

GLOBAL CAPITAL IN LOCAL CONTEXT: PLATFORM POWER AND LABOUR AGENCY IN FOOD DELIVERY IN CROATIA AND SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines labour agency among food delivery couriers in Croatia and Serbia, two Central and Eastern European markets where public protest and legal actions against platforms remain scarce. Drawing on 53 interviews with food delivery couriers in Croatia and Serbia, the paper identifies a triple constraint in the form of algorithmic control, subcontracting model of work organization, and structurally weak institutions that divert the agency away from collective channels and into two individualized repertoires: strategic non-compliance and strategic misappropriation. Strategic non-compliance refers to individual actions such as task selection, rejections, and timed logoffs that deliberately bend or break platform rules with the aim of maximizing profit. Strategic misappropriations involve couriers' use of subcontracting and institutional weaknesses to externalize costs, thereby increasing their take-home earnings. These individual actions are not just responses to production regimes but constitutive elements of platform capitalism as it materializes in hybrid institutional regimes.

Key Words: platform work, algorithmic management, subcontracting, labour agency, hybrid institutional regimes

INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital labour platforms has transformed the organization of work across sectors and regions. These platforms are characterized by the relentless pursuit of market dominance (Sundararajan, 2016), algorithmic control over the labour process (Kellogg et al., 2020), and strategic evasion of regulation and social responsibilities (Prassl, 2018). These features of the platform business model have distinctly shaped work experiences of platform workers, characterized by work intensification, low earnings, poor and dangerous working conditions, and a lack of labour protection (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2022). They have also been credited for limiting workers' ability to exercise agency and significantly discouraged them from collectively organizing (Vandaele, 2021).

Despite these constraints, the global proliferation of platform capitalism has not gone unchallenged. Platform workers are increasingly engaging in demonstrations, strikes, log-off campaigns, and legal actions against the precarization and casualization of work (Umney et al., 2024). The patterns of labour unrest, however, are strikingly uneven: street-level protests are more common in the countries of the Global South; legal action plays a more important role in the Global North; while in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), there is scant evidence of either form of resistance (Bessa et al., 2022). This seeming silence in CEE countries raises two interrelated questions: (1) how do platform workers in hybrid institutional settings navigate or resist the constraints of platform governance, and (2) how do these actions shape the local manifestation of the platform labour regime?

To answer these questions, the paper focuses on Croatia and Serbia, two CEE countries experiencing a seemingly unchallenged proliferation of platform work with no notable instances of strikes and no legal cases regarding the status of workers. The two countries are also representative of platforms' use of different strategies of externalizing labour; in addition to categorizing workers as individual contractors, platforms in these countries heavily rely on a network of subcontractors to recruit, contract, and manage the workforce (Starcevic, 2023). Platform proliferation also unfolds in hybrid institutional settings, characterized by a mix of features from coordinated market economies, liberal market economies, and post-socialist legacies (Myant, 2014). The empirical data set comprises 53 in-depth interviews with food delivery couriers working on two dominant platforms in both countries. The findings extend understanding of labour agency by showing how the combination of algorithmic control, subcontracting model of platform work, and weak institutions shifts labour agency toward covert, individual actions that diminish the potential of traditional collective organizing and action. At the same time, these forms of labour agency are not only a response to the production system but also distinctly shape the local manifestation of the platform business model.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: The next two sections review platform business models, control regimes, and labour agency literature, followed by a section explaining data and methods. The subsequent section presents a catalogue of labour agency expressions among food delivery couriers in Croatia and Serbia. The concluding section discusses implications, limitations, and avenues for future research.

PLATFORM BUSINESS MODELS AND FORMS OF CONTROL

Technological platform companies that rely on digital technologies to facilitate transactions and labour exchange between multiple user groups have gained global prominence across various sectors, most notably in transportation and food delivery segments. Their profit generation strategy is based on harnessing network effects, whereby the platform's value increases as more users participate, fostering rapid scalability and market dominance (Rochet & Tirole, 2003). To quickly build up network effects and establish themselves as dominant players when entering a new market, platform companies offer increased remuneration for workers and lower service prices to consumers. While such a strategy leads to platforms operating at a negative profit, the ultimate payoff from gaining monopsony power makes capital more patient, willing to back up and continue investing in platform companies (Rahman & Thelen, 2019).

