

RESEARCH

Bringing Labour Markets Back in: Inclusionary and Exclusionary Solidarities in Platform Delivery Work in Italy and Belgium

Ladin Bayurgil¹, Claudia Marà², Valeria Pulignano³

Abstract

This research showcases the ways in which the labour market informs the formation of different types of solidarities among platform workers. Building on qualitative research that focuses on the delivery sector in Italy and Belgium, we demonstrate diversity in forms of solidarities built among platform workers. While in Italy, in- and out-group boundaries, particularly those based on language and ethnicity, are successfully crossed by platform workers resulting in what we describe as inclusionary solidarities, in Belgium, they remain rigid resulting in exclusionary solidarities. Our findings demonstrate that two distinct forms of solidarity are informed by the functioning of labour markets, which shape workers' options for exit outside of the platform world and hence the degree of platform dependency. These processes contribute to the creation of variegated understandings of self and others at work and in the labour market at large that in turn inform the ways in which workers relate to one another and form solidarities.

Keywords: Platform Work, Solidarity, Labour Market, Symbolic Boundaries, Europe

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- 1 Postdoctoral Resaercher at KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45 – box 3601, 3000 Leuven, Belgium. Ladin.bayurgil@kuleuven.be
 - 2 Fellow Researcher at KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45 – box 3601, 3000 Leuven, Belgium. Claudia.mara@kuleuven.be
 - 3 Professor in Sociology at the Centre for Sociological Research (CESO) at KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45 – box 3601, 3000 Leuven, Belgium. Valeria.pulignano@kuleuven.be

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Introduction

Platform work has often been described as hindering solidarity, understood here as a shared sense of identification and belonging to an “imagined community” (Bild et al. 1997; D’Art and Turner 2002), and representing a prerequisite for collectivism and collective action (Kelly and Breinlinger 1996). For example, scholars explore the relatively high atomizing nature of platform work, where workers’ labour belongs to various employment categories that range from “independent contractor” to direct employment, which in turn create a diversity of work identities and interests (Bellini and Lucciarini 2019). Additionally, studies report that the labour process in platform work is fragmented and individualized, considering that work is usually performed in isolation and geographical dispersion, which in turn can act as a barrier to collectivism and, consequentially, to collective action (Ferrari and Graham 2021). Yet, recent studies illustrate that the potential for solidarity and collectivism in platform work exists due to the persistence of structured antagonism in the platform labour process (Wood and Lehdonvirta 2019) and that platform workers can overcome individualization and achieve solidarity, for example, when they engage in day-to-day forms of mutual actions that reconstruct feelings of reciprocity (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Marrone and Peterlongo 2020).

Despite the existence of cross-country and -sectoral analyses exploring the formation of workers’ solidarities (e.g., Cini et al. 2021; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2019; della Porta et al. 2022; Cini 2022; Johnston 2020), insufficient insights are offered on the role of contextual underpinnings, such as national labour market conditions, in fostering the creation of different forms of solidarities among platform workers. In this article, we respond to this limitation and investigate the impact that national labour market settings, which come along with opportunities or constraints for local workers, can have on the emergence of different types of solidarities. Therefore, by binding workers’ diverse claims to different institutional settings, we examine

how national labour markets inform solidaristic feelings (or lack thereof) related to perceptions of shared belonging and identification with an “imagined community” among workers. This research suggests that integrating examinations of national labour market conditions into practices of solidarity can enhance existing understandings of diversity in platform workers’ solidarity formation.

Specifically, we have found discrepancies between solidarity built across delivery platform workers in Belgium and Italy, two countries with strong traditions of collective bargaining and union activity and, yet very distinct labour markets. In Italy, wage stagnation and productivity decline are two longstanding features of the national economy (Baccaro and Pulignano 2016), coupled with a high incidence of precarious employment (Tassinari 2022), and unemployment rates higher than the EU average (Eurostat 2023). Conversely, Belgium enjoys a rather healthy and stable labour market, with wage indexation and unemployment rates that stay below the EU average (ibid). To examine how differences in the national labour market settings explain the heterogeneity in workers’ solidarities, we adopt the concepts of symbolic and social boundaries around which workers create understandings of self and others (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Molnar 2002). As we argue, these understandings of solidarities are framed through the distinctive shapes of the national labour market in which workers are positioned with certain opportunities and constraints.

In Italy, we observe what we describe as *inclusionary solidarities* among delivery platform workers that cut across existing boundaries and are representative of a wide range of workers. In Italy, the platform world is occupied by a large group of workers from all age groups and backgrounds who lack opportunities in the larger labour market, where high rates of unemployment and low wages exist. This situation has enabled solidarities to emerge around the common experiences of precarity among the reserve army of workers that allows for existing ethnic and language boundaries to be crossed. More specifically, workers’ claims are grounded in shared experiences of precarities with attention given to the representation of a diverse set of workers, particularly those with migration backgrounds, who face heightened precarity.

By contrast, in Belgium, we observe what we describe as *exclusionary solidarities* among delivery platform workers that fail to cut across existing boundaries, particularly those built around ethnicity and language. Belgium enjoys a healthy formal labour market with rather stable unemployment rates, platform work remains highly segmented, serving either as an ephemeral job for Belgian students and native citizens or as the main means of subsistence for workers with migration backgrounds whose access to jobs remains limited. Thus, sharp segmentation in the Belgian labour market hinders the opportunity of bridging the symbolic and social bound-

aries between these two distinct groups within the platform world, with limited shared experiences between the two groups deterring common claim formation and inclusive notions of solidarity.

