you start to get a shitload of members who are going to be members long-term, because these things always taking a year, 18 months ... And then once you've got that kind of capacity of members ... it starts organically growing into this nice little movement. But with low-paid workers, you kind of really need this carrot. Otherwise, the first sign of, you know, the landlord knocking on their door or anything like that, the first thing to go is going to be a union membership. So, it's been quite useful. (CLB 4)

Thus, CLB activists had an understanding that legal action was not only a matter of individual justice but it was also an important component of collective organising among low-paid and insecure workers.

As discussed above, unions have strategic choices, which means that the approach of mainstream and grassroots unions are not determined only by institutional constraints or union identity, and consequently may overlap. Thus, we found evidence that one mainstream UK union had adopted elements of a more direct organising approach. Respondents described platform work just as vividly as respondents from grassroots unions. One explained how a climate of fear inside platformised logistics companies meant that workers usually only approached the union when they were already planning to quit. Another explained that this union saw platform work 'in terms of precarious work' (UK, TU 1), linking it with wider union efforts to organise such workers. While lacking the militant activism of the IWGB, this evidence suggests that mainstream unions can develop a greater understanding of platform workers' situations and needs through direct contact and organising efforts.

Conversely, CLB organisers did not eschew methods of collective bargaining, especially where legal campaigns had won worker status and greater security for workers. At TDL, CLB organised a 2-day strike in 2019 that won increased pay and changes to the pay structure. Although the strike followed the UK legal framework and complex balloting regulations, interviewees were keen to point out that this was still an IWGB strike bearing the hallmark of grassroots activism. For instance, out of the 80 union members on strike, some 65 attended the picket line. On the second day of the strike:

we did like a ride around. So, we got all the motorcyclists [couriers] to bring a second helmet and we took the protest to all their [TDL's] high-paying clients ... going up and down Harley Street, these massive red flares going off ... and a megaphone ... beeping the horns and everything, and really embarrassed the

company, and then headed back for more kind of strike action outside the office, before having a big lunch and all heading off home ... It was quality. (CLB 4)

This respondent also emphasised the combination of methods used by the IWGB:

it's like a triple attack ... we've got this great legal department ... We also have fantastic media links as well ... and ... more traditional boots-on-the-ground organising ... So, it's these three things mixed together, but we found it being really effective. (CLB 4)

As a result:

It's an exciting thing to be part of ... We're making waves in an industry that they thought was, you know, un-unionisable ... We're making it a job that people don't just think is a temporary job. It's a job that people can actually think about having families. (CLB 4)

Overall, our evidence suggests a complex interweaving of collective bargaining and legal enactment, influenced partly by unions' strategic orientations, but also by the nature of the platform workforce. Mainstream unions tended to view platform work through a standardised institutional collective bargaining lens, which was a poor fit with prevailing conditions. By contrast, grassroots unions oriented towards platform workers by direct engagement, utilising direct action alongside legal enactment and combining methods in a bottom-up, activism-based approach. Where mainstream unions oriented more consistently towards platform work, their methods shifted towards those adopted by grassroots unions, including a relative prioritisation of legal enactment. This suggests an evolving situation where grassroots unions pioneer methods suited to organising platform workers, and mainstream unions face strategic choices over the extent to which they are willing to adopt (or adapt) those methods. Nevertheless, the methods of grassroots unions reflect the specific nature and situation of platform workers, rather than deriving simply from union choices. That is, underlying structural realities mean that some strategic choices are more likely to succeed than others.

DISCUSSION: PLATFORM WORKER UNIONISM IN THE *LONGUE DURÉE*

We can now expand our framework of leading industries to include labour unrest and trade unionism in platform work, as summarised in Table 2. First, there was little evidence in our research that platform workers have significant structural power. Rather, our evidence shows activists building associational power among platform workers, and between platform workers and other workers—usually insecure—sometimes based on pre-existing solidarities. For these workers, associational power was key to their union strength. Our research, therefore, offers a corrective to current preoccupations with structural power, emphasising the crucial importance of associational power for understanding labour unrest and trade unionism in platform work.