The platform business model is also asset-light; vehicles, bikes, smartphones, and other means of production are supplied by workers, transferring fixed costs and operational risks (Kenney & Zysman, 2020). However, the most important asset, the digital infrastructure, is in the hands of platform companies, resulting in power asymmetries. The digital infrastructure is based on matching technology (Prassl, 2018), dynamic price-setting (Shapiro, 2020), and algorithmic management that directs, disciplines, and controls the workforce (Kellogg et al., 2020).

Externalization of labour is another key feature of the platform business model. The direct employment relationship between platforms and workers rarely exists, and platform companies adopt various organizational strategies to avoid the costs and risks of direct employment. Most prominently, platforms create triangular relations whereby they appear as technological intermediaries between two sides of the market, clients and service providers (Vallas & Schor, 2020). In other local contexts, such as Croatia and Serbia, the platforms' organizational strategies additionally (and predominantly) rely on externalizing labour through subcontracting (Starcevic, 2023).

These key features of platform business models, however, create a managerial challenge of synchronizing a geographically dispersed, legally detached workforce with volatile client demands in real-time. To address this issue, platform companies employ a combination of rational forms of control (Kellogg et al., 2020) and normative mechanisms of post-disciplinary control (Gandini, 2019).

Much of the literature on platforms has focused on algorithmic management as a form of rational control, where algorithms coordinate the labour process and make decisions that affect labour, without the need for human intervention (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Duggan et al., 2020). Remote surveillance, automated nudges, and instant sanctions allow platforms to standardize service without having to rely on direct control through an employment relationship (Lee et al., 2015; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). The most systematic treatment of algorithmic

management as a form of rational control is offered by Kellogg et al. (2020), who identify six mutually reinforcing mechanisms: restricting information, recommending preferred actions, recording performance data, rating workers, replacing under-performers and rewarding compliance.

Still, rational control alone is insufficient to secure a long-term labour supply in markets where exit costs are low. To address this, the platforms exert governmentality power or normative control in order for workers to internalize the pursuit of ratings and digital reputations (Gandini, 2019). In her study of Deliveroo, Sophia Galière (2020) demonstrates how platform removal of entry barriers and badges fosters perceptions of meritocracy, especially in light of unfavourable labour market positions and a lack of better job opportunities. Similarly, in the context of Amazon, Vallas et al. (2022) demonstrate how the creation of a normative ideal of a diligent worker and the use of relational control foster engagement and productivity.

Together, these studies demonstrate how the platform business model relies on dual mechanisms of control: algorithmic management converts network volatility and asset-light outsourcing into real-time directives that discipline a legally detached workforce, while normative scripts enlist workers' identities in the continual pursuit of ratings and availability. This integrated control regime consolidates platform power and shapes the possibilities for labour agency.

LABOUR AGENCY UNDER PLATFORM CAPITALISM

To understand how workers navigate or resist the platform control regime, the paper adopts the definition of labour agency as “intention and practice of taking action for one’s own self-interest and the interest of others” (Rogaly, 2009, p. 1975). This definition is broad enough to encompass various manifestations of agency, including both overt and covert actions, as well as individual and collective actions, and formal and informal actions. Furthermore, the labour agency is viewed as an active constituent of the economy, shaping the systems in which they are embedded, rather than a passive factor of production (Cumbers et al., 2016; Herod, 2001).

The confluence of algorithmic management and externalization of labour initially led many scholars to question whether labour can have any agency. Platforms' control mechanisms, embedded in the labour process governed by algorithms, suppress workers' voices by turning platforms into shadow employers, stripping workers of a conflict and dialogue partner (Gandini, 2019; Vandaele, 2021). Furthermore, labour agencies depend on the local context, as institutions may further constrain agency. For example, institutional regulation of trade unions and employment relationships excludes independent contractors from the right to collectively organize and form a union, thus creating significant obstacles to collective action (Vandaele, 2021).

However, a growing body of research has documented that platform workers are not devoid of agency; on the contrary, they engage in various forms of labour agency. The review of the literature reveals that agency typically takes a collective or individual form, with different degrees of visibility. Workers engage in overt, collective actions by staging coordinated log-off campaigns, flash demonstrations, and protests against platforms' unilateral changes to payment structures and a lack of transparency regarding payment methods (Bessa et al., 2020). Others pursue legal action against the misclassification of their employment status; however, this is hindered by significant discrepancies in reclassification, as well as sectoral and geographical limitations (Potocka-Sionek, 2023). Workers' agency can also take the form of less visible collective action, such as utilizing online forums and messaging apps in various forms of algoactivism (Kellogg et al., 2020).