Our findings point to boundaries being successfully crossed by platform workers in Italy while remaining rigid in Belgium, resulting in different forms of solidarity. Building on our empirical findings, this research contributes to the literature on platform solidarities in the following ways. First, it displays the interlinkages between forms of platform solidarities and labour markets by demonstrating the ways in which the national labour market context shapes the configuration of the labour force and thus informs workers' heterogeneous understandings of the self and others at work and in the labour market at large, and in return, shape solidarity formation. Second, instead of studying solidarity by solely focusing on processes of cooperation, it also showcases its antipode, exclusion, considering that solidarity depends on the distinction between "us" versus "them" and thus is a form of identification with an "imagined community" and "as such is both inclusive and exclusionary" (Morgan and Pulignano 2020:20). Lastly, it brings in the issue of migrant labour in platform work and demonstrates how intersecting subjectivities, particularly along the lines of ethnicity and language, shape workers' identities and solidarity practices, in addition to exacerbating experiences of precarity in the platform labour market.

In the following sections, we first discuss the literature on boundary formation and how it can contribute to existing understandings of solidarity formation in platform work. Then we present our findings showcasing how the national context of the labour market shapes platform workers' understandings of in-group identification and out-group differentiation which are the bases of the formation and inhibition of solidarities at work. We then conclude with what the formation of inclusive versus exclusive solidarities implies for the future of collective action.

Literature Review

Formation and Negotiation of Boundaries

The adoption of neoliberal socio-economic policies and the growth of the ideology of individualism in the late 20th century has been widely argued to result in a breakdown of collective identities and an erosion of social solidarity (Mijs et al. 2016). As a result, we have witnessed more pronounced definitions of symbolic boundaries, which can be described as conceptual distinctions made by actors to categorize objects, people, and practices (Lamont and Molnar 2002:168). Such categorization involves processes of similarity recognition and distinction building and behavioural patterns

of association of “us” versus “them”, resulting in in-group inclusion and out-group exclusion (Morgan and Pulignano 2019). Thus, boundary formation is crucial in understanding how cleavages among different social groups are formed, maintained, and translated into inequalities in the labour market, with significant repercussions, particularly for ethno-racialized groups and religious minorities. Existing literature has examined the ways in which sociopolitical changes such as shrinkages in the labour market or waves of immigration inform the formation, negotiation, and contestation of boundaries drawn along ethnic and religious “otherness” (Alba 2005; Bail 2008). In return, boundary formation constitutes and reproduces the structure of inequality itself (Sherman 2005), as symbolic boundaries are translated into and solidify social boundaries, which are “social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities” (Lamont and Molnar 2002:168).

The existing literature has looked into the boundary-defining practices of the privileged groups that have a distributive effect in determining the allocation of resources and thus maintenance of privilege (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Sherman 2018). On the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, a vast body of work has examined the ways in which low-income workers make sense of their identities and interpret and respond to their changing socio-economic structures, such as shrinkages in the labour market. Particularly, ethnographic studies have provided a rich account of how the urban working poor, who has unstable, unpredictable hours with little to no benefits, distinguish themselves from the unemployed poor (Newman 1999) or “street” poor (Anderson 1999), find dignity in their work (Lamont 2000), make sense of their opportunities for social mobility (Young 2006), and navigate their ongoing search for work (Purser 2009). Others have applied theories of symbolic boundaries to labour markets under transition and the changing world of work (Vallas 2001), as in this context, internal symbolic boundaries may become more pronounced, particularly along citizen-foreigner lines, as migrant and hence cheaper workers are perceived to be threatening and blamed for social problems, competition, and unemployment (Lamont and Duvoux 2014). Here, scholars have examined boundary formation within work organizations and the ways in which workers leverage social differentiation and distinction to tackle workplace inequality and gain control over their occupational status, working time, or tight management (Blair-Loy 2004; Nelson and Vallas 2021; Sallaz 2010; Sherman 2007; Osnowitz and Henson 2016).

Symbolic Boundaries and Solidarity in Platform Work

Examination of the configuration of symbolic boundaries is particularly relevant for discussions around belonging and solidarity at work, as boundaries drawn among actors highlight differences rather than establishing a sense of collectivity. The

existence and persistence of symbolic boundaries in the workforce can represent a serious hindrance to the formation of collective identity and solidarity at work. Especially since the industrial and occupational transformations started in the 1970s, scholars have discussed the decline of traditional forms of labour solidarity which coalesced around a shared feeling of identification and belonging to the working class (Valkenburg 1996; D'Art and Turner 2011). Changes in the labour markets, e.g. the proliferation of new labour market identities and the progressive individualization of the employment relation, have contributed to dissolving the bonding power of shared identification in an "imagined community" of workers, fostering individualistic understandings of one's working life and working conditions (Beck 1987). The fading of labour solidarity, which is foundational and integral to the formation of collective action (Beck and Brook 2020), has had implications for the retention of power by organized labour and its hallmark institutions, namely trade unions (Valkenburg and Zoll 1995).

Transformations in the world of work have recently reached a new peak with the introduction of digital platforms in labour markets. Platform workers perform work in heterogeneous sectors ranging from creative work to on-site services, under variegated employment categories extending from flexible self-employment to full-time work, and under various statuses such as platform work as complementary activity or workers' main source of income (Bellini and Lucciarini 2019). In this variegated and highly individualized platform labour market scenario, scholars have pointed to these new forms of work as representing an existential challenge to traditional forms of labour solidarity and collectivism (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). However, studies have shown that solidarity can emerge also in the adverse conditions set by digital labour platforms, with workers able to overcome geographical dispersion and the existence of diverse work identities to effectively foster solidarity (Chesta et al. 2019; Heiland and Schaupp 2021; Stewart et al. 2020). Relatedly, other scholars have investigated the nature of the labour process in platform work and claimed that structured antagonism (Wood and Lehdonvirta 2019) and the cash nexus (Joyce 2020) underlie labour-capital relations also in this innovative form of work, thereby seeding the potential for the formation of workplace solidarity and collective resistance (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020).