Second, in terms of methods of trade unionism, we found a clear commitment to legal enactment among the more successful platform worker unions. Respondents from CLB were often militant in their pursuit of legal challenges to platform companies and saw legal action as

TABLE 2 Labour unrest in platform work

Structure of industry	Dispersed and varied <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - venture capital funding models - widely dispersed workforce
Management methods	Platform management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - portfolio of methods (Moore & Joyce, 2020)
Type of power (Silver)	Associational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - no evidence of strong structural (market or workplace) bargaining power - successful organising highly dependent on active collectivism
Methods of trade unionism (Webbs)	Legal enactment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - militant and strategic use of legal action - widespread commitment to enforcing and increasing legal rights - campaign for legal reform integrated with mobilisation strategies - collective bargaining is rare and rudimentary - conventional approaches to collective bargaining present obstacles to organising
Union organisation	Geographical <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - not workplace-based - city-wide organisation typical

part of an overall strategy of collective action, not an alternative to it. This integration of legal enactment with collective organising was similar to the practices of the 19th-century unions (Ward, 1962; Webb & Webb, 1897), especially as it offered unions a way of uniting a scattered workforce (Reid, 2004). We also found some evidence of mainstream unions shifting towards legal enactment in relation to platform workers, though less clearly integrated into collective organising initiatives (cf. Bertolini & Dukes, 2021). Thus, while grassroots and mainstream unions have tended to adopt characteristically differing strategies, there is scope for overlap and learning.

The method of collective bargaining was also present in our evidence. However, unions that prioritised institutionalised collective bargaining—mostly mainstream unions—were significantly restricted in their capacity to organise platform workers as a result. Nevertheless, we also found evidence that basic collective bargaining could emerge where grassroots unions had first been successful in gaining employment rights for workers through legal enactment; although it remains to be seen how resilient these arrangements will prove in the longer term. Moreover, where grassroots unions did engage in collective bargaining—as at TDL—activist methods continued to feature. The campaign at CitySprint, by contrast, involved scarcely any collective bargaining in the Webbs's sense of a representative process; rather, companies simply responded to sustained pressure from workers.

Finally, our evidence clearly supported the widespread finding that platform worker unions tend to organise on a geographical basis—especially, city-wide—rather than the more familiar workplace model that tends to dominate industrial relations thinking. Again, this is more like 19th-century than 20th-century unionism.

These findings support our argument that a theoretical understanding of labour unrest and trade unionism in platform work can be constructed successfully using resources drawn from existing industrial relations theory. By recentring the labour–capital relationship, and situating platforms as a method for managing labour rather than a novel economic formation, labour unrest in platforms is rendered less of a ‘puzzle’ (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021) than some have assumed. Building on insights from classic industrial relations theory, we have demonstrated its continuing value for understanding emergent forms, including platform worker unrest and unionism. Our approach also underlines the importance of a historical perspective. Seen over the *longue durée*, platform work appears not as a radical break with other forms but as a shift on a spectrum. Finally, our findings also vindicate our argument for reintegrating a consideration of structure into the understanding of labour unrest and trade unionism. While agency-centric explanations and national–institutional accounts undoubtedly bring insights, we have identified characteristics of platform worker unrest and trade unionism that appear to be more generally applicable.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have presented a novel approach to theorising platform worker unrest and unionism, but one deeply rooted in established industrial relations scholarship. By situating platform work in the *longue durée* of capitalist labour processes, we bring to the fore its character as an evolution in the management of labour–capital relations rather than a new economic form. From this perspective, platform work can be seen as a leading industry in Silver’s dual sense of developing distinctive methods for managing labour and simultaneously generating characteristic forms of labour unrest. Consequently, labour unrest and trade unionism in platform work is rendered amenable to explanation in terms of established industrial relations theory—on condition of critical engagement with, and development of that theory—rather than requiring an entirely fresh start.

The central conclusion of this analysis is that platform worker resistance resembles 19th-century forms of trade unionism more than 20th-century forms. To date, platform worker unionism has been characterised by three key features: it relies more on associational power than structural power; it typically reprioritises legal enactment relative to collective bargaining; and it tends to be organised on a geographical rather than workplace basis. While grassroots unions—as in our CLB case study—have actively developed this combination of methods, mainstream unions have been slower to modify longstanding practices that are poorly suited to the conditions of platform work (cf. Bertolini & Dukes, 2021; Joyce & Stuart, 2021). As Milkman (2020) has suggested for the United States, unions that have adapted best to contemporary precarious employment commonly use methods with roots in the deep history of 19th- and early 20th-century labour. More generally, we would argue, the development of viable 21st-century models of trade unionism is likely to depend—at least in part—on the extent to which unions can (re)incorporate methods drawn from older traditions alongside newly innovated practices to meet new, yet historically familiar conditions. It remains to be seen how far and how fast such methods will spread within the wider union movement.

Finally, the novel framework we have outlined offers the potential for developing further research. There is a continuing need for a better understanding of associational power, how worker organisations use it and how it might be developed. Similarly, there is a need for greater understanding of legal enactment as a method for building collective organisation and action. To the extent that platform-based methods of labour management spread beyond the platform

industry, we can expect characteristic forms of worker resistance to become more widespread, with the potential to develop further union organisation. Understanding that process remains a central challenge for platform work researchers.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.gdeltproject.org/>.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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