

Accepted Manuscript of:

Paolo Borghi and Annalisa Murgia (2024, Online First) Beyond borders: Trans-organisational and transnational alliances among gig workers in the United Kingdom and Italy, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221856241238617>.

This version of the article has been accepted for publication after peer review but is not the Version of Record and does not reflect post-acceptance improvements, or any corrections. The Version of Record is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221856241238617>.

Beyond Borders: Trans-organisational and Trans-national Alliances Among Gig Workers in the UK and Italy

Abstract

This article examines the activities of the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB) and Deliverance Milano (DM), the main collective actors that are currently organising food delivery platform workers in London and Milan respectively. Both IWGB and DM seek to encourage and support alliances across organisational boundaries as well as across national borders, albeit in different ways. Drawing on a combination of participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis, the findings of these case studies suggest that IWGB and DM are successfully developing trans-organisational and trans-national alliances and ties. The article contributes to the growing literature on the renewal of workers' representation, focusing on the relationship between trade unions and other collective actors at local as well as national and international levels. In particular, we propose a distinction between *purpose-oriented* and *value-oriented* alliances, both present in the networks of collective actors engaged in organising platform workers.

Keywords: Alliances, Collective representation, Food-delivery, Gig workers, Organising

Introduction

In this article we aim to contribute to the wide-ranging debate on the renewal of representation processes, focusing on new collective actors in the platform work sector, where the organisation of work and employment relations – heavily reliant on self-employment – make workers weaker and encourage the emergence of individualistic approaches to work. Through the analysis of two case studies, the Independent Workers’ Union of Great Britain (IWGB) and Deliverance Milano (DM), respectively active in the UK and Italy, we aim to answer the following research questions: What kind of alliances are promoted to support platform workers’ representation? How are they constructed, which collective actors are involved, and under what conditions do they prove to be successful?

The article is structured as follows. After presenting the debate on the renewal of workers’ representation, we illustrate the research context and methods. Findings are then presented, which focus on trans-organisational and trans-national alliances promoted by IWGB in the UK and DM in Italy. Finally, we discuss our findings and conclude.

The Renewal of Collective Representation and the Key Role of Alliances

The debate on the representation gap (Heery, 2009; Towers, 1997) and the renewal of workers’ representation has widely focused on trade union revitalisation considering, from a comparative perspective, state policies and the different institutional contexts of industrial relations systems (Frege, 2003). Many authors analyse different forms of organising, emphasising their variety in different territories, sectors (Gall, 2009), and workplaces (Simms, 2013). Others explore the connection between organising and servicing (Carter, 2006; Jerrard et al., 2009), questioning organising usefulness and effectiveness (De Turberville, 2004, 2007; Waddington, 1995), or claiming that the organising should have an expansive function for the democratization of work through the inclusion of poorly represented groups (Dörre et al., 2009).

Union revitalisation, in fact, unfolds along controversial paths, in which some distinct trends can be identified. A first tension that characterises union revitalisation is pointed out by Simms and Holgate (2010), who discuss the limited results of organising practices when they are conceived of as a ‘toolbox of practices’ instead of a strategy with long-term political vision aimed at changing the culture of unions. A second trend concerns the renewal of the ‘repertoires of contention’ (McAdam et al., 2004, p.16), which increasingly include online campaigns, as

well as digital protests, that can have different consequences for the organisational dynamics and outcomes of both trade unions and grassroots groups. Digital media can indeed be a favourable channel for conveying alternative imageries and involving different audiences, but their effectiveness and strength is always linked to specific socio-political and cultural conditions (Geelan and Hodder, 2017; Treré et al., 2017). Moreover, in significant cases, unions tend to replicate top-down communication strategies even when using digital tools, therefore limiting possible interactions between union and non-union members (Carneiro and Costa, 2022). Finally, is the attempt to contrast union decline through a widespread use of organising strategies with the aim to involve new members (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017), who are often precarious, young, women, and migrants (Alberti et al., 2013; Hodder and Kretsos, 2015, Keune, 2013). In doing so, tensions between traditional and new constituencies have become visible, highlighting the differences between insiders and outsiders. In some cases, these organising attempts aim to renovate cultural approaches ‘to’ and strategies ‘of’ representation; in other cases, they have the mere intention of counterbalancing or reducing the loss of representativeness (Behrens et al., 2004).