Across the body of work dealing with solidarity in platform work, a strand of literature focuses on workers' practices of solidarity, which emerge through workers' shared experiences, ideas, and aspirations within and via workspaces, digital or spatial, as these shared norms are channelled into common interests, grievances, and claims (Lei 2021; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Vandaele et al. 2019; Wood and Lehdonvirta 2021; Wood et al. 2021). Others, particularly cross-country analyses, sought to

explain how local dynamics can account for subnational variation and the conditions under which heterogeneity of organizational forms in solidarity emerge (Borghi et al. 2021; Cini et al. 2021; della Porta et al. 2022). Here, scholars paid attention to the social and political features outside of the workplace that shape workers' identity framing (della Porta et al. 2022) or the traditions of local political organizing (Borghi et al. 2021) from which workers derive their repertoires of action (Cini et al. 2021).

Yet, in discussions around the role of specificities of the setting in which solidarity is formed, there is yet scope to examine the national institutional context, particularly the role of the national labour market in accounting for identity and boundary formation around class, ethnicity, language, and other identity category lines on which solidarities are formed. The embeddedness of solidarity in the national labour market is rooted in the national labour market's role in shaping the composition of the workforce, in addition to determining available exit options and workers' dependency on work, all of which contribute to the formation of work identities, workers' definitions of "self" and "others", and positionality vis-à-vis others in the labour force. These structural elements of the labour market are linked to the ways in which workers make sense of themselves and coworkers, and therefore inform notions around a sense of shared belonging and criteria of solidarity. Thus, this article contributes to the existing literature by bringing labour markets back in as a factor that constructs workers' understandings of in-group identification and out-group differentiation which are the bases of the formation and inhibition of solidarities at work.

Building on the above analytical frameworks, our analysis is informed by existing understandings of solidarity in relation to the identification of self and others through symbolic boundaries, which are similarities and distinctions built around cultural traditions and practices that contribute to the construction, manifestation, negotiation, and contestation of social boundaries around which are patterns of exclusion and segregation in terms of class, gender, and ethnicity are constructed (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Lamont et al. 2015). Building such group boundaries, symbolically and socially, informs collective identity formation and social network building, which in turn, shapes mobilization methods and strategies (della Porta et al. 2022). Hence, this research examines how workers draw and overcome boundaries in everyday life and what it tells us about solidarity at work. By adopting a lens that focuses on the formation of group boundaries and the development of self-identity in relation to others, this research underlines the importance of paying attention to workers' positionality, particularly within the national labour market context, in which platform workers are embedded and hence workers' interests, claims, and collective action repertoires are structured. The merit of displaying the embeddedness of solidarity

formation in the national context is pointing to limitations and pathways toward building inclusive solidarities.

Research Methods

This research adopts a comparative study of the forms of solidarity among delivery platform workers. We identified Belgium and Italy as our case studies because these two European countries have similarities in terms of trade unionism and collective action, yet discrepancies in terms of labour market conditions, particularly salary, employment, and productivity rates on the national level. We sampled around two international platforms, Glovo in Italy and Deliveroo in Belgium, with similar scales and market trajectories, in addition to employment and salary types. In order to account for the ways in which the national labour market context informs workers' experiences, we decided to hold the platform regulatory context constant. In both countries, self-employment is the main work status for platform workers active on the two platforms selected; similarly, both Belgium and Italy offer fiscally-advantageous work regimes (respectively called Peer-to-Peer status and Casual Service contract) for platform workers earning less than around 6,000 euros annually.

Our selection of Glovo and Deliveroo workers was motivated by the fact that both platforms are one of the biggest international platforms operating in the European region at large, the most prominent players in Italy and Belgium respectively, and thus allowed us to gain a representative perspective of delivery platform work at large. While Glovo, founded in 2015 in Spain, is operational in more than 1500 cities in 25 countries offering fast delivery services and expanded into Italy by acquiring Italian food-delivery startup Foodinho (O'Hear 2016), Deliveroo, founded in 2013 in the UK, operates in 200 cities in 10 countries and entered the Belgian market in 2015 and became one of the biggest food delivery platforms operating in Belgium (Sassard 2017).

This article relies on 31 interviews, in total, with (1) experts (n=9) and (2) platform workers (n=22). First, the expert interviews were conducted with trade unionists and platform managers, four in Italy and five in Belgium, and followed the semi-structured interview format. The expert interviews allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the regulatory and employment schemes, in which platform workers operate. Second, we conducted rich and detailed interviews with platform workers, 13 Glovo workers in Italy and 9 Deliveroo workers in Belgium. Respondents were selected to ensure a sample as diverse as possible in terms of age, work status, ethnic background, and gender. The interviews followed an in-depth biographical narrative structure (Schutze 1983), where workers were initially prompted to recount

the larger history of their working lives and share their recollections of job search and work experiences. The narrative main narrative part was followed by more specific questions about the interviewees' current work experiences in the platform world and relation and communication with coworkers. The narrative interview format allowed us to gain rich insights into the interviewees' work trajectories, personal socio-economic backgrounds, and relative positions in the labour market at large. The workers' narratives of their past work experiences were then followed up by specific questions about the interviewees' work experiences in the platform world and communication and relationship with coworkers. The depth and richness of narrative interviews and the focus on one single platform per country, allowed us to reach thematic saturation with a relatively small sample, in line with methodological positions that claim the variability of saturation threshold on the basis of the methods adopted (Guest et al. 2006).

The interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021 remotely via Zoom or Skype due to the pandemic. They lasted between 90 minutes and four hours, with delivery worker participants being compensated for their time. Interviews were conducted in Dutch, French, Italian, and English by interviewers fluent in these languages and working within the scope of the European project of which this research is part. The interviews were fully transcribed and translated by professionals and the interview data were analysed and coded by the first author. Rounds of open and selective coding were reiterated for all interviews to locate and connect themes that emerged from the data, coupled with discussions between the first and second authors that took place after each round of coding to maintain reliability.