Workers also engage in individual forms of agency that are less visible and that occur beneath the surface of normal workplace activities (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Rogaly, 2009). Few existing empirical studies attest to the array of individual acts and subtle forms of resistance through which platform workers contest the power of platforms and attempt to evade the constraints imposed by algorithmic control. Examples include technological countermeasures, such as using fake GPS apps by workers in the United States (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016) or manipulating algorithms and engaging in strategic non-compliance, pragmatic subversion, or workers' misbehaviour (Bonini & Tréré, 2024; Anwar & Graham, 2020; Shapiro, 2020; Reid-Musson et al., 2020). Although largely invisible, these individual tactics secure day-to-day social reproduction under unfavourable conditions of platform relations.

The literature further suggests that whether workers engage in collective or individual action seems to hinge on their ability to establish social (horizontal) and institutional (vertical) linkages. In the platform economy, waiting zones, hotspots, and digital communication channels became important sites for sharing grievances and establishing new social linkages (Cini, 2023; Maffie, 2020). These horizontal linkages bind geographically scattered workers into an imagined community of the exploited, a cognitive prerequisite for solidarity. Translating labour agency into collective action also depends on institutional linkages. Traditional unions, grassroots organizations, and worker centres supply legal expertise, tactical know-how, and strike funds, giving platform workers an organizational structure and resources needed to translate workers' agency into durable, collective action (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Maffie, 2020). From this perspective, individual acts of agency are an important first step toward building solidarity and collective action. However, other scholars have raised their skepticism, pointing out that individual low-level agency expressions align with, rather than challenge, the platform business model (Barratt et al., 2020).

Despite this significant body of research on platform control regimes and labour agency, we still know little about worker agency under the subcontracting platform model and in hybrid institutional settings, both of which can create opportunities or further constrain labour agency. For example, working for a subcontractor can provide couriers with a ready-made peer network and a gathering place, facilitating agency potential; however, it also further blurs employer identity, creating obstacles for collective organizing. Similarly, gaps and ambiguities in the institutional setting can open space for self-organization; however, weak institutions limit access to resources and formal representation channels, normalizing individual strategies for material gain over collective solidarity. Therefore, the paper posits that algorithmic control, subcontracting model of work organization, and weak institutions act as mediators of platform control regimes and redirect agency toward covert, individual action.

CASE SELECTION AND METHODOLOGY

While the platform economy encompasses a wide range of heterogeneous economic activities performed via digital platforms, this paper focuses specifically on food delivery as the most fully developed and visible segment of the platform economy in Croatia and Serbia, characterized by significant foreign investment, rapid expansion, and institutional ambiguity.

The food delivery platform economy in both countries began to develop in the mid-2000s with the founding of domestic start-ups, such as Donesi.com (Serbia, 2006) and Pauza.hr (Croatia, 2008). These early platforms initially operated as online sites that aggregated food offerings and facilitated online orders, while the actual delivery was carried out by restaurant staff. Their acquisition by the German platform Delivery Hero in 2015 marked a significant transition toward a platform-based model. This transformation was further intensified with the entry of the Finnish platform Wolt (2018) and the Spanish multi-category platform Glovo (2019), both of which introduced app-based, on-demand task allocation, piece-meal remuneration and externalization of labour. Subsequent global mergers and acquisitions, namely those of Delivery Hero and Glovo, and Wolt and DoorDash, further reshaped the food delivery market in these two countries, resulting in the dominant positions of Wolt and Glovo, despite the entry of newer competitors.

The rapid expansion of this sector was further enabled by the absence of effective regulatory frameworks in both product and labour markets. Food delivery platforms operating in Croatia and Serbia face very few to no barriers to market entry, as there are no specific rules governing the provision of food services via digital platforms. Similarly, in the domain of labour regulation, platforms have been successful in bypassing domestic regulations either by classifying workers as self-employed or subcontracting them through intermediary firms.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis further accelerated the expansion of food delivery. As restaurants shifted to takeout models and consumer demand for delivery services increased, platforms rapidly expanded their market penetration. At the same time, for many workers facing unemployment and limited job opportunities, platform work became one of the few accessible sources of income. In this context, food delivery emerged not only as a dominant form of platform labour but also as a de facto response to structural labour market deficiencies.