Over the years, several authors have suggested that theory and research on workers’ representation should expand its gaze to different collective actors and coalitions engaged in workers’ representation (Heery and Frege, 2006; Ibsen and Tapia, 2017; Tapia et al., 2015). Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick (2017) underline how the growth of employment insecurity, further fostered by the last financial crisis and by the emergence of new economies based on global digital platforms, also puts into question the role of trade unions being mainly concentrated on their core membership, only narrowly encompassing the growing precarious workforce. In this respect, the ‘new’ social movements, considered as less institutionalised forms of collective mobilisation than trade unions, are identified as potential allies in the face of challenges that result from growing labour market insecurity. In particular, Cha and colleagues (2018), through a comparative case study in the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, show that emerging cultures of activism can facilitate the building of alliances between trade unions and other social movements. The authors underline the strategic role of young people as effective ‘connectors’ of trade unions and social movements, playing a relevant role in reframing traditional labour issues, especially when focusing on working conditions, precarity of employment and wages, thereby creating opportunities for the unions’ revitalization. Other authors have focused on the relationship between trade unions and organised community groups. As an example, Perrett and Lucio (2009) show the gaps between trade unions and community groups in black and minority ethnic (BME) communities and

underline that further effort is required in the renewal of representation to understand community politics within BME groups and the way they perceive trade unions. More recently, also the interaction of indie unions with well-established unions has received growing attention in the debate. In particular, Smith (2021) illustrates how the former – part of the wider community of practices within the labour movement – can influence the latter, playing a relevant role in union renewal, creating what Però (2019) defined as communities of struggle.

In analysing these phenomena, consideration should also be given to the fact that trade union revitalisation also relies on the ability to improve workers' representation not only within national borders. In this direction, attempts have been made by unions to implement collective bargaining at national and transnational levels in the Eurozone (Glassner and Pochet, 2011) and in the face of the recent financial crisis (Lehndorff et al., 2018). Also, in terms of collective organising processes, it has long been discussed how so-called 'transnational activism' (Tarrow, 2006) should be integrated into the discourses and practices of labour movements (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017). In this regard, digital technologies often represent an opportunity (and sometimes a limitation) for building alliances across national borders (Geelan and Hodder, 2017; Kelly Garrett, 2006), which are already embedded in specific dynamics experienced by unions at local and national level (Lévesque and Murray, 2010). Underhill and colleagues (2020) show how Australian unions dealing with migrant temporary workers' representation rely on conventional methods and resources in some cases, while in other cases the unions explore external digital tools and alliances. Within the latter frame, unions rely on network collectivism, focusing on union organising, building links with collective actors of home countries, and building friendly informal relations with workers.

The existing literature on alliances between trade unions and other organisations at the local and national level tends to emphasise the facilitating role of non-union actors, such as youth, specific groups within BME communities, temporary migrant workforces or independent trade unions (Cha et al., 2018; Perrett and Lucio, 2009; Underhill et al., 2020). In terms of transnational alliances, particular attention is paid, on the one hand, to trade union capacities to mobilise its power resources, on the other hand, to the role of digital technologies in contributing to effective transnational labour solidarity (Geelan and Hodder, 2017; Lévesque and Murray, 2010). Although fundamental for defining and interpreting trade union alliances, we argue that its power resources, as well as the role of other collective actors or social media, are not sufficient to capture the process that leads to the emergence of alliances. In this study we suggest, first, to explore the point of view not only of the trade unions but also of the other actors involved in the alliances, and second, to shift the spotlight from the actors and strategies

used to the motivations capable of activating the alliances and the co-construction of forms of collective action.

Through a study of the practices of organising developed through alliances between different types of actors in the labour movement, and in line with critical approaches that aim to overcome the dichotomy of labour *versus* movement research – and the associated polarisation that has long considered trade unions as more focused on the defence of interests of their members and social movements as more concerned with shared values and immaterial concerns (Grote and Wagemann, 2018; Johansson et al., 2019), we discuss two types of alliances we identified at local, national, and transnational levels. On the one hand, *purpose-oriented* alliances, when the objective is circumscribed to well-defined frames and goals connected to the representation of the workforce; on the other hand, *value-oriented alliances*, when the scope is less tied to specific events or claims that go beyond the representation of platform workers. In doing so, we show how both purpose and value orientation can emerge and intertwine at different scale level between new and old collective actors focused on workers' representation. Values and purposes, in fact, while they cannot be distinguished from each other except for analytical purposes, in the two case studies analysed turned out to have different influences on the likelihood of success of emerging forms of collective action for the improvement of platform workers' rights.

In the following sections, after presenting the research method and context, the article seeks to better understand these two forms of alliances and to analyse their effectiveness by discussing the practices of organising in the food-delivery sector in the UK and Italy.