Labour Market Conditions in Italy and Belgium

Belgium and Italy have various labour market commonalities, particularly in terms of trade unionism and collective action, as both countries share high rates of union membership, a large number of employees covered by a collective agreement, and a high number of working days dedicated annually to strike action compared to other European countries (ETUI 2016, 2020). Despite convergences in terms of the trade union movement, the labour market looks drastically different in the two countries, particularly in relation to salary, employment, and productivity rates. The 2022 unemployment rate in Italy at 7.8 percent stands above the EU average of 6 percent, and Belgium stands lower at 5.5 percent (Eurostat 2023). A similar trend is present in median gross hourly earnings in Belgium with 18 euros staying well above the EU average of 13 euros, whereas in Italy slightly below with 12.6 euros (Eurostat 2021) as Italy is long characterized by labour market difficulties, such as wage and produc-

tivity decline and stagnation. Particularly, the youth unemployment rate is high in Italy at 23 percent, whereas Belgium stays at around 17 (Eurostat 2023).

Longitudinal studies on Italy have highlighted that wage divergence between white and blue-collar workers has decreased over the past three decades and with significant compression of salaries across these occupations, while compensations in managerial positions and high-level professional services have been on a sustained increase (Cetrulo et al. 2022). Wage stagnation in middle and low-class occupations is not only the result of general productivity decline but also of a progressive decentralization of bargaining structures resulting from structural reforms implemented starting in the 1990s (Fana et al. 2016). Deregulatory reforms have significantly reshaped and flexibilized the Italian labour market through the introduction of new atypical contractual arrangements, such as voucher contracts and temporary work statuses while allowing for collective agreement derogations (Barbieri and Scherer 2009). The double-dip recessions of the post-2008 and the ensuing austerity measures implemented to contain the debt crisis, have intensified an already difficult labour market scenario, where so-called “the working poor” has reached double-digits figures, spanning all demographic groups (Saraceno et al. 2020). Young people seem particularly affected by the current conjuncture, as shown by the very high levels of youth unemployment in the country and the widespread use of atypical labour contracts among this age group such as unpaid or low-paid internships, on-demand work like platform labour arrangements, and significant levels of part-time work that is often “involuntary” due to the lack of other available options such as full-time work. The attainment of a degree from a high education institutions is no guarantee for gaining a better position in the labour market; research shows that also high-skilled young workers with university-level certificates experience high degrees of precariousness in the Italian labour market (Armano and Murgia 2013; Barbieri 2011; Murgia and Poggio 2014).

In contrast, the Belgian economy fares well in the European scenario, with one of the highest productivity rates in the EU (European Commission 2022). The solid sector-level bargaining system ensures a uniform coverage of collective agreements, allowing for *meliorative* conditions to be agreed upon at local and shop-floor level while limiting the possibility to derogate from national-level arrangements (Pulignano et al. 2016). Moreover, and in comparison to other European countries, Italy among others, Belgium presents a more limited fragmentation of contractual arrangements, with standard employment still representing the norm for the majority of workers (Doerflinger et al. 2020). In terms of labour market outcomes, however, some groups fare worse than others. It is particularly the case of second-generation young workers, namely workers whose parents migrated to Belgium from other countries,

who experience significantly lower and more precarious employment than their native peers (Corluy et al. 2015; Maes et al. 2019). Recent policies have attempted to incept new and atypical work statuses in the Belgian labour market, as it has namely been the case for the so-called De Croo Law, passed in 2017. Although the norm was presented as aiming at regulating volunteer work in Belgium, *de facto* it established a new employment status – the peer-to-peer (P2P) status – that allows Belgian citizens to work on a highly discounted tax rate (10% as opposed to the general high taxation on employee work) for earnings up to around 6,000 euros per year (Pulignano and van Lancker 2021). Importantly, the P2P status was also meant for digital platform workers, provided that platforms receive accreditation by the Belgian government.

With the regulatory frameworks that have accommodated and enabled the growth of the platform sector in Italy and Belgium, the number of gig workers increased rapidly as new platforms entered the market, platforms expanded their operations, and last-mile delivery services gained popularity with the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, in Italy, the number of platform workers doubled to half a million between 2019 and 2021 (Bacchi 2022). Similarly, Deliveroo has reported that in Belgium more than 43 thousand people have applied to work as a food delivery rider in 2020 (Cardinaels 2021). This growth in operations and number of workers was also enabled through an increase in the number of workers with migration backgrounds, particularly those who lack access to the formal labour market, resulting in the emergence of a black market with workers subletting their accounts to workers with migration backgrounds (Alderman 2019). The next section discusses more in detail about the ways in which the labour market context shapes the composition of the workforce, which is increasingly migrantized, and how this segmentation contributes to the processes of identity and boundary formation among platform workers.

Labour Market Informing Formation of Solidarities

Our findings display the interlinkages between the labour market condition and the formation of different types of platform workers with variegated identities and work experiences. We showcase how these processes, in turn, inform the ways in which workers relate to one another and form bonding and solidarity. The national context of the labour market shapes the scope of workers' exit options, which are limited in Italy and ample in Belgium, particularly for native workers, in addition to the degree of workers' dependency on the platform income, which is high in Italy and low, again only for natives and less for migrants, in Belgium. As a result, in Italy, we observe collective experiences of precarity across heterogeneous platform worker groups that range from students to unemployed, migrants to bankrupt, in turn creating high degrees of inter-group solidarity, which we describe as the creation of inclusionary

solidarities. In opposition, in Belgium, we observe a highly segmented platform work field with a high turnover rate of native workers with available options outside of the platform, while workers with a migration background remain stuck to platform work due to limited opportunities. This in turn creates a more moderate form of solidarity, as limited shared experiences and inter-group communication hinder the formation of bonds, a process we describe as exclusionary solidarities. Below we explain how workers' variegated positions in the labour market inform their perceptions of self and others and hence notions around solidarity at work.