Against this backdrop, and in order to understand workers' agency, the paper draws on in-depth interviews with food delivery couriers on Wolt and Glovo, two platforms that dominate the Croatian and Serbian markets. Interviews were conducted in person between February and July 2023 in the capital city of each country. A total of 53 semi-structured interviews with food delivery couriers comprised the data set for the analysis, of which 33 couriers were associated with Wolt and 20 couriers were affiliated with Glovo. The sole criterion for participation was current engagement in work on a food delivery platform, regardless of whether it represented primary activity or a way of supplementing their income. Recruitment was carried out opportunistically by meeting workers in public areas, such as in front of restaurants, known waiting zones, and public squares. Snowball sampling and referrals were employed, but proved largely ineffective, highlighting the fragmented and individualized nature of the workforce. Despite these limitations in recruitment, the resulting sample included participants across different employment statuses: five self-employed individuals, two participants with student work contracts, and 46 subcontracted workers, among whom many were informally employed. The duration of participants' engagement on platforms varied from one month to four years. The sample also included 44 male participants, nine female participants, eight foreign nationals, and 45 nationals.

Interviews were conducted in the local languages and English and lasted between 30 and 145 minutes. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, exploring issues related to daily work routines, income and cost structures, incentives and penalties, interactions with platforms and subcontractors, perceptions of autonomy, control, and risks. All participants were provided with information about the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw at any time, and measures taken to ensure confidentiality. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent, anonymized and transcribed. The data were analyzed through an abductive and iterative two-stage coding process in NVivo (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Line-by-line coding was used to capture workers' own terms for tactics, risks, and control triggers. In the second stage, these descriptive codes were aggregated into patterns. In the final stage, patterns were linked to the theory and research questions (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

LABOUR AGENCY AMONG FOOD DELIVERY COURIERS IN CROATIA AND SERBIA

In the Croatian and Serbian food delivery sector, as in other countries, the platform control regime significantly shapes the potential for agency. Food delivery couriers are assigned tasks, monitored, evaluated and disciplined through algorithmic management. Digital reward and punishment mechanisms are also used to incentivize workers to work long hours under high intensity. For example, Glovo requires couriers in both Croatia and Serbia to preselect time slots during the week in order to perform deliveries, thereby, in reality, turning flexible working time into shift work. Furthermore, access to the selection of time slots depends on performance scores, and to maintain a high performance score, the courier must adhere to their selected time slots. The performance score is based on a combination of adherence to rules, customer reviews, working during high-demand periods, and the number of deliveries. Performance scores influence access to tasks, with more tasks available for those with higher performance scores. Mechanisms of normative control, such as leadership boards, courier of the month, and bonus schemes, also incentivize couriers to internalize the top-performer logic, stay engaged on the platform, and intensify their effort. The majority of interviewed couriers attest to working long hours and engaging in hazardous driving to expedite deliveries, all with the goal of meeting ever-increasing bonus targets.

Another important element distinctly shaping agency potential in Croatia and Serbia is the platforms' organizational strategy for externalizing labour. The overwhelming majority of interviewed couriers perform this type of work through subcontractors (84% in Croatia and 97% in Serbia). However, the organization of work through subcontracting does not eliminate the platform's control over the labour process; the platform's algorithm still allocates tasks, monitors, evaluates, and disciplines workers, and the platform sets the piecemeal remuneration per task. The role of subcontractors primarily focuses on recruitment and workforce management functions, including preparing, managing, and negotiating employment contract terms, enrolling workers in social security programs, and making payments to workers. For these "services," subcontractors charge fees from the couriers, thus further exacerbating the imperative of income generation and transfer of costs stemming from the platform business model.

Lastly, the agency of food delivery couriers in Croatia and Serbia cannot be fully understood without reference to the weak institutional setting and unfavourable labour market conditions. Economic insecurities and periods of prolonged unemployment experienced over the years of turbulent transition left a significant proportion of

citizens without savings and with substantial debts. At the same time, reforms implemented during the transition period have not brought many improvements to labour markets, nor have they increased trust in institutions. The legacy of the transition period is still evident, as the levels of the informal economy remain relatively high in both countries. In Croatia, the informal economy constitutes 29.5% of GDP, while in Serbia, it accounts for 31.3% of GDP (World Economics, 2023). The inability to earn enough to satisfy basic material needs through their traditional jobs was the main reason why around 65 percent of interviewed platform workers across both countries perform platform work either as their primary work or as supplemental work in addition to their more traditional employment.

