RESEARCH ARTICLE

Struggle for recognition, a lever to establish Industrial Relations from below. Reinterpreting couriers' mobilisations in food delivery sector in Italy

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ABSTRACT: In this contribution we offer a conceptualisation of the cycle of struggles recently happening in the food delivery sector in Italy. As a part of an in-depth co-research conducted among Riders Union Bologna (RUB), we investigate this case by adopting the lens of recognition. Despite its long-standing roots, recognition is a category that has largely been neglected by Industrial Relations (IR) debate. The article will present its potential in understanding some precarious workers' struggles, focusing their successful path in establishing IR in an anti-union environment, such as that of food delivery platforms. Three dimensions of recognition will then be explored: the internal recognition that is fundamental in forming workers' collective identity; the institutional recognition leading to the development of new regulations in the sector; the recognition by employers that makes collective bargaining possible. In conclusion, after highlighting the main evidences of the research, reflections will be conducted on the potential of the category of recognition in renewing IR theories, including struggles that often escape traditional approaches.

KEYWORDS: couriers, food delivery, gig economy, Industrial Relations, Platform Capitalism, Recognition theory

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1. Introduction

In recent times the struggle of platform workers has contributed to revitalise the global labour movement. Among them, despite being just a small portion of a growing and variegated galaxy of workers nowadays operating through digital means of production, food delivery workers have distinguished themselves. Their protests have managed to attract the attention of activists, scholars, journalists and commentators, interested both in their fight against digital exploitation of labour and in their ability to challenge long-term trends of de-unionization and precarisation. Food delivery workers have not only been able to challenge the label of "unorganizable", starting a wave of unionisation at global level, but also managed to reach outcomes that have improved their conditions. Thus, what makes their mobilisation peculiar? How have they managed to organise in a hostile environment? What has been the key in achieving successful outcomes? We will try to answer these questions by considering the food delivery workers' struggle as a *struggle for recognition*. In our view, this theoretical framework is particularly helpful to understand the path followed by couriers' mobilisation and to focus on the most relevant aspects. The concept of recognition will then be a lens to look both at the practices they employed and at the role this struggle had in building IR in an unregulated sector.

In the following pages we will first present the recognition toolbox available in a transdisciplinary debate, highlighting the potential this may have in adequating IR theories to the challenges brought by platformisation of labour. Secondly, this will be used to narrow down the role that recognition and misrecognition have in platform capitalism both as arguments to escape traditional economic regulation and means to establish new forms of exploitation. We will then present the three dimensions of recognition emerging from our research on the couriers' struggle. Firstly, an internal dimension including those strategies and solidarity practices that have facilitated the reciprocal recognition of workers and given associational powers to workers. Secondly, an institutional recognition, meaning how the State - understood in a broader sense rather than simply a policy-making body - have acted to recognize their demands resulting in a legal power for workers' representatives. Thirdly, a recognition by employers, concerning the collective agreement reached in Takeaway.com and the impact this has had in the sector in terms of bargaining power. Finally, we will reflect on the role that struggles for recognition may have in extending labour protection and in renewing IR theories by including more peripheral workers.

1.1 Methodological note

Our research began in Autumn 2017 when *Riders Union Bologna* (RUB), one of the many informal unions mushroomed in the food delivery sector in Italy, started operating in the region capital of Emilia Romagna. Our involvement was more intense in the beginning of the struggle and at least until the signing of collective agreement between unions and Takeaway.com (March 2021). However, it has continued beyond that date since both authors keep actively following the mobilisation of food delivery workers. We are continuing discussions with union representatives and activists, as well as updating our dataset with mapping strikes, protest actions (including statement, flyers etc.), collective agreements, legal disputes and labour court rulings.

Over the course of our multi-year study, our role was complementary. Nicola Quondamatteo worked as a courier in Bologna from October 2017 until October 2019, for two different companies: Glovo and MyMenu. While working he has also participated in the forming of RUB, representing it during bargaining roundtables at both local and national level. He actively followed the struggle initiatives and collective bargaining activities even after leaving his job as a courier and starting his PhD course in Political Science and Sociology in Florence. Marco Marrone has also participated in the activities of RUB since the very beginning declaring his research. He has also represented RUB in some of the negotiations, such as those leading to the

approval of Riders Law by the Italian parliament in 2019. Furthermore, he attended European meetings of couriers and policymakers (in particular the 2nd and 3d appointments of *International Forum for the Alternatives to Uberisation of Work* held in Brussels). These represented opportunities to put pressure on the European Commission and the European Parliament regarding the debate on the EU platform work directive. Separately, we published two monographs (Quondamatteo, 2019; Marrone, 2021) and several other articles, while this paper presents common reflections arising from the case of RUB.