Inclusionary Solidarities in Italy

The national labour market at large defines job opportunities outside of the platform world and hence informs platform workers' exit options. In Italy, for platform workers, exit options outside of the platform world are very limited. This is embedded in the condition of the national labour market, which is troubled with high unemployment rates, particularly youth unemployment, coupled with low wages that restrain workers' opportunities outside of the platform world. For instance, Luigi, a 21-year-old university student applied for any open job position he could find in fields as diverse as elderly care, masonry, and bartending. He started working for Glovo full-time after he was rejected from every position, except for a piecework job as a street fundraiser for a major non-profit organization. However Luigi only kept the job for a few months because working conditions as a street fundraiser were "really really like slavery" and by far "worse off than us riders". This led him to turn to platform work as an option with better pay and conditions. Considering that in Italy job opportunities in the formal labour market offer payments and working conditions that are often worse off than platform jobs, workers, particularly new labour market entries with limited experiences resort to delivery work, although it does not offer a career trajectory, as described by Daniele, who is a 25-year-old Glovo rider: "it [this job] doesn't open you up to a career as a rider. I would contextualize it as a necessity, not as a career." Daniele, who was left unemployed after graduating from technical school and moving from one job to another that varied from dishwashing to photography, even relocating to Malta to expand his job opportunities, eventually resorted to working full-time for multiple delivery platforms. Similarly, Anna, a 22-year-old Italian Master's student explained how it was a necessity for her to work as a rider because her parents had multiple bank debts that led to her "forcing" herself to work for Glovo, although she "would like very much to find something else because this job is ungratifying, one hundred percent. Plus I have a degree and you know it kind of weighs on me. I'd like to do other things, but it's very difficult to find something else, especially in this historical moment." Here she is referring to the Italian labour market in a longstanding crisis that limits opportunities outside of the platform world even when for job seekers with degrees and skills.

As a result of limited exit options outside of platforms, workers' degree of dependency on platform work remains very high in Italy, exemplified by Francesco's case. Despite having a master's degree in chemical engineering, Francesco could not find a job in his field due to the even further shrinkages in the labour market during the pandemic, thus started riding full-time for Glovo. Fhrad, an Iranian migrant in Italy, was not only dependent on platforms to financially sustain himself, but also to secure a residence permit, which required a full-time, fixed-term contract, which he was not able to secure not only in the platform labour market due to uncontracted nature of platform work, but also outside of the platform market despite having multiple degrees in engineering and the experience of building and running a tech start-up. Thus, Fhrad resorted to registering for another Master's degree to secure a student visa, while continuing to ride for multiple delivery platforms to make a living. He explained how he is able to "survive little by little" with his platform income, yet lives only paycheck to paycheck: "We [migrant platform workers like him] always have to work to survive because it is not like we have a bank account full of thousand euros. So every month we always spend all the money to get to the next month with our salary. If we do not get it, we are dead." Although delivery platforms have claimed that delivery jobs are designed to top off other revenues as "a side job" for workers, who are claimed to seek flexibility, independence, and "just want to earn a little extra" (The Bulletin 2021) instead of being hired as full-time workers, existing research demonstrates that the majority of platform workers are fully or partially dependent on platform income to cover their basic needs, while a minority are supplemental earners (see Schor et al. 2020).

Dependency on platforms is not solely reserved for students, young workers, or immigrants who have difficulty penetrating into the world of the professional workforce due to shrinkages in the labour market in Italy, but also for high-skilled workers with vast experiences. For instance, Pierluigi, a 50-year-old rider for multiple delivery platforms, has been relying fully on platform income after his data entry business went bankrupt in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and he had to move back to his family home to live with his parents to be able to economically sustain himself. He underlined how the challenges he faced in his work life allowed him to be empathic towards struggling coworkers: "I always aimed at trying to obtain rights for those who don't have any." Platform workers in Italy consist of a heterogeneous group of workers, ranging from student workers to recent graduates looking for work, from migrant workers to former business owners, all of whom share the experience of dependency on platforms due to a lack of opportunities outside of the platform labour market. This variety in types of workers, yet similarity in shared experiences best explained by Dino, an Italian Glovo courier with a university degree and union activist, who underlined that "within this sector there are fathers, it's not

true that it's only students. There are the fathers, there are the unemployed, there are the precarious, so those are people that need their rights to be acknowledged and protected." He added, "even if [the job is] temporary or seasonal, there's no reason why it shouldn't be protected like any other job."

At the bottom of the heterogeneous group of workers stand those with migration backgrounds, who are disproportionately represented in the platform workforce, considering that immigrants are more likely to hold jobs with poor working conditions than native-born workers. Fhrad expressed the despair the migrant workers like him are in: "In Glovo, the migrants who do not have any money or relatives, who do not have anybody, who work in that situation, they do not say anything because they need this money, don't they?" Also, Dino explained in detail the experiences of precarity of migrant workers, shared to a certain degree by other platform workers who are also deprived of work opportunities:

The composition of workers and the organization of work changed radically. In the beginning, it was mostly students finding a way to make it to the end of the month or young people who still gravitated in the unemployment world between finishing university and starting their work career. Then there was a huge increase in the migrant component and weak subjectivities who couldn't have sustained themselves in any other way. Also so also many people who lost their job at 40 and 50 years old and many precarious workers from the culture sector. Basically, all weak subjectivities, but especially migrants.

Donato, another worker who is in his late 20s and works full time for three different delivery platforms to make ends meet despite having a law degree, described how workers from Pakistan and Bangladesh make up the majority of the fleet of Glovo, a phenomenon also described as "ethnic ghettoization" by Dino. Donato went into detail to explain how Glovo only requires a copy of an identity card while entering the platform, which in turn makes it easy for workers without documents to "cheat the platform". Here he is describing how he once saw the ID of a Glovo rider's profile, which did not match the identity of the actual rider. Yet, during our data collection, we were not able to reach any subletter or subletter riders, most probably due to the illegal nature of such work and the workers' will and the necessity for anonymity.