Therefore, the labour agency, under these triple constraints of algorithmic control, subcontracting, and unfavourable labour markets, takes on a short-term, income-generating focus, which shifts the agency from collective to individual actions of strategic non-compliance with platform rules and strategic misappropriation of institutional rules. Strategic non-compliance refers to individual actions taken by food delivery couriers, such as task selection, rejections, and timed log-offs, that deliberately bend or break platform rules with the aim of maximizing profit. Strategic misappropriations capture couriers' use of subcontracting and institutional grey zones to underreport hours and/or wages, evade taxes and externalize costs. The subsections below detail how each strategy emerges from, and in turn reinforces, the hybrid platform regime in Croatia and Serbia.

Decoding the Algorithm and Strategic Non-Compliance

Before they can even consider resisting it, couriers must first understand the opaque algorithmic system that allocates tasks and calculates pay. As one of the Croatian food delivery couriers explains: "It [the algorithm] is not transparent at all. The pay per delivery changes with no logic; there is no set pay for taking the delivery or per kilometre" (interview fd1cro14). Other couriers have a sense that the algorithm is not neutral but "set up so everyone has to stay engaged and work more. They don't want a situation where on the last day of the weekly bonus, there is no one working" (interview fd1srb11). Some food delivery workers even attest to human interference with the algorithmic task allocation. In Croatia, a food delivery courier explains how they received a message through the app asking if they were available to deliver an order under a certain number. "When I replied that I had not received that order, they told me if I wanted it, they would set it up for me" (interview fd1cro11). Similarly, a Serbian courier on the same app attests to receiving phone calls directly from the company inquiring whether he was willing to make a specific delivery, which he then received via the app (interview fd1srb4). Another common complaint regarding the algorithms' lack of neutrality is that participants view the algorithm as being set up to favour couriers who work through subcontractors over those who are self-employed. However, such claims remain in the realm of suspicion as food delivery couriers across the two countries lack evidence: "We can not prove it, because we don't have access to it...maybe if we had a union, we could do it" (interview fd1cro12).

In the absence of access to algorithms or formal channels of redress, one way Croatian and Serbian food delivery couriers are attempting to make sense of algorithmic task allocation and pay systems is by building their own personal data sets or diaries, logging every order, distance, wait time, and euro earned in notebooks or by taking phone screenshots. Through this self-imposed data collection, food delivery workers gain some insight about the work effort they need to put in. As one courier explains, "If I can complete three or more deliveries per hour, I know I am doing well. However, if I am completing less than three, I have a problem" (interview fd2cro2). This self-datafication also serves to protect workers from the fallibility of the algorithm. The following illustrations vividly depict this necessity:

"It so happened that I have completed the delivery, but it wasn't reflected on my daily summary in the app. I contacted the support and they told me I needed to send them the name of the restaurant, the number of the delivery order, the time,...of course, I didn't have any of that information. Since then, I always take screenshots of my orders" (interview fd1srb6).

Meticulous accounts are also needed regarding their costs in order to understand exactly how much they earn on the platform. This is true for both self-employed individuals and those working under subcontractors, as in either case, couriers bear the cost of work-related expenses and may even have to pay fees to subcontractors.

Once food delivery couriers have enough information about how the system works and where it fails, they translate this knowledge into a repertoire of individually executed refusals and workarounds. The most common

strategy is the selective acceptance of tasks. The most vivid debate among food delivery couriers in both Croatia and Serbia is whether it is more profitable to accept long delivery routes or to reject them and focus on short deliveries. The long delivery route potentially offers a greater financial reward, but couriers risk spending more time in traffic on a single delivery and having to return to their preferred area without a delivery, thus increasing higher costs. As one of the interviewees succinctly described the essence of the debate, "you have to weigh a €9 long run against three short jobs under €2. Sometimes quick money is safer" (interview fd1cro7). Others rely on a different understanding of algorithmic matching:

"I always accept long delivery routes because I noticed the app stacks deliveries along the route. As soon as I finish one, another one is already ringing. However, if I refuse, the queue resets and I have to wait for a new delivery request" (interview fd2sr5).