Table 1 - Partial list of happenings / occasions on which we collected data

Date	Place	Event
13/11/2017	Bologna	"Snow strike" - first strike in Bologna
24/11/2017	Bologna	Sit-in and critical mass
10/01/2018	Bologna	First meeting with the Mayor of Bologna
15/04/2018	Bologna	First national assembly of couriers' movements
01/05/2018	Bologna	1st May - Couriers' Parade
31/05/2018	Bologna	Signing of "Charter of digital labour rights in the urban context"
04/06/2018	Rome	First meeting with the Labour Ministry (govt. Conte I)
02/07/2018	Rome	First bargaining roundtable (govt., couriers' associations, unions, platforms)
26/11/2018	Bologna	First union assembly in MyMenu
01/12/2018	Bologna	Afternoon flash mob
28/06/2019	Italy	National strike of Glovo's couriers
03/11/2019	Rome	Final approval of "Riders Law"
15/09/2020	Rome	Signing of the collective agreement between Assodelivery and UGL
30/10/2020	Italy	National strike of couriers against Assodelivery-UGL agreement
26/03/2021	Italy	National strike of couriers organized by RidersxiDiritti - Couriers for rights
29/03/2021	Remote	Signing of collective agreement between Takeaway.com and unions

However, it is also important to notice how the approach we employed is not one of its kind. Platform workers' struggles have stimulated not only an intense debate on the challenges of digital labour, but also favoured the development of similar in-depth methodologies (Cant, 2019, Woodcock, 2021). Furthermore, they are nothing new, but relates with a consolidated tradition that has long-term characterised 'Italian workerism' (Alasia & Montaldi, 1960; Panzieri, 1965; Alquati, 1993; Pugliese, 2009) recently renewed by other similar international contributions (Burawoy, 2005; Woodcock, 2014; Carmichael, 2019). These approaches present differences and varieties that cannot be fully discussed here, but what they share is the goal of providing a point of view usually obscured due to social asymmetries, by overcoming the distance between the researcher and the "object" of the research. In this way researchers can establish a process of "mutual learning" that is essential "to make visible the invisible, to make the private public and to validate these organic connections as part of our sociological life" (Burawoy, 2005, p. 8). This sentence has a twofold meaning that deserves to be highlighted. On the one hand, the researcher is called to immerse in the field, stripping himself of designs and assumptions and adopting an open approach from which "the new can always arise and be sought and reproduced" (Alquati, 1993, p. 3). On the other hand, this does not mean that the researcher needs to renounce his role, but he has to move beyond academic borders, sharing the sociological tools, making them public in order to enhance both individual critical capabilities and collective imagination.

The research did not follow a pre-designed plan but has followed the direction undertaken by the route of couriers' struggle. Some of the most significant stages are listed in Table1 below. During them we collected

data according to the opportunities provided by the struggle. This includes the possibility of having access to collective discussions that occurred both in assemblies and in couriers' WhatsApp group chats and the notes taken during assemblies and bargaining roundtables. Moreover, a crucial part in building up this paper comes from the frequent reflections and our exchanges with workers, unionists, journalists, representatives of platforms and policymakers (Ministries, members of national and European parliamentary branches, local administrators) - as well as among ourselves. These unwritten data have also been a crucial contribution to stimulate analysis, hypothesis and research questions.

Recognition theories will be employed to analyse these data showing not only how workers have been able to organise in a hostile environment, but also the outcomes and resonance achieved by this struggle. By adopting these lenses, we aim to uncover those "normally invisible Lilliputian threads and also give them causal prominence in many areas usually attributed to heroic actors, social movements, or cultural mores" (Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 34). In other words, our intent is not that of presenting food delivery informal unionism as a model of the struggle against precarity and digital exploitation, but rather as a prism to look at tendencies and potentials often missed by traditional IR studies.

2. The roots of recognition: a transdisciplinary overview

As argued by Honneth (2019), recognition holds a central place in many social and political theories. However, the same can't be said for IR and labour studies, where the concept of recognition has been widely neglected, when not outright criticised. For example, this has often been considered as an issue limited to workers positioned at the margins of the labour market, such as informal workers (Chen, 2016), care workers (Cortis & Meagher, 2012; Cordini & Ranci, 2017), migrants (Sökefeld, 2008; Giudici, 2013; Alberti & Però, 2018) and the like. In other cases, especially from a more "orthodox" Marxist point of view, it has been perceived as a contamination of identity politics (Kompridis, 2007; McNay, 2008).

What we suggest, instead, is the potential this concept has in understanding how workers' struggles are more recently transforming and in renewing IR theories. While IR scholars have paid attention to the weakening of traditional unionism (Hyman, 2015; Baccaro & Howell, 2017), we reckon that the concept of recognition may include the mobilizations of new actors at global level that are often obscured in this view. Among the others, this is the case of platform workers, but also that of Amazon pickers (Delfanti, 2021), Tech workers (Dencik & Wilkin, 2018), Starbucks workers (Sauviat 2022), or the growing share of informal workers employed in the global value chains (Routh & Borghi, 2018).