Despite the increase in the number of migrant workers in the platform world is a shared reality in the platform world, including Belgium and Italy, it has dramatically different repercussions for platform workers' perceptions of association and solidarity formation in Italy compared to our Belgian case. When asked about if and when workers get into contact with other workers, our informants in Italy intention-

ally brought out the case of migrant workers and the effort they put into building bridges with workers from all backgrounds, particularly migration backgrounds, considering that precarity is perceived to be a shared existence among the heterogeneous groups of workers. Daniele, 25-year-old old rider who graduated from technical school but also decided to enrol at a university with the hopes of getting a degree would help him find better jobs, explained this situation as being *all on the same boat*:

You go and recreate a brotherhood almost. In the sense that when you're in trouble and you see a rider – sometimes there are communication problems because a good part [of workers], especially with Glovo, are people who still can't speak Italian well – there's a little bit of difficulty but you make yourself understood. Even maybe in English, but you make yourself understood... So you go to face other people, asking other riders, so you help each other. I had it happen to me once, I was in [city centre] doing nothing, I had a powerbank and this guy comes up to me and goes "Oh I have to make a delivery, I need it because my cell phone is running low, if it runs low clearly I don't know where I have to go" I said, "here, take it, you're welcome." And then we exchanged our numbers and he eventually said "I'll give it back to you." Very often this kind of stuff happens. Anyway, we help each other because we are all in the same boat in the end [emphasis added].

Daniele offers a detailed explanation of how shared experiences at work and in the labour market at large allow workers to build a wide and inclusive in-groupness, which facilitates communicating and bonding with one other. "Being in the same boat", which here signifies the feeling of togetherness and belonging to the same "imagined community" that comes from shared experiences of precarity and being stuck to platform work due to limited options in the labour market, is a common attitude we have observed among platform workers in Italy. Anna, a young rider who is continuing her master's degree, described her communication with other workers as "very nice" and "super", in addition to bringing the subject to lending a hand to particularly to migrant workers, to which she almost always has to speak in English because "the majority of people are migrants, Africans, [from] southern Asia, India":

A beautiful relationship stems from the fact that obviously we're all aware of what we're doing, and how everything works, so we try to help each other often. The majority of people aren't Italian so there's an issue with the language, the issue of understanding each other, so we help each other. Many times people have come up to me so that I could explain to them the road, to explain Google Maps, to explain all these things, so we, there's a lot of cohesion.

When asked about relationship and communication with coworkers, similar experiences were shared by Tina, a 47-year-old woman, who went into detail to explain how she cherishes her friendship with migrant workers, who make up the majority of platform workers: “Ah, look I’ll tell you the truth the most beautiful friendships I’ve made are all with foreigners, y’know my colleagues are all ‘my blackies’, I always say this. Oh and the Pakistani.” Despite Tina’s demeaning language, she continued to talk about the camaraderie built between workers and reflect the feeling of unity among coworkers:

At the beginning and end of every shift, we meet up with all our Pakistani friends and we have so much fun. I’ll tell you the truth, they’re so friendly. Also, the Africans have incredible respect for women, sometimes they take my packages and put them in my bag. I swear, they help me a lot with wherever I can’t do.

Tina delivers food from 11 am to midnight seven days a week to be able to make a living. She had to start working for Glovo when she and her husband lost their jobs due to serious illnesses while working as an administrative and accountant officer in a company.

The challenging labour market conditions result in creation of heterogeneous group of workers from all walks of life yet share experiences of precarity, which in turn allows for language and ethnicity based boundaries to be crossed and hence inclusionary solidarities to be formed in Italy. In the next section we demonstrate how a highly segmented platform labour market in Belgium, on the contrary, limits formation of shared experiences and hence sense of belonging between native and migrant workers.

Exclusionary Solidarities in Belgium

In Belgium, a healthy labour market with low unemployment and high unionization rates increases workers’ options outside of the platform world and hence decreases their dependency on platform incomes. Yet, this is less valid for workers with a migration background, who often struggle to get good and stable jobs, and in some cases even lack documentation and access to the formal labour market. Thus, in Belgium, we observe segmentation in the platform workforce, with student workers who use platforms for short-term and fast economic gains, versus workers with migration backgrounds who are stuck to platforms, resulting in sharp separation and tight definitions of “us” versus “them”. As a result, our findings point to the creation of what we describe as exclusionary solidarities that fail to cross language and ethnicity-based boundaries between two groups of workers.

Our findings demonstrate ample exit options for native workers outside of the platform world in Belgium, as many of our respondents have quit working for platforms for better job market opportunities, particularly when faced with the heightened competition or diminished incomes on platforms. Student worker informants have moved on to their “careers” that match their training and skills, such as Hans, a Belgian industrial engineering student, who was looking for internships compatible with his future degree and intentionally reduced the amount of work he performed on Deliveroo when faced with diminished income as a result of competition among workers that was further heightened in the times of the pandemic. Max is a young rider who joined Deliveroo in 2017, while working on his master’s studies, along with ten of his close friends because then the platform was offering referral bonuses of around 175 euros each to the referrer and the referee. Yet Max underlines that among this large group of friends, he is the only one still working for the platform, and “everyone else has stopped because I do have the feeling that most people are doing it as a short-term solution.” Thus we observe a high turnover rate for student workers in Belgium, in which the labour market offers various options for exit from the platform world.