Diverse task selection strategies also include rejecting low-paid tasks, orders from the restaurants known to have long waiting times, or deliveries that are difficult to execute. For example, one courier from Croatia calculated that he loses one delivery per hour when he accepts deliveries to high-rise buildings (interview fd2cro8), while another affirms that using elevators or stairs and finding parking is where most time is wasted (interview fd1cro15). Similarly, many couriers from Serbia attest to avoiding deliveries to buildings without elevators, areas with difficult parking, or deliveries that require a lot of effort. As one food delivery courier, who delivers on a bicycle, commented, "cycling up that hill to get €2-3 is just not worth it" (interview fd1sr18). These rejections of tasks and log-offs also suggest that normative control mechanisms, such as leaderboards or bonus schemes, are effective only up to the point at which they clash with couriers' earning logic.

In sum, algorithmic sense-making equips couriers with a calculative rationality that frames every task as a cost-benefit calculation. The same calculations feed strategic non-compliance: rejecting, cancelling, or timing work to maximize net earnings in the face of opaque rules and algorithmic discipline. Yet, this individualized, data-driven strategy also locks couriers into a perpetual chase for higher earnings through trial and error, keeping the labour process running despite its fallibility.

Subcontracting and Strategic Misappropriations

Whereas strategic non-compliance bends the platform's algorithmic rule, strategic misappropriation is engendered by the interaction between platforms' organizational strategies of externalizing labour and local institutional conditions.

Subcontracting as an organizational strategy typically represents an adaptation to institutional constraints; using third parties enables platforms to appear to comply with local legal requirements and/or protects them from the risk of reclassifying couriers as platform workers. In Croatia and Serbia, subcontracting also represents organizational adaptation to labour agency, as it grew from workers' resistance toward the independent contractor model. The majority of interview couriers do not want to work as individual contractors on a platform, as they do not see themselves as entrepreneurs. "To do this through my own firm, I don't have enough knowledge," one of the Croatian couriers summarized what many other couriers also expressed as a lack of knowledge, skills, or even motivation to navigate being self-employed. "My brother knew one of the subcontractors, so I went with him," she continues, "it's much easier, you just do your deliveries and don't have to think about anything else" (interview fd2cro1).

Other couriers prefer to work through a subcontractor because they are trying to work around maintaining state transfers while gaining additional income. This is commonly found among couriers who are retired, students, or other recipients of state benefits. As one of the couriers-recipient of state benefits explains her reasoning:

"I am a single mum of a wonderful boy with special needs. I had to quit my job to take care of him. Nevertheless, the financial benefits I receive from the state are not enough. I had to find ways to fill the home budget while having the flexibility to work around my son's needs. Glovo offers me that, and I have an arrangement with my contractor to work without a contract so I can keep the state benefits," (interview fd2cro9).

These tactics of working without a contract, enabled by platforms' desire to externalize labour and weak institutions, became a conscious repertoire of tactics used by platform workers to improve their own material position.

In addition to informal work, couriers in both countries display a sophisticated understanding of the local legal landscape and employ diverse tactics to circumvent it in order to increase their take-home earnings. One such tactic is contract shopping, where couriers “shop” among subcontractors for the cheapest fee structure or the most flexible work arrangements. As one of the interviewed couriers explains:

“There are a bunch of subcontractors advertising and offering different things and charging different fees. Some charge a fixed fee, others say if you make this much, the fee is 2% but if you don’t make as much, they will charge you more. Some will even take 10%. You also need to ask around to see if a subcontractor is decent or not” (interview fd1sr17).

Flexible work arrangements include negotiating various employment contracts that can bring cost savings by decreasing tax and social contribution deductions. For example, negotiating employment contracts that stipulate fewer hours of work or lower contractual salary is the most common tactic. One of the interviewed couriers described the reasoning behind such arrangements:

“I have an employment contract, but for two hours a week. In reality, I spend between five and eight hours working, depending on the day. That allows me to have higher take-home earnings and cover all my costs. It is a good model of coexistence” (interview fd1cro5).

This quote reflects that strategic misappropriation is a rational decision by workers to increase earnings, but also an action that allows platforms and subcontractors to continue externalizing risks and costs while extracting value, thus reinforcing the system. As such, these individual tactics come at a structural cost.