A possible starting point in building up our analytical toolbox comes from the dialogue between Fraser and Honneth (2003) around the concepts of "redistribution" and "recognition". Their discussion moves from different approaches. Fraser attempts to construct a theoretical framework capable of connecting and interweaving struggles for recognition and struggles for redistribution. On the other hand, Honneth claims a centrality of the category of recognition, which would always include as a subset the struggles for redistribution. Nonetheless, what they have in common is the idea that the "struggle for recognition" gains fundamental relevance in the age of globalised capitalism. Contacts between cultures accelerate, patterns of interpretation shatter, identities and differences get a prominent political role in all global contexts. Additionally, neoliberalism has also extended and enhanced dynamics of *missachtung* - misrecognition. With this term, Honneth does not simply intend a lack of recognition, but: "such patterns of devaluation of certain performances or forms of life implying for the subjects in question that they cannot refer to the qualities acquired in the course of their biographical histories in the positive sense they would take on if they were the object of social esteem" (Honneth, 2010). Thus, *missachtung* is not simply a matter of exclusion from social rights, but a process of humiliation and disrespect with the aim of disempowering and marginalising those who

are not "recognized as participating in the general process of realisation of the society" (Honneth, 2007). In this view, recognition has to be intended as "a sociocultural device that, in a specific historical period, defines the standards of social esteem that benefits certain occupations" (Honneth, 2010).

However, such processes, as much as they are the result of deeply rooted social asymmetries, are not immutable, but can be changed according to the impact that "struggles for recognition" have in increasing the social esteem workers' benefit. This means that recognition is not simply a moral category of the spirit, but it is crucial in addressing the normative sphere and the ethical progress of the society. According to Honneth (2010), this has already been intended by Hegel, who noticed the limitations of a strictly juridical conception of recognition. First, he expanded the view of recognition by adding the concept of moral respect taken from Kant, one where "subjects recognize each other in their peculiar needy nature". Second, he included a form of recognition that allows subjects to respect themselves in the ethical sphere of the State: "by virtue of those qualities that contribute to the reproduction of the social order" (Honneth, 2010). The passage from each of this level happens through a struggle that leads subjects to seek respect according to the degree of self-awareness they reach. This also means that each dimension determines an intersubjective conflict that can be solved only by continuously expanding the sphere of recognition from time to time. In other words, what Hegel could not see because obscured by the hegemony that idealism had in his time, is how struggles for recognition are at the core of modern society, representing the premises of normative action of the State.

Thus, it is not surprising that the concept of recognition enjoyed a consistent fortune also among critical sociology. For instance, Pizzorno (1980) used it in interpreting the cycle of workers struggle that affected Italian factories in 1968-69. In his view the level of conflictuality reached at that time cannot be understood without considering these as "struggles for recognition". More than just an increase in wages, what they demanded was a greater dignity for the "working class" - often composed by inner migrants from the South of the country - in a time of crucial transformations of the Italian society. It is for this reason that employers and governments had difficulty to recompose a conflictuality that could not have been resolved simply on a formal level but required a more general transformation of both political and social institutions. As already argued by Della Porta, Chesta and Cini (2022/a), this view is still useful to provide a perspective on labour conflicts in the gig economy. Even in this case, more than just redistribution, workers are demanding dignity for their work and, therefore, a general expansion of the sphere of social protections in order to include "new" forms of labour as well.

Another issue pointed out by Pizzorno (1978; 1983) concerns the formation of collective identities: these are symbols that allow "members of a community to recognise themselves as such with ensuing possibility to mobilise solidarities and collective action" (Pizzorno, 1983). This aspect is particularly relevant: as we will empirically demonstrate later, this dimension of recognition is a fundamental precondition for the development of struggles. In any case, even in Social Movement Studies (Della Porta, 2017) great attention has been paid to analysing the formation of new collective identities in the absence of traditional solidarity frames. In this sense, starting from the "struggle for recognition" frame, it is possible to propose a reflection that crosses disciplinary boundaries between Labour Studies and Social Movement Studies, which is already starting to happen (Della Porta, Chesta & Cini, 2022/a; 2022/b). Given the transformations in contemporary union action – see in this regard the debate on social movement unionism (Fairbrother & Webster, 2008; Waterman, 1993) – this pattern of analysis can be a valuable interpretative resource.

3. Misrecognition and platform labour process

In recent years, the ability of digital technologies to reconfigure organisations, redesigning processes and products, has stimulated an intense debate on the future of labour. An initial analysis has emphasised the innovation potentialities of ICT in revolutionising business models. To get an understanding of such techno-optimism, it is enough to give a look to some of the titles published in the initial stage of platforms' growth, such as: "What's mine is yours. The rise of collaborative consumption" (Botsman & Rogers, 2010); "The wealth of networks. How social production transforms markets and freedom" (Benkler, 2006); "Reinventing Capitalism in the Age of Big Data" (Meyer-Schonberger & Ramge, 2018). In this view digital technologies would have liberated us from the inequalities of capitalism: "With the market economy advancing with the help of data, we may no longer label the future "capitalist" in the sense of power concentrated by the holders of money. Ironically perhaps, as data-driven markets devalue the role of money, they prove Karl Marx wrong, not Adam Smith " (Mayer-Schönberger & Ramge, 2018).