The condition of the labour market not only informs workers’ exit options outside of the platform world but also workers’ dependency on platform incomes, which is intrinsically linked to the former. Our findings demonstrate that platform workers in Belgium, particularly student workers, perform platform work occasionally in their free time and use platform incomes to top off other familial or public support mechanisms such as monthly allowances or scholarships. For instance, Hans and Dieter, both Belgian students in their early 20s who ride for Deliveroo when they have the extra time from schoolwork describe their work as “a hobby” and “paid fitness.” Similarly, Aaleks, another Belgian student who lives with his parents, described platform work as “something to fall back on” that allows him to “never go beg for work from anyone”. He described his job as “perfect for students” because of the flexibility: “If I want to work, then I can just work. If I don’t want to work anymore, then I don’t have to answer to anyone.” Various Belgian student worker interviewees were not dependent on their income from platforms, but instead used their gains to supplement their extra costs, such as booking big holiday trips, purchasing of expensive electronics, or upgrading their existing belongings such as bikes. For instance, Aaleks, a student in his 20s who solely rides in the evenings after his classes, used his platform income to go on a large trip with his sister. Senne, another Belgian student in his 20s, started working for Deliveroo when he decided to move out of his family home and be more independent from his family in covering his student housing costs. He acknowledged that as a student job, the platform income “is a nice addition so it is a fair wage in my opinion, but for someone who really wants to live off it,

then it is not a fair wage.” He explains in detail how platforms do not offer sufficient income because on “a top day” he earned 40 euros, which adds up to 1200 euros for a month’s earnings, yet his average daily income almost falls short of it: “It is a nice sum, but that means that you have to have a top day every day and there is also the physical limitation that you have to cycle every day, which is physically hard and definitely won’t work out. There will be days that you earn less. So I think it is a major challenge to work for Deliveroo every day and try to live off it.”

Although delivery work appears as a source of pleasurable pastime and supplementary income for Belgian student workers who perform work at their own discretion, while continuing to rely on scholarships or family support, platform work takes a different shape for workers with migration backgrounds. This in return contributes to shape a segmented labour force and ensuing tight definitions of “us” versus “them” within natives and workers with a migration background in platform work. The latter group faces limited exit options outside of platforms and hence high rates of dependency on platform income, for instance, due to experiences of discrimination or difficulty transferring their credentials earned in their home countries to the Belgian context. For Mehdi, a Belgian-born Deliveroo worker with Moroccan origins, even moving working from one delivery company to another with better working conditions was a challenge. Mehdi has faced racial profiling and discrimination throughout his life, being subjected to police checks multiple times a day and being wrongfully accused and imprisoned. After being released from prison after three months of wrongful conviction, he received severance payment, with which he was able to buy a car and work as a driver for Uber, in addition to working as a rider for Deliveroo with his newly purchased bike. Yet he was repeatedly rejected working for Takeaway, a competitor of Deliveroo which is known for providing better working conditions such as by providing more stable work and insurance: “I have already asked several times to work on Takeaway. They’ve always rejected me... All messages I get from Takeaway are rejection messages. They’ve never told me why but, anyway I called and I told them ‘it’s not normal, I always get rejections, rejections, rejections.’ And they don’t care.”

Different lived experiences of platform work between native workers and workers with a migration background is most visible when it comes to opportunities in the labour market in Belgium, which seem ample for native workers yet, restricted for migrant workers, whose residence permits are often dependent on their work or who lack any formal documentation. It has been widely reported in the media that around half of platform workers in Belgium are undocumented (Alderman 2019; Cloot 2021), for whom platforms remain the only option for work, as at the entrance, platforms do not require a work permit and allow the performance of work through

subletting accounts. Various informants also have reported how they have heard of rumours circulating around sublet accounts, such as Bashar, a 40-year-old Deliveroo worker in Belgium who is from Pakistan and has two kids, of whom he takes care with his platform income. He explained how UberEats “asks for you to take your photo. Face recognition or something like that. But Deliveroo doesn’t have that system. Anybody can work on everybody’s phone.” Other workers have also underlined how the number of migrant workers has increased in the platform world, described as “a bit of an evolution” in type for workers by Max, a Belgian master’s student: “Before there were really a lot more students and now it’s only a quarter or maybe one-third is a student. [Nowadays] I think [there are] a lot of older people, like 30 or 40 years old who are doing it. I also think [there are] more refugees as well.”

Such differences in exit options and dependency on platform income result in formation of rigid boundaries between two groups of workers, resulting in loss of communication and bonding opportunities. When asked about if and under what conditions our informants communicate with other workers, various student workers brought up the issue of the increase in the number of workers, particularly those with migration backgrounds, in accounting for diminished contacts and association between workers. For instance, when asked about his relationship with his coworkers, Max expressed his disinterest in bonding with them:

It [the work] has become more anonymous. Before you would see people you would know or had already run into a few times, or would wait for orders together or something. Now it’s not the case anymore. I think it is like that because there are a lot more [workers], probably, so you just don’t know everyone anymore. I wouldn’t know how many hundreds of people there are in [his city]; every time I go to work, I see foreign people I have never seen before. So there has to be a lot of people... Such a group or a certain connection or something...that’s not the case anymore. But I also don’t really mind it. I also don’t do it for social contact or something, so it’s just because I like to bike and you’re also earning a bit with it.

Similarly, Hans explained in detail how he thinks with the increase of workers with a migration background with whom he claims to have limited similarities and feeling of group membership contributes to a loss of communication between workers: “In my opinion, it [communication] was more personal, I mean the contact was more social back then. Now it’s less because of the change of who’s working for Deliveroo.” He continued:

There is definitely an evolution in who’s working for Deliveroo. So when I started to work there were mainly, how should I say this... there were more white people so to

say. And now it's 70 percent, or something like that, 75 percent of other descents, from Turkey or Morocco or something like that, those kinds of colours... And they also often don't speak Dutch. When you're waiting at McDonald's there, usually, isn't that much talking but sometimes you do have a talk and they talk Arabic then, or something like that, I don't know. And they don't speak Dutch that well so then I usually also don't begin to chat because of the language barrier.

As described by Hans in a highly racialized manner, restrictive understandings of in-grouping and out-grouping based on ethnicity and language result in boundaries between native and migrant workers not being crossed and a lack of bonding between the two groups. Particularly for the former group, platform work appears as an ephemeral job and thus the formation of solidarity among workers is not a significant aspect of work for them. When asked about bonds with other workers, participation in workers' meetings, or union membership, native workers almost always stated that they have not engaged in such activities, as building solidarities did not contribute to their job outcomes. For instance, Hans initially joined the Whatsapp group formed among workers, yet he did not check the messages and participated in solidarity building: "I think that the WhatsApp group disappeared, or something like that. Or I got a new phone, or something like that, and I wasn't in the WhatsApp group anymore. I didn't put in any effort to get into it again because it didn't have any added value to me." Similarly, Aaleks expressed how he is not committed to solidarity building: "I won't say 'hello' or go talk [to coworkers] or something like that. It's not like they're my best friends or put my hand in the air to wave or something. I don't do that."