Research contexts and methods

The United Kingdom is characterised by a long history of collective bargaining, which was systematically dismantled by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party when it came to power in 1979. This significantly increased employers' unilateral decisions and weakened trade union power, producing a reduction of collective actions and an increase of individual legal cases as a tool of conflict. With the New Labour government in 1997, the essential elements of Thatcher's neoliberal policy more or less remained in place (Howell, 2007), except for limited 're-regulation' of the labour market through the Employment Relations Act 1999, with 'the introduction of a statutory union recognition procedure, framed to intrude as little as possible on business interests' (Forsyth, 2022, p. 36).

The recent growth of platform work in the UK – one of the first countries where corporations such as Uber and Deliveroo tested their model in the European area – also stimulated early reactions among workers, who started to organise in 2016, when the first strike against Deliveroo took place. IWGB was the main collective actor focused on riders and drivers in the UK, with a strong presence in London. From the beginning, the union supported organising processes, wildcat strike actions, networks with other collective actors and the internationalisation of the struggle, legal and leverage campaigns (Woodcock and Cant, 2022). Although the attention of national trade unions such as GMB, PCS, UNISON and UNITE¹ on precarious workers, including migrants, has been relevant in previous decades (Gall, 2020), the attention given to platform workers in general, and to riders and drivers in particular, has been quite limited (Bertolini and Dukes, 2021). Exceptions in this field are few and controversial, as in the case of GMB, which made some weak attempts to represent Uber drivers (Aslam and Woodcock, 2020), signing an agreement with Uber as part of a competitive strategy with IWGB, which strongly contested the agreement (Gall, 2020).

As far as Italy is concerned, Eberwein and colleagues (2018) underline the strategic role played by trade union unity in the regulation of conflicts. The three ideologically orientated national union confederations (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2018 [2013]) and the more significant role of the representative bodies at workplace level (Forsyth, 2022) are other relevant traits that distinguish Italy from the United Kingdom. In this case, to respond to the flexibilization of the labour market, the three confederal trade unions started representing non-standard workers in the late 1990s (Regalia, 2012), although they were organised in separate branches. This choice had the side effect of limiting the solidarity between standard and non-standard workers, although paths of inclusion were detected for example in the case of temporary agency workers, therefore configuring a selective inclusiveness towards atypical workers (Benassi et al., 2019; Durazzi, 2017). The selective inclusion of non-standard workers in the main trade unions made room for grassroots groups, such as the ‘San Precario’ network,² which was one of the main activist networks that attempted to mobilise against precarious work (Author2 et al., 2012).

In recent years, trade unions have experienced a similar delay in reacting to the growth (in numbers and visibility) of platform workers (Author1 et al., 2021; Cini et al., 2021). Since 2016, different grassroots groups, such as Deliverance Project in Turin, DM in Milan and Riders Union Bologna, have started to organise food delivery riders when trade unions have been reluctant. It was only a few years later that the trade unions CGIL and UIL made their first attempts to organise riders through pilot projects at local level. At the same time, trade

unions started lobbying to open a path to collective bargaining, which proved difficult due to the evasive behaviour of platforms (Quondamatteo, 2021). Collective bargaining was finally included in act 128/2019 regulating food and goods delivery at national level, which limited piecework and established a necessary dialogue between platforms and the most representative trade unions for the purpose of collective agreements. However, Assodelivery – the association representing the main food delivery platforms – evaded these obligations and signed an agreement with UGL, a minor right-wing trade union, pretending it was the most representative union. This agreement was later deemed illegal by the courts.

This study analyses two qualitative case studies (Yin, 2013) to investigate the types of alliances developed by these organisations – IWGB in London and DM in Milan – across organisational boundaries and national borders. In particular, the cases were selected according to the ‘most different’ methodological approach (Seawright and Gerring, 2008) having found in these two very different European industrial relations systems rather similar dynamics.

IWGB is an independent trade union based in London that has branches in other cities. It is one of the main unions focused on migrant and gig workers in the UK. At the time of the fieldwork, it had specific branches for care workers, cleaners, security guards, private hire drivers, charity workers, yoga teachers, game workers, food delivery riders and other workers of logistics. Each branch was organised at local level and enjoyed broad independence in organising and mobilising workers and supporters at company level.

DM is based in Milan but also plays a relevant role at the national level, being one of the promoters of national protests, strikes and coalitions. It was created in 2016 by five young activists and precarious workers with the common idea of fighting the increasing diffusion of precarious work. It was the second grassroots group focused on riders’ representation created in Italy, a few months after ‘Deliverance Project’ in Turin. Since the start, DM has organised riders and offered them legal advice in cases of unfair dismissals or missed payments. During the fieldwork DM also implemented a strong communication strategy through social media to inform and organise riders as well as to counterbalance the dominant rhetoric of platforms.