These techno-optimist approaches - frequently echoed by digital platforms - looked at the ICT revolution as something opening to new ways of working, based on flexibility and autonomy, facilitating the possibility of reconciling with social reproduction. However, this would have been possible only by adapting existing regulation – especially those regarding labour protection (e.g. towards the so-called "third gender" of employment) – to the new opportunities provided by technological innovation. From this point of view, platforms engage in a conflict with old-fashioned rules that need to be changed to promote economic growth (Lobel, 2017). Otherwise, the risk is that of boosting automation and technological unemployment that, according to Frey and Osborne (2017) esteem, would affect nearly 50% of the total workforce.

This view has radically changed in the aftermath of the struggle of platform workers (Woodcock, 2021). Drivers and couriers have shown not only the inconsistency of this narrative, but also how this has been functional in expanding labour exploitation. Digital technologies, more than substituting human work, are employed to radically transform some of its crucial features (Casilli, 2019). These transformations are profound, reconfiguring space-time coordination of production, and allow platforms to escape traditional regulation as well as increasing the rate of exploitation (Marrone, 2022). This means that misrecognition of digital labour plays a crucial role in the platform business model, making labour cheaper, exiting traditional IR systems and managing a wide workforce that operates with high levels of turnover. By using self-employment, platforms avoid the recognition of social rights associated with wage labour. The problem, as Huws (2020) highlights, is that these rights: "are probably worth much more to most workers in real terms than whatever tax saving they make by being self-employed, but of course can only be claimed if their employers actually agree that they are employees and fulfil their part of bargaining". This is nothing new, since such a condition of exclusion characterises informal workers (Agarwala, 2013) and the troubled world of subcontracting; however, digitalization is offering the opportunity to strengthen these features (Jones, 2021).

However, critical scholars have shown how digital technologies are not only simply used to avoid regulation and labour standards, but also to shape labour processes thanks to the role of data extraction (Zuboff, 2018; Casilli, 2019; Altenreid, 2022). In this regard, we can consider the amount of data that couriers produce whenever they interact with their smartphones (Pulignano & Marà, 2021). These data, that workers produce both intentionally and unintentionally, feed the ranking system, a component of the so-called "algorithm management" (Stark & Pais, 2020). It is not by chance then if we can find these labour control devices in different platforms, regardless of the service they provide. In this system, the novelty is that platforms do not only exercise "despotic power", but also an "infrastructural power" functioning by indirectly imposing standards that workers need to respect to operate in the platform ecosystem (Borghi & Marrone, 2022). Those who adhere to such standards and accordingly adjust their behaviour, for example by continuously intensifying their working performances or by competing with the rest of the workforce, are rewarded with more income

opportunities. On the other hand, those operating discontinuously, often refusing the tasks assigned and becoming too adversarial, are expelled or marginalised. In other words, we can see how platforms are responsible for a "hidden labour regime" that, beyond the formal dimension and the narrative exposed, is based on informal dynamics that ensure workers' compliance to platform expectations. These letters are those that have prompted workers to act against platforms and to demand the recognition of subordinate employment (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2022).

Another key component of the platform labour concerns skills and "means of production" that workers are requested to provide (Altenried, 2021). In the case of food delivery workers, this relates to smartphones and bikes, but also to knowledge needed to successfully comply with platform standards (Lehdonvirta, Margaryan, & Davies, 2019). Far from being just a job that can be done by all those having "a bike and a smartphone", delivering requires transversal skills - such as the knowledge of the city, bike repairing, customer relation, understanding of algorithmic indicators, etc… - that are necessary to improve their position in the platform or to simply avoid the risk of being marginalised by the algorithm. All of these contributions that workers bring in order to provide the service are not provided by platforms, nor are they recognized. Moreover, workers are also exposed to a pressure that results in continuously improving their capital investment (Bonifacio & de Benedittis, 2022). This is evident in the case of food delivery workers, "pressured" to buy electric and performance bikes, but the same can be said for other platforms such as Airbnb (Semi & Tonetta, 2021), where hosts are pushed to increasingly invest in their apartments in order to improve their visibility within the platform. Not only material resources, but also soft skills enable workers with more experience to overcome what Rosenblat and Stark (2016) calls "informational asymmetries" and get better income opportunities.

Thus, we may argue that misrecognition plays a key role in the platform labour process. The narrative of a flexible employment that can be done by all those having "a smartphone and a bike" functions to deny the contribution of workers in service provision. However, misrecognition does not simply act to escape regulation or to reduce labour costs, but also to maintain control over the workforce by convincing workers they can be easily substituted, undermining unionisation and discouraging labour conflicts. At the same time, these factors open a space for workers' contestation precisely because of the common understanding of such logics of exploitation. This should lead us to look at couriers' struggle for recognition simply as a contestation of *missachtung* dynamics. As we will show in the next pages, the potentiality of "struggles for recognition" is that of moving beyond a solely logic of resistance.

3. Internal recognition

The first dimension of recognition analysed is that happened among workers themselves. In this case recognition means to challenge the variety and the high turnover rate characterising platform workforce by allowing workers to mutually recognize themselves as belonging to the same class of exploited. A process that, as already shown by other researches, has been possible thanks to the use of solidarity practices having as an outcome the make of an "associational power" (Wright, 2000) - essential in establishing unionisation in such a deregulated sector (Tassinari & Maccarone, 2017; 2020).

RUB was born in October 2017, when a group of about ten couriers belonging to the four main platforms operating at that time in the city (Foodora, Just Eat, Deliveroo and MyMenu) began meeting on a weekly basis. Despite the influence of strikes already happening in cities like London, Berlin, Brussels or Turin, in its initial stage, rather than showing an explicit union vocation, the group was born for solidarity purposes. As written by a courier in one of the first messages sent in the RUB WhatsApp group: "Isolation in this work is one of the biggest problems. It's really sad to see people like me, who do the same work I do, cycling down the street

with me every day, but not even knowing what their name is, who they are". This message highlights the paradox of a labour process where, despite a pervasive regime of connectivity, workers' experience is characterised by solitude and isolation. The extreme individualization of digital control of labour is then enhanced by the high level of turnover of the workforce, making it difficult to build any sort of continuous social tie. These informal dynamics, other than more explicit anti-union approaches employed by platforms, represented the main obstacles in unionising workers.

Thus, breaking up this "digital barrier", knowing and mutually supporting each other in order to face the risks of this job, became the priority of this group. The first step in this direction has been the formation of a WhatsApp group dedicated to workers' solidarity in case of injuries, damages of the bike and to share information about algorithm management functioning or their legal status, other than simply getting together. As argued elsewhere (Quondamatteo, 2019; 2021; Quondamatteo & Marrone, 2019; Marrone, 2021), the group has rapidly expanded, facilitated not only by the growth of the workforce in the city, but also by the urban structure of Bologna, offering squares and places where workers could easily meet while waiting for their orders. Another enabler was also the initial choice of platforms such as Just Eat and MyMenu to use WhatsApp or Telegram groups to coordinate their workforce. This has given easy access to other workers' contacts that has fostered the creation of parallel messaging groups.

A key component in establishing a solidarity network has also been played by local activists who have given support to such initiatives. First, they contributed to grow the initial nucleus by leafleting and recruiting workers outside some of the most common city restaurants. Second, they provided the necessary – material and immaterial – resources to create a stable solidarity network including: bike repairing workshops and training courses on this issue; support or replacement bikes to ultimate the service in case of damage; legal info-points where workers could find support in getting information about their contract or on how to take legal action; sociability moments such as afterwork drinking appointments, that became not only a way to build social tie, but also to share information, opinion and comments about the job.

However, the building up of solidarity and social ties was effective in breaking up isolation, but still not sufficient to start unionisation: not only due to the risk of getting fired – as it happened for Turin's Foodora workers – but also due to the influence of platform labour narratives. An example of this is represented in a message sent by a courier in RUB WhatsApp group: "Today I tried to talk to my colleagues to motivate them to do something, but many of them disagreed. Some say it's a small job not worth fighting for... while others don't want to expose themselves because they're worried about losing this job". This clearly features how, despite differences, the digital labour regime works in discouraging conflicts and organising processes. On the one hand, for those having food delivery as a main source of income, exposing themselves into a struggle was perceived as too risky. On the other hand, those who worked as food couriers for a secondary and temporary source of income did not think that fighting against platforms was worth their time and energy. In other words, despite mutual aid and solidarity networks, the variegated composition of the workforce that platforms attract still undermine internal recognition and challenge unionisation processes.

However, the conditions for a protest were there. The trigger was a snowfall in November 2017, when couriers spontaneously refused to continue the service and logged out from the platforms. This episode motivated RUB to open a Facebook page and report what was happening, receiving support from users, but also attention from local media. This is a crucial moment for RUB, in which, paraphrasing Goodwyn (1978), the "movement looks at itself", which means confronting the complex process of forming a collective identity.

This was an essential component to move to a more union-like approach. Firstly, claims were elaborated, such as the recognition of subordinate employment, but also more immediate requests of basic labour rights (e.g. a public insurance covering injuries) to be guaranteed regardless of their working legal status. Second, other initiatives of mobilisation have been organised, including strikes, rallies, sit-ins, parades and the like. However, this does not mean that the difficulties of the platform environment have been overcome. New

struggling practices had to be developed to avoid retaliation, especially to protect workers who had delivery as the only source of income. This happened with the choice of wearing masks during media reported protests to protect workers' identities. Another practice has been that of differentiating striking approaches – logging out or logging in and refusing all the coming orders – according to the different level of risk workers wanted to take. Interestingly, these practices have not only been effective in protecting workers from the risk of dismissal, but they have also contributed to fostering internal recognition. The same can be said to traditional struggling tools like strikes. Despite being much less effective in pressuring employers, striking has nevertheless played a crucial role in building "class identity" among couriers. This aspect - the role of strikes in shaping the class consciousness - has already been pointed out by Pizzorno (1978; 1980; 1983) in above-mentioned essays.

Considering the practices outlined thus far, we may notice how internal recognition has formed in-between the discipline tools employed by platforms. In this sense, not only labour misrecognition has been ineffective in discouraging organising, but it has paradoxically given the conditions for that to happen through solidarity practices. After all, as already stressed by Ford and Honan (2019) in the case of Indonesian taxi drivers, the centralisation of capital in the hands of digital platforms helped workers to clearly identify a counterpart. In this sense, we argue that this process has made it possible to overcome the lack of "structural power", building an "associational power" characterised by new approaches and practices that have been effective in establishing a bargaining position.

4. Institutional recognition

To successfully meet their own demands, couriers had to pass another step we define as "institutional recognition". This refers, in the first instance, to the sphere of the State in its broadest sense, including local institutions, Parliament and government, labour courts. In this realm we see a continuity with some trends in advanced capitalist economies where the regulatory capacity of the social partners (collective bargaining) has been weakened, implying a renewed role for State regulation (Meardi, 2018). This is true if we think about the statutory minimum wage debate or the broader labour market transformations (feminization, tertiarisation, migrant labour). Gig economy, after all, can be interpreted as one of the most advanced examples of the trajectory of industrial relations in a neoliberal direction (Zwick, 2018).

Given the asymmetry of power between food delivery platforms and couriers, the associational power formed by workers was not only directly used against companies, but to call institutions into question. In the workers' view, the institutions should have rebalanced the asymmetry favouring the establishment of Industrial Relations in the sector. In order to do this, they had to recognize the struggling couriers as an organised subjectivity carrying collective interests (even if, at first, this was done outside the traditional unions). To reach this goal, in the aftermath of the initial protests RUB wrote a letter to the mayor of Bologna. In their arguments, he was the one responsible for their workplace, corresponding to the city streets where the delivery service occurred. The positive reply led to the opening of a bargaining roundtable where RUB gained institutional recognition for the first time. In this way, the city stopped to simply represent the scenario where platforms "hit the ground", instead acting as a facilitator of collective bargaining. This led to the stipulation of the "Charter of digital labour rights in the urban context" signed by RUB, traditional unions (CGIL, CISL, UIL) and MyMenu (a local food delivery platform) other than the Municipality of Bologna. Its regulation power was actually low, but still played a key role in recognizing RUB representativeness in the sector.

Following the approval of Bologna Charter, the freshly appointed yellow-green government decided to convene the couriers' grassroots movement as a "symbol of the abandoned generation to which the government

wants to give a response". In this way, the government identified delivery workers as an exemplary status of the *precariat* that represented one of the main targets of its political program including, among the rest, the introduction of a basic income scheme (*Reddito di Cittadinanza)* and stricter regulations in the use of temporary employment (*Decreto Dignità)*. However, with this act, the Ministry of Labour *de facto* recognized also the representativeness of couriers' informal unions. However, the scepticism of traditional unions and employer associations towards the idea of regulating the sector by law, motivated the government to call for a collective bargaining roundtable - ensuring anyway the approval of the law in the case of failure. After almost a year of meetings, the ostracism of digital platforms led negotiations nowhere, motivating the parliamentary majority to approve the "Riders Law". As law scholars such as Barbieri (2019) have stressed, unlike in Spain, where platform workers get a more direct and full recognition of subordinate work, the Italian bill still had its main goal in providing further support to collective bargaining. At the same time, the law strengthened the possibility of obtaining the same rights of subordinate employment through labour judiciary appeals.

This did not, in any case, satisfy the demands of couriers. More than steadily regulating the sector, government initiative supported the associational power of workers, also generating the need to increase couriers' pressure towards institutions to honour its promises and commitments. The frequent call for the role of citizens, consumers and public opinion - such as in the case of delivery boycotting initiatives – can also be explained in this way: in the sphere of precarious labour where State regulation regains a central role, the public (as the set of political parties' voters) becomes a potential actor in the attempt to institutionalise systems of labour protection and IR.

However, we want to stress how the Italian government has not been the only institutional actor providing recognition to couriers' representatives. This is the case, for instance, of labour courts, to which workers often appealed against employment misclassification perpetuated by platforms. In the case of platform work – where it is the business model itself that systematically breaks the law as most recently revealed in the *Uber Files –* appeals to labour judiciary have been practised in many European countries, in the United States, in Brazil and elsewhere. In the Italian case, litigations in the courts have become intertwined with police investigations on cases of *caporalato*. These, despite not being a formal act of recognition, have contributed to strengthen couriers' bargaining position.

Furthermore, another key step in providing institutional recognition has been played by traditional unions (CGIL, UIL and CISL - mainly by the first two). More than the role of organisers they played that of bargaining authority that the Italian IR system gives them. Especially in the initial stage of the struggle they underestimated couriers' protests, considering them a marginal and quantitatively modest workforce, but once the negotiation table was established, they gave support to informal unions demands. Moreover, in Italy the opening of the collective bargaining roundtable contributed significantly to raise media coverage on couriers' struggle. This forced established unions to recognize the relevance of food delivery struggle and to take an interest in this sector, even without having any registered member among couriers. Therefore, in this case the category of recognition helps to understand the behaviour of Italian traditional unions that are usually quite sceptical about grassroots or informal unionism (Ciarini & Dorigatti, 2017). It's only after the government had given attention to informal unions' demands that CGIL (in different cities) and UIL (particularly in Milan and in Lombardia) started to direct resources in unionising the food delivery sector, even if with different outcomes according to each city. Bondy (2022) talked about "conflictual complementarity" in analysing the possible coexistence between traditional and new labour actors in workplaces marked by liberalisation and erosion of collective bargaining systems. In this case, the recognition of informal unionism has given the possibility to get a complementarity between "old" and "new" IR actors. A distinguished example of this is the Italian network "*RiderXiDiritti*" - "Couriers for rights" - where both representatives of informal and traditional unions have coordinated bargaining moments and initiated common actions and strikes, as that of 26 March 2021 above-mentioned in Table1.

5. Recognition by employers

The last dimension of the couriers' "struggle for recognition" we investigate is that of employer counterparts. Considering the peculiar and anti-union ostracism of platforms, this has been the most difficult goal to achieve by couriers. In our case study, RUB claims have always targeted companies, but, especially in the initial stage of the struggle, this was more functional to sought institutional recognition rather than engaging in a classical union bargaining.

Thus - while the first strikes and sit-ins aimed to bring pressure over institutions - RUB tried to force companies to sit down at collective bargaining roundtables and recognize the existence of a legitimated collective workers' representative. The first opportunity occurred at the local level following the initiative of the municipality of Bologna. On this occasion the multinational platforms – after attending an introductory meeting – decided not to participate in the bargaining process leading to the "Charter". Therefore, this was only signed by a local platform (MyMenu) while multinationals attempted to minimise its relevance. However, it is not the first time that local and multinational platforms have behaved differently. As argued by Muszyński, Pulignano and Marà (2022) this has also been the case of the Polish firm Stava that recognized employment standards attempting to build an image of sustainability. Thus, in the case of MyMenu the recognition gets a double relevance. While on one hand RUB was for the first time recognized by an employer, on the other hand MyMenu obtained institutional recognition of its compliance with minimum labour standards. Thus, workers increased their bargaining power with the "Charter", dividing the platforms front and showing the possibility to reach agreements in the sector. At the same time MyMenu got the necessary premises to develop a competitive strategy aimed to conquer "ethical niches" within the market. The possibility to challenge more structured competitors (focused on using the cost-cutting leverage) by using the social sustainability argument is what motivated MyMenu to sign the "Charter". In other words, the extreme competition characterising platform markets is what has impeded them to form a homogeneous block.

The second opportunity to gain employer recognition has been the collective bargaining roundtable called by the Ministry of Labour. As mentioned above, despite government initiatives, this path has been very tortuous and conflictual. Differently from what could have been expected by the choice of platforms to form an employer association (*Assodelivery*), this was not intended to reach an agreement, but, on the contrary, to undermine this possibility. Finally, after more than a year during which the government intervened by law and collective bargaining did not take off, the corporate front suffered a second split. Just Eat – in the meanwhile acquired by the Dutch firm Takeaway.com – announced its intention to recognize its couriers as employees marking a significant turning point in the global scenario of food delivery. For this reason, they abandoned *Assodelivery* and reached an arrangement with both established and new couriers' unions to apply the logistics sector collective agreement (Quondamatteo, 2021). In the meanwhile, *Assodelivery* – willing to undermine the lawmakers' provisions – signed an agreement with the right-wing union UGL that, according to some labour law scholars (Aloisi & De Stefano; Barbieri, 2020), had the goal of maintaining the existing situation: couriers as independent contractors on piecework payment.

If we intend recognition on a narrower legal level, we should say that couriers gained it from Takeaway.com and partially MyMenu and not from Assodelivery (Glovo, Deliveroo, Uber Eats). However, things are more complex. Despite the collective agreement, Takeaway.com and workers' representatives still had disputes regarding the role of unions in determining some aspects of work organisation (such as the location of starting points, the unilateral introduction of bonuses, the equipment provision and so on). Therefore, the agreement, even if it improved couriers' conditions, did not solve the conflict which nowadays is still hinged on recognition demands in Takeaway.com. On the other hand, in March 2021, Glovo – that still misrecognizes

couriers' employment relationship – was forced for the first time to admit the existence of a strike with an email sent to all partner restaurants. In sum, while on one hand those platforms signing formal agreements with workers representatives still present partial backtrack, on the other hand those who did not sign formal agreements still have to face union activities. This allows us to specify that recognition should not be seen as a monolith with o a clear border line that can be drawn by law or agreements, but it's a more nuanced category dealing with social dynamics more than just the formal dimension.

Lastly, we want to emphasise how, despite the difficulties remaining in the sector, recognition by employers gained from Takeaway.com has initiated IR in the sector, providing the possibility for workers to get access to redistribution. In our scheme, the possible bridge that Fraser (2003) imagined between recognition and redistribution occurs at this stage of couriers' struggle. It is only through recognition that collective bargaining can take part in improving working conditions and on the more strictly wage-related and redistributive part.

Table 2 – Summary of Focus, Practices and Outcomes of RUB struggle for recognition

	Internal	*Institutional*	*By employers*
Focus	Workers	Institutions (government, Parliament, courts, established unions, public opinion)	Food delivery platforms
Practices	Solidarity (mutualism, info-points, bike repair workshops)	Public/Social Movements (pressure on public opinion, alliances with consumers, recourse to labour courts)	Traditional union (strikes, collective bargaining)
Outcomes	Associational power (Overcoming workforce fragmentation, building collective identity)	Law-making power (Bologna Charter, Riders Law, favourable judgments of labour courts)	Bargaining power (Collective agreement with Takeaway.com)

6. Conclusion

In this essay we have tried to present the potential of the concept of recognition by analysing the struggle of food delivery workers. More specifically, we have seen how this first provides a key to read how digital platforms have managed to expand and intensify labour exploitation. In this sense, by misrecognizing workers' contribution to service provision platforms on one hand escape traditional regulation, on the other create a labour regime that does not only increase exploitation ratio but is also able to establish a particularly hostile environment for unionism.

However, we intended the Italian couriers' mobilisation as a struggle for recognition not only for their ability to avoid anti-unionism, but also for their capacity to reach successful outcomes. Table 2 synthesises the main features composing each of the three stages of recognition. First, what we have called internal recognition is the process that has led workers to recognize each other as belonging to the same group of exploited. On this level, "solidarity practices" have been a key tool in building an "associational power", but not the only one. From a recognition perspective, the practices of conflict adopted by couriers' informal unions have also been pivotal. Thus, the anti-union tactics adopted by digital platforms have stimulated new alliances - such as those with city activists - and variegated forms of struggle - such as wearing masks, rallies or strikes - that have made

possible mutual recognition. Put differently, it is in the blind spots of digital labour that informal unions have found the necessary resources to overcome platform anti-unionism and build a common class consciousness.

Second, what we have called "institutional recognition" is the recognition of workers' claims and of the representativeness of informal unions by local and national institutions. As argued above, the choice of informal unions to avoid the asymmetry of power between platforms and workers by employing "public practices" to influence institutions' behaviours has been a crucial turning point for this struggle. However, in the framework of recognition the efficacy of this approach can be grasped only by looking at the State not as a monolith, but as an articulated dimension involving national and local policymakers as much as labour courts or traditional unions. In order to define couriers' ability in influencing these processes, we type this kind of power as "law-making power", underlining workers' role in setting, at a regulatory level, what Streeck (1997) defines "beneficial constraints".

These steps have been necessary to reach the "recognition by employers" that is what initiated IR in the sector. However, with this we mean not only the Takeaway.com collective agreement, but a wider process recognizing the legitimacy of workers' voice within digital platforms. Despite the remaining difficulties, the Takeaway.com agreement has shaped a possible model of IR in the sector. Moreover, the positive outcomes achieved by Italian couriers goes beyond Takeaway.com, affecting those platforms that still have not recognized the subordination of their workers as much as all the other platform workers. As stressed by recognition theories, the result of couriers' struggle has not only been that of allowing Takeaway.com workers to get access to wage improvement, but generally extended the sphere of labour protection including those types of workers that once were excluded.

We also want to stress how these three levels should not lead us to linear look at couriers' struggle. In fact, they are processes that have moved in parallel - in particular the second and the third steps. The same internal recognition has had to cyclically renew itself due to the relevant turnover characterising the food delivery sector and therefore the need to include new workers in the unionising process. Additionally, the positive outcomes reached by food delivery struggle lie in the ability to combine a wide range of practices often seen as ideologically determined or structurally associated to specific sectors or types of workers. Moreover, especially for what concerns the initial phases of the struggle, the practices workers adopted shows how there is very little innovation in RUB action. More than a "unionism 2.0", in fact, they have adopted practices consolidated in the global labour movement, especially with regards to more peripheral workers. This is a key point in our study because while on the one hand it allows us to make visible the connections with other workers' struggles happening both within and outside digital platforms, on the other hand it highlights the potential that recognition theories may have in renewing IR theories. In our view, struggles for recognition should not only be limited to our case study or to other platform workers, but can be applied to understand how the global workers' movement is transforming after decades of neoliberalism - bringing new actors and practices that are often invisible to traditional IR analytical categories.

First, as well underlined by the global labour history approach (Breman & Van der Linden, 2014), neoliberalism has deeply undermined the validity of Western employment standards, levelling its exceptionality. Second, this is because the exit from subordination is no longer an approach limited to the "periphery" of value chains - as argued by GVC theories - but it has become a general feature of how labour is getting reshaped (Steinberg, 2022). This is evident in the case of digitalized and platformised employments, but also in the way in which companies increasingly make use of alternative legal arrangements - such as freelancing, collaboration and internships - escaping labour protection (Friedman, 2014). In other words, delivery workers' struggle shows the crucial role that struggles for recognition - as much as those for redistribution - play in expanding workers' rights "not for us, but for everyone" according to one of the most

popular slogans employed by RUB. We then encourage future studies on other forms of struggles for recognition happening within and beyond digital platforms.

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