Status fragmentation and the pursuit of individual interests create an obstacle to building solidarity among workers. Platform workers can be in informal relationships, quasi-formal relationships, employed as part-time or full-time workers, or operate as self-employed individuals. This situation causes problems when workers try to organize collectively. One of the couriers from Croatia attested to these difficulties, pointing out that he “encountered a significant division among workers regarding their views on what an employment relationship in platform work should entail” (interview fd1cro14).

Furthermore, subcontracting brings more confusion about who the appropriate partner is to voice grievances to or who the negotiating partner is. In fact, in such cases, workers are commonly faced with a situation where each actor points elsewhere. For example, when a group of Croatian couriers had a grievance over changes in the payment structure, the platform directed them to subcontractors, while the subcontractors renounced any role, pointing out that it is the platform that sets the rates (interview fd1cro11). Similarly, Serbian couriers who work without a contract face the reality of their exclusion from formal institutions once they have a grievance or, worse, when they experience accidents at work. Such diffusion of responsibility further discourages coordinated demands and collective organization. The weak enforcement of rules just reinforces the belief that institutions meant to protect workers are failing them. Disillusions and low levels of trust in institutions are often evoked as justification for engaging in such strategic misappropriation.

In sum, strategic misappropriations illustrate how agency is relational and context-dependent: couriers exploit the very fissures that platforms and weak institutions create. Yet every misappropriation deepens fragmentation and erodes the social foundations of collective voice.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to explore labour agency in countries that remain largely unaffected by the increasing wave of platform worker mobilization and labour unrest. Drawing on 53 interviews with food delivery couriers in Croatia and Serbia, the paper identifies a triple constraint in the form of algorithmic control, subcontracting model of work organization, and structurally weak institutions that divert the agency away from collective channels and into two individualized repertoires: strategic non-compliance and strategic misappropriation. Strategic non-compliance refers to individual actions such as task selection, rejections, and timed logoffs that deliberately bend or break platform rules with the aim of maximizing profit. Strategic misappropriations involve couriers’ use of subcontracting and institutional weaknesses to externalize costs, thereby increasing their take-home earnings. These findings bring nuance to the prevailing platform labour unrest narrative (Umney et al.,

Bessa et al.) by showing that in the absence of overt collective action, platform workers still have agency, but it takes the form of individual and hidden actions.

The findings resonate with established scholarship on everyday resistance (Scott, 1985) and reworking practices (Katz, 2004) and on individual tactics against algorithmic control in the platform economy (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Bonini & Treré, 2024). Yet, the findings presented here broaden our understanding of labour agency in several ways. By mapping how food delivery couriers engage in strategic non-compliance and strategic misappropriations, the paper shows how workers exercise calculative and survivalist forms of agency, which go beyond just resisting or renegotiating algorithmic control. The findings also expand our understanding of the impact of the organizational model on agency, which goes beyond self-employment status as the crucial element shaping platform workers' agency potential (Barratt et al., 2020). Subcontracting, as an alternative organizational strategy for externalizing labour, is also an important factor in shaping agency as individual expression. The findings show that strategic misappropriation is not only a survival tactic, but it is also co-produced by the platform governance architecture that fissures the employment. The weak institutional setting acts as an enabling condition not only for platform companies and subcontractors to engage in various forms of institutional toying (Benassi & Kornelakis, 2021) but also for workers who learn how to navigate those loopholes.

Furthermore, subcontracting and weak institutions hinder the transformation of individual action into collective action. While the subcontracting model could strengthen vertical linkages, the blurring of employer identity and the variety of statuses it fosters fragment solidarity and create further obstacles for building collective action. Weak institutions also hinder the creation of institutional linkages necessary for transforming individual agency into sustainable collective action. This means that recent regulatory efforts to reclassify workers or impose rules around algorithmic control alone, without piercing the subcontractor veil, cannot act as catalysts for the collective voice.

The findings in this paper are subject to common limitations associated with the use of qualitative research design, including the observation of only one sector of the platform economy in just two countries of the CEE region. Future research could expand the analysis geographically and incorporate explorations on how regulatory responses and changes in enforcement alter both platform strategies and workers' tactics over time. While Croatia adopted new rules regarding platform work during the study period, the delayed entry into force in 2024 meant that discussion about its effects remained outside this paper. Within the labour agency, there is also a need for a deeper investigation of the mechanisms by which individual agency shifts or fails to shift into collective action.

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