The labour market that allows for native workers to only shortly and occasionally work for platforms, whereas that traps workers with migration backgrounds to platform work results in formation of boundaries developed particularly by advantageous groups like student workers to separate from others. In addition to ample exit options in the labour market at large and hence low degree of dependency on platforms for native workers, association and stigmatization of platform work with migrant labour also contribute to the formation of rigid language and ethnicity based boundaries and hence exclusionary solidarities.

Discussion

This article displays the ways in which the condition of the national labour market determines platform workers' opportunities in and outside of the platform world, which in turn informs how workers make sense of their and others' identities and

relate to one another. This article examines labour market factors that contribute to boundary making and hence formation of solidarities in delivery platform work.

Although Italy and Belgium share a history of strong trade unionism and labour mobilization, in addition to similar patterns of platform operations of Glovo and Deliveroo, we observe different trajectories and forms of solidarity building. In Belgium, the first wave of workers, who are mostly white citizens and particularly student workers have ample exit options and hence low dependency on platform work, whereas workers with migration backgrounds, particularly those who lack documentation, are stuck to platform work. The high segmentation in platform work creates limited shared experiences and, symbolic boundaries particularly those along the ethnic and language lines not being crossed, resulting in exclusionary forms of solidarity building in Belgium. Whereas in Italy, employment experiences in and outside of the platform world shared by native and migrant workers are perceived to be associative, as for both groups exit options are limited and hence platform dependency remains high due to the condition of the labour market at large. The shared experiences of precarity contribute to inclusive solidarity building between heterogeneous groups of workers and the crossing of existing boundaries along the lines of ethnicity and language.

We explain how solidarity formation, inclusionary in Italy and exclusionary in Belgium in our case, arises from workers' positionality in the labour market in terms of available exit options and dependency on income from work and hence is embedded in the structure of the labour market at large. Whereas the impact of long-term industrial transformations has contributed to unravelling of solidarity among workers who were previously bonded by a shared identification with an "imagined community" of worker (Valkenbourg 1996; D'Art and Turner 2011), a new sense of belonging can emerge in contexts where labour market failures plunge very different categories of workers – with different origins and also occupations and levels of education – into a similar condition of precarity. The perception of limited opportunities in the Italian labour market, albeit with nuances between native workers and workers with a migration background, acted among platform workers to re-create a broad "imagined community" of the precarious workers that encompasses Italian students, recent master graduates without a (decent) job, workers with a migration background, as well as more mature Italian workers who resorted to platform work from a trajectory of work instability. The expression of the "being in the same boat" offers a representation of how the national labour market can influence the drawing of ample and inclusive boundaries and solidarity among platform workers. Conversely, where labour markets are "fit" and precarious working conditions are limited to

specific pockets of workers, such as in Belgium, workers tend to draw narrower boundaries that fail to diffuse a sense of belonging to a larger community of workers.

Therefore, this research contributes to the literature on platform solidarities by bringing labour market back in to our understandings of formation of boundaries and bonds, which are the bases of solidarity at work, although platform solidarities have been considered to be limited due to the highly fragmented and individualized nature of platform work, yet also essential due to the low-payments and precarity. In doing so, our findings showcase that solidarity formation and the notions around categorizations of “us” versus “them” are informed by one’s positionality, that is identity influences and potential biases in relation to class, gender, migration status, ethnicity, etc. Through paying attention to patterns of identification, association, and boundary, this research takes into account intersectionality and processes of exclusion in our analysis of solidarity at work.

Concluding Remarks and Broader Implications

As solidarity at work is often appraised by labour sociologists and industrial relations scholars as a prerequisite for labour collectivism and collective action (Kelly and Breinlinger 1996), the forms of solidarity built in different national contexts can have important implications for the organizing of resistance actions at different latitudes. This opens up questions around the potential for transnationalization of solidarity and collective action, particularly when acts of resistance on the national level are based on different notions around solidarity. The question of transnationalization of solidarity movements is even more relevant as scholarly understandings of labour solidarity has been increasingly transnationalized and carried beyond the borders of the nation state, despite the still prevalent methodological nationalism. Attempts of expanding the geographic reach of solidarity movements in the platform world plays a new role in discussions around the future of work, while generating new forms of coalition building and contributing to the emergence of new global struggles against platform capitalism (Woodcock 2021), considering that insecurity in access to labour, precarious self-employment, and tight labour management through algorithms are shared experiences among workers performing labour through the mediation of digital platforms that operate transnationally. In this attempt, scholars have looked into the extent to which new solidarities that emerge through being subjected to operations of platform capitalism can contribute to effective fight back against neoliberal transnational policies and practices and contribute to the development of cooperativist alternatives to mainstream platforms (Schor 2020; Schor and Attwood-Charles 2017).

Through our findings, we contribute to the scholarly debate on the transnationalization of labour solidarity by displaying the embeddedness of workers' solidarity in the national context and hence showcasing potential hindrances towards the feasibility and sustainability to transnational collective action movements. Underlining the influence that national labour market structures have in shaping solidarity patterns, as we do in this study, points to reestablishing the uniqueness of each country's socio-economic arrangements, and potentially predicting an irreducible variation that can but impede the imagination and formation of a solid transnational labour movement. Despite increasingly prevalent attempts of reconnecting different forms of platform workers solidarities (Cant and Mogno 2020), we posit that national particularism could represent a substantial hindrance to the pathway towards accomplishing solidarity formation inclusive of multiple (national) labour subjectivities. In doing so, this research underlines the importance of incorporation of multiple subjectivities into solidarity formation and points to potential pathways towards accomplishing inclusive solidarities.

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