Data collection was carried out by Author 1 through a multi-sited ethnography (Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995) in Italy and the UK. The fieldwork was realised in Italy between July and December 2018 and July and December 2020 (with some interviews realised in the months following the fieldwork) and included, in addition to participant observation, 37 in-depth interviews with activists and platform workers. Data collection in the UK took place between March and August 2019 (with some further interviews realised in May 2021) and July and December 2021. In this case too, the ethnography was further informed by 38 in-depth

interviews. The research activities were mainly based in Milan and London, but interviews and participant observations were also conducted in other cities, according to the evolving process of the fieldwork and the key actors included in our study. In particular, both the ‘key people’, present at multiple sites and multiple local events, and ‘the conflict’, through participation in public and internal meetings as well as in demonstrations, pickets and public events, were followed (see Marcus, 1995). The study was conducted in English and Italian, then fieldnotes and interviews were all transcribed and translated into English. Data were shared every two weeks via a server remotely accessible by both authors to allow subsequent data collection based on shared reflections.

Data analysis initially followed an open inductive approach, based on iterative stages of thematic coding of interviews, fieldnotes and documents (Boyatzis, 1998) with the support of the software Atlas.ti (version 8.4). After this first phase of analysis, relationships with other collective actors and the building of alliances emerged as a key theme among the organising practices of both IWGB and DM. The second coding phase therefore focused on the characteristics of these relationships, the way they were developed, and the collective actors involved.

Findings

Trans-organisational alliances at local and national levels

During the fieldwork we investigated how the organisations studied conceived and practiced platform workers’ representation, following specific campaigns and protests. In this frame, we could identify – at both local and national level – specific alliances and connections with other organisations, which resulted in strategies for specific purposes connected to workers’ representation.

In London, we followed a protest that involved riders who usually delivered McDonald’s food in Dalston.³ Members of local unions – as in the case of tenants’ trade unions or members of the local branch of the Socialist Party – were active participants in protests and pickets, distributing leaflets and shouting claims, as seen in the picture below, which shows the participation of both union members and activists linked to political parties. After being asked to wait for orders in a parking area 200 metres away, couriers began to demand that the car park be equipped with shelters for the rain, public toilets, and above all new parameters for the

algorithm assigning orders, so that they would not be penalised for the excessive distance of the waiting point.



Picture 1: Action organised on 9 October 2021 in London © Author

During the pickets some local councillors from the Labour Party played an active role in the mediation process with the owner of the local McDonald's shop. According to IWGB members, the presence of different groups and activists in their protests was a well-established practice aimed at displaying a large and stable social front to gain the support of public opinion and influence public institutions. The boycott lasted for three months and obliged the local cabinet member for community safety to promise shelters and toilets at the new waiting point, also mediating with platforms over the redefinition of geolocation for order collection.⁴

A second protest we followed was against Ocado Zoom, because the company induced some self-employed workers with migrant origins – mainly Pakistanis and Bengalis working exclusively for Ocado Zoom through the service companies Ryde and Stuart – to invest in electric or hybrid cars, promising them a significant increase in delivery orders (the equivalent of forty working hours per week). This was part of a plan towards a 'green transition', which was totally dismantled by the new management several weeks after the workers had invested all their savings in electric and hybrid cars and most of the orders shifted to couriers with diesel cars and motorbikes. The company also adopted a fire-and-rehire strategy to save money with the new contract, then reduced payments per delivery.

One of the protests against these decisions was held on 30 September 2021 in West London, close to Acton Town; it was part of a large and coordinated shaming campaign after BME key worker jobs were threatened. The demonstration started in front of the Ocado Zoom

showroom-warehouse (from which couriers used to start their service). Workers, members of IWGB, and activists formed a parade in the surrounding area where warehouses alternated with small businesses such as tyre and car repair shops. Workers, activists, and different supporters, including the founder of the NOcado campaign⁵ and the local MP for Ealing Central, gave public speeches. The Ocado Zoom protest emerged as an opportunity to establish an alliance between IWGB and the local community of Archway and Turnfell in London, who promoted the campaign against the Ocado project to install an intensive 24/7 depot close to Yerbury primary school. The contested project was brought forward as a result of the company trying to elude rules on urban development and hide the side effects of the project, including air, light, and noise pollution that would be produced by intense and non-stop logistical activity in the core of the local community. During the action organised by IWGB, one of the promoters of the NOcado campaign claimed:

There are several reasons to join our protest with the one of Ocado Zoom workers promoted by IWGB. It's about the exploitative aim of the company, it's about the gap between its ethical claims, which include both fair treatment of workers and its commitments for an ecological transition and what the company actually does. No respect for workers who invested their own savings in ecological transition, no respect for the community installing a storage building where hundreds of diesel trucks will pollute the area, also producing noise seven days per week, twenty-four hours per day.

The coordination of IWGB and the NOcado campaign was strong and stable during the following months, with mutual support in the initiatives organised by both organisations. During the same protest, a representative of IWGB also read a long message sent by Black Lives Matter⁶ London:

[...] We can't be with you in person, but we are with you in spirit. We have a message we want to send to all workers. We want to make you know that we all stand in complete solidarity with you in your struggle against Ocado and we look upon your action here today with admiration and respect. We also have a message for Ocado bosses if they didn't know already, we want to make our position crystal clear: we are sick of sick treatments of black and brown workers on the hands of Ocado and we completely reject that

political gesturing. It is absurd that Ocado pretends to be an ethical brand to be committed in equality and diversity. You cannot be selectively anti-racist. That's not how it works [...].

This message, delivered during the protest, was strongly supported by the applause of participants, most of them migrant workers, including all those fired after investing all their savings in environmentally friendly vehicles. The opposition to the fake ethical face of the company around environmental and diversity management issues was the core of the struggle. This protest, like others against Deliveroo, was an opportunity to strengthen an alliance not only at local, but also at national level with the Black Lives Matter movement, as stated in an interview with the IWGB representative in charge of BME groups, which constituted the majority of IWGB members. The network of alliances also included other movements, as was the case for the Kill the Bill protest:

Alliances have no bounds, so we work as a local organisation with couriers and with people who are not necessarily couriers, but they stand with us, and we stand with them, and we altogether stand with other groups, as Black Lives Matters or Kill the Bill protest.⁷ Each of those protests are built on going down and standing with your fellow workers, supporting the cause.

The Bill was an attempt by the UK government to restrict the right to protest, allowing the police to limit marches and static protests in case of noise or distress for bystanders. IWGB also had an active role in organising demonstrations, as happened for example on 1st May, International Workers Day 2021. IWGB was one of more than one hundred organisations across the UK that signed the Joint Statement against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. An IWGB activist explained why they strongly supported the protest:

Our actions are conceived to attract attention, to raise debate in the public opinion, to denounce discriminatory actions of companies against workers. Our pickets are noisy, accompanied by music, slogans, claims. Imagine what would happen if this Bill passed. We would be prosecuted for each of these things because the police would simply have the right to do so. This Bill is a way to shut us up and all the organisations fighting against injustice.

Joining national movements, therefore, became a matter of coherence that protected and strengthened the actions that the IWGB carried out. The interweaving of alliances with a wide range of different organisations, such as national and local Black Lives Matter groups, Novaramedia,⁸ and several organisations fighting for LGBTQIA+ and migrants' rights emerged as part of a shared strategy. The wide social front of which IWGB was part also counterbalanced the weak, and in some cases conflictual, connections at the national level with most traditional trade unions:

We have the sister union United Voice of the Work (UVW), we do a lot of actions together, campaigns, protests, things like that. I think with the bigger unions it's a bit of a mixed bag. In some cases, they didn't do good works [...] so we don't have a good relationship. In other cases, we have good relationships with some trade unionists but generally speaking we can't agree with what GMB, to make a recent example, did with drivers. They signed an agreement with Uber, on behalf of drivers they never organised.

Differently from 'bigger unions', UVW focused mainly on low paid, precarious, and migrant workers, sharing the same approach as IWGB – pressuring employers and claiming dignity and respect through direct actions on the streets and through the courts.

Focusing on the Italian case study, DM was part of a thick network too, both at local and national levels. This was partly inherited from its core members, who in the early 2000s were part of the 'San Precario' movement, the first to protest precariousness in Italy, which also had significant reverberations at the European level. Most of the DM network was, however, the result of more recent connections.

At the local level, DM had closed relationships with both left-wing political parties and associations focused on environmental and housing issues, as well as on migrants' rights. Moreover, a small part of the network came from proximity with other organisations active on issues such as feminism, urban development, homelessness, critical consumption, and community organising. This happened because DM's headquarters – Pianoterra,⁹ a squatted flat in Milan – was shared with other activist groups. At this level, the network had weak ties that emerged from thematic and political affinities, which brought a mutual recognition and support to specific events, but rarely evolved into more structured collaborations. Nevertheless, the network worked effectively as a visibility multiplier when collective actions and claims were promoted (both offline and online through social media).

DM's closer relationships improved between 2018 and 2020, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, as reported in an interview by a DM member:

The pandemic was paradoxically a period of great activity. Riders conquered the core of the public debate. The mainstream media were calling us heroes; we were alone in the streets, along with the ambulances, delivering food into people's homes, but the platforms were still cutting back on the distribution of protective equipment and payments were progressively decreasing. So, we had a lot of reasons to protest, and our visibility was significant. Riders' protests were therefore also inspiring for other workers. We were invited to the protests with creative workers, with people claiming the reopening of schools. We discussed every potential alliance in our internal weekly meetings [...] we also had a constant personal dialogue with some trade unionists at local level.

The punctual collective evaluation of feasibility, sustainability, and strategic networking through active participation in protests and events promoted by other groups favoured the progressive implementation of alliances by preserving the internal coherence and claims raised by DM. This was also the case with the protests organised in Milan and led by activists against the CPR (*Centri di Permanenza e Rimpatri*), the detention structures for undocumented migrants. As can be seen in the photo below, the activists positioned themselves on one side of the square, while the DM members with their bicycles were on the other side, due to the distancing measures imposed during the pandemic.



Picture 2: Action organised on 10 July 2020 in Milan © Deliverance Milano

Protests were promoted throughout 2020 to denounce the inhumane detention conditions of migrants during the pandemic, as reported in the fieldnote below:

One of the relevant points of the assembly tonight is the participation in the NO CPR campaign. A DM activist comments on the importance of supporting the movement against CPR also being an extremely sensible issue for many migrants working as riders: “In some cases, migrant riders come from the same countries and in some cases are even friends of those detained in CPR, where human rights are often not respected. Moreover, the extreme living conditions are further worsened during the pandemic: no possibilities for social distancing and hygienic measures to prevent the diffusion of Covid-19.” The activists discuss extensively the opportunity to participate; during the pandemic, several meetings and ‘static demonstrations’ have been organised to denounce the unsafe working conditions of riders. The participation in additional demonstrations is a potential source of stress for most active members. Nevertheless, the assembly decides to promote and participate in the NO CPR campaign, being extremely important for most riders, members of DM.

At national level, instead, the main reference network for DM was a group of trade union branches and grassroots groups conceived in 2018 with the aim of coordinating actions and lobbying activities against the massive misuse of self-employed workers in food delivery.

The national network 'Rider x i Diritti' [Riders 4 rights] is a common framework that identifies different organisations. When we say 'not for us but for all' it is exactly this: thinking beyond ourselves, beyond our organisation; it is not only a theoretical position but also a position of substance: it means to think and act in a coordinated way. When something happens to a person or an organisation of the network, it is something that touches everybody. Alliances start from mutual recognition, from coordination, supporting each other while knowing that in everyday life each organisation is focused on its own activity.

DM was the main promoter of the national network, which represented an attempt to overcome the historical fractures between traditional trade unions on the one hand, and grassroots groups on the other.

We promoted Rider x i Diritti because we realised that a broad alliance with all the different actors involved all over the country was necessary. At the beginning, it all started from us. We discussed the opportunity of a national network with Riders Union Bologna and UilTuCS Milano. Then Firenze Riders and Rider Union Napoli, which are very close to CGIL-NIDIL, joined the network too. Then Rider Union Roma also arrived, as well as CGIL-NIDIL Milano, UIL-TuCS Catania. After some months, other local grassroots groups also joined the network. This network was necessary both to talk with public institutions, and to create a common front against the abuses from digital platforms.

The dialogue with trade unions started through personal direct contact by the co-founder. Significant conflicts between DM and trade unions involved in the national network emerged due to a lack of mutual legitimation, especially in the initial phase. Over time, however, the

constant dialogue favoured the stabilisation of the network that, at the time of the fieldwork, counted 20 organisations all over the country. During the pandemic, the network increased its visibility by promoting protests against food delivery platforms, which neglected to distribute personal protective equipment in good time and in sufficient quantity. The network ‘Riders 4 Rights’ [*Rider x i Diritti*] also succeeded in becoming a recognised stakeholder at the consultation tables promoted by the Italian Government in 2020 and 2021. Consultations had three main purposes: an agreement on safety measures during the pandemic, a protocol against illegal hiring practices (*caporalato*),¹⁰ and a structured discussion aimed at overcoming what was defined as a ‘fake national collective employment agreement’ signed by Assodelivery, the association gathering most food delivery platforms in Italy, and UGL, a right-wing trade union. This provoked the reaction of grassroots groups and unions, which also organised protests and national strikes through the network ‘Riders 4 Rights’. Only one of the three main goals of the consultation tables was achieved with the signing, in March 2021, of a protocol against illegal hiring practices.

The national network therefore emerged both as a progressively structured tool for lobbying and as leverage to mobilise workers at national level, overcoming the historical dichotomy between traditional trade unions and grassroots groups.

Transnational alliances

The focus on alliances led us to analyse relations between trade unions and other collective actors also at transnational level. Online communication emerged as a strategic tool to explore different and physically distant contexts, possible common frames, goals, and coordination opportunities for common actions with other groups across the world.

The two organisations studied, IWGB and DM, proved to be particularly active in exploring transnational networks. A relevant case involving both organisations was the global campaign to boycott the Deliveroo Initial Public Offering (IPO) on the London Stock Exchange (31 March and 7 April 2021). The campaign was promoted by the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), relying on an international network of organisations active on digital workers’ rights, as stated by one of the key actors:

the idea to foster a transnational network focused on digital and platform workers’ rights emerged in the global Congress of ITF in 2018 and evolved

into a global network which also supported projects of specific unions, namely TWU [Transport Workers Union of Australia] and IWGB in the UK. The network constantly evolved, involving 60 members from different countries across the world.

The campaign aiming to boycott the Deliveroo IPO therefore became the peak of a longstanding piece of work begun years earlier by IWGB with riders. IWGB played a prominent role in that campaign, leading demonstrations, and communication initiatives, because the IPO was launched in London, but under the coordination of ITF the campaign assumed a global dimension. As reported by one IWGB member:

The ITF campaign is a good example of a transnational alliance. We were working with unionised couriers in Greece, Tokyo, Barcelona, Italy, Ireland, Canada etc. and we were struggling for the same common goal, that is, to stop couriers' exploitation. We were able to organise a global campaign against Deliveroo when the company decided to promote an IPO. The campaign was the common frame for acting together, sharing the same strategy, the same goal, because we are part of the same global movement.

The campaign gained visibility at national and international levels. ITF coordinated the global campaign through regular online meetings – in which we continually participated – where claims and decisions were taken through a constant consultation of participants (e.g., online surveys), discussing the results during the meetings. Through this method, a common strategy was then adapted at local and national levels and actions were implemented autonomously by each organisation considering both the local agenda and the overall sustainability of the activities. Members of the network were mainly trade union branches of the transport sector, but also other branches (e.g., service sector and precarious workers, as in the case of the Italian CGIL-NIDIL) and included grassroots groups and indie unions. This was the result of a precise strategy by the promoters who decided to involve the most active organisations in each country, beyond the fact that they were formal members of the International Transport Federation. As a result, both IWGB, despite being an independent union, and DM, neither a formal union nor a member of ITF, took part in the global campaign against Deliveroo.

It was an important opportunity to strengthen ties with a global network of organisations fighting for the same cause. Opportunities to participate in a global network with a solid structure and effective methods for making decisions and acting in a coordinated way are not so frequent. It should be the standard in the struggle with global digital platforms, but it is still an exception: it implies a clear focus and a strong engagement, beyond a formal membership.

The same DM activist, commenting on the global network set up by ITF, also referred to a previous attempt made in 2018 to build a transnational network by promoting a European assembly of couriers. It was one of the first significant opportunities to strengthen transnational connections with other organisations involved in riders' representation all over Europe, but it had limited consequences in terms of transnational coordination:

It was a very important moment because it was the first time that riders' organisations from many European countries came together. There were two days of discussions, of confrontation, and we got to know each other directly, but then there was no follow-up, or at least there was no continuity of action within a common framework, although the links between the different organisations improved.

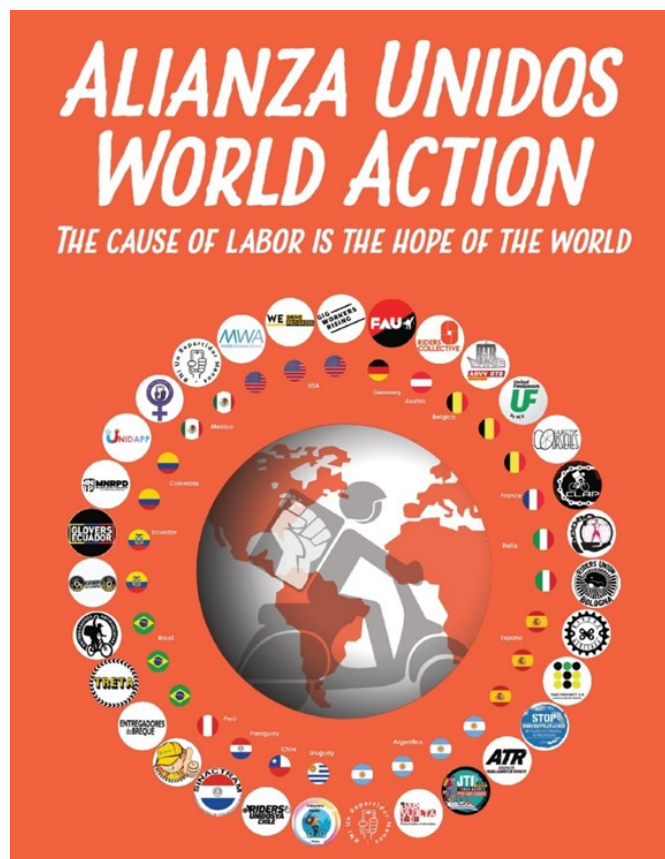
Similar limits also emerged in DM's WhatsApp chat, in relation to another transnational network created during the pandemic to which IWGB was also invited without, however, ever playing an active role, as one IWGB trade unionist explained during an interview:

Well, we were all focused on ITF global project because IWGB was playing a key role, so when the promoters of AUWA invited us to take part in the online meeting someone from IWGB took part in the first one. After that, nevertheless, we concentrated all our efforts on ITF project.

The network 'Alianza Unidos World Action' (AUWA)¹¹ was launched by the American Mobile Workers Alliance (AMWA),¹² one of the Californian organisations fighting against the exploitation of platform workers of big digital platforms such as Uber, Lyft and Doordash. AMWA supported the creation of the global network promoting the online constituting

assemblies and offering simultaneous translators to facilitate communication among participants from different countries around the world.

The impulse for creating a transnational network was not only based on the shared idea to stop the exploitation of platform workers but also on the urgency perceived by the promoters – part of AMWA – that were fighting against PROP 22¹³ in California, considered to be a strategic tool for digital labour platforms to test aggressive solutions that were replicable at global scale.



Picture 3: Poster of AUWA

Beyond the fight against PROP 22, conceived as an aggressive prototype that could potentially be extended to other countries, with a global symbolic dimension, DM perceived a mismatch between its priorities and those of AUWA:

We know very well that platforms experiment with their strategies at a national level, trying to replicate them in other countries, and certainly what is happening in California should be taken seriously. However, our daily battles against platforms have specific connotations that are linked to the space for action that platforms have in the Italian legal framework and

labour market. At the moment, however, it is difficult for us to bring an issue such as PROP 22 to the national and local level, beyond a few hints in our public speeches. In other words, we need to find a stronger common framework that is also rooted in the daily struggles each of us is leading.

According to the debate in DM, AUWA had two main functions: one internal – to increase trustworthiness within the network through symbolic support; and one external – mainly showing the existence of the network. What emerged was a common ground of values rooted in the everyday resistance to platform abuses and working conditions, with different degrees of deterioration in the different countries of the network. However, the mechanism through which the transnational alliance was performed and maintained showed its limits.

In several cases, during the internal meetings of DM we attended, the transnational level was mentioned as a potential added value and, at the same time, a side activity with respect to the core of the everyday life of the organisation carried out by a restricted number of activists. For these reasons, scepticism about transnational networks without a strong common frame based on clear and concrete purposes was quite diffuse. A careful assessment of the energy to invest in active participation as well as of the quality of the network was therefore strategic for the sustainability of the organisation.

During the first two months, the need to enlarge and stabilise the AUWA network passed through the attempt to define a common frame based on mutual recognition. Despite the concerns reported by both IWGB and DM, the constituting process of the transnational network evolved after some months through the creation of a manifesto (published at the end of 2020) denouncing the misclassification of platform workers as self-employed. The claims reported in the manifesto included: a living wage based on defined hourly rates; insurance against accidents and unemployment; digital rights related to data management; protection against unfair decisions made by the platforms (e.g., deactivation); an active role for public institutions over digital labour platforms with the creation of a public register; and the recognition of trade union representatives by platforms. The following period was mainly devoted to sharing information and discussing urgent issues that were happening in some of the countries involved in the network and were potentially common to most of the members. Recurrent discussions involved courier harassment and accidents, an issue that became the main topic in a WhatsApp group created to encourage interactions in real time. One of the activists who took part in the transnational network underlined that, despite being relevant

issues which deserved to be denounced, they were not part of a global campaign, therefore he struggled to include them in their communication agenda:

We constantly follow the online meetings of AUWA with interest. Sometimes it is extremely complicated to imagine how to frame common priorities and actions. We are aware that our South American brothers and sisters experience extreme situations on a daily basis: aggressions, thefts, and in some cases, death as a result of accidents or brutal assaults. The problem is that all we can do is to express our solidarity when these things happen, but if we denounce all these facts in our communication channels, we would no longer have room to communicate the battles we are carrying out. It's a paradox, I know, but not saturating our communication channels is important to ensure the effectiveness of our messages.

The focus on transnational networks revealed the significant activism of the organisations studied, which took part in relevant experiences promoted by different actors. The global dimension of the networks here considered revealed potentialities and limits which are worth analysing because they also form part of the attempts to renew the existing representation strategies. Potentialities and contradictions were related to different issues: the tension between the local and the global, the priorities of the organisations, the tension between communication and action, and the (im)possibility of sharing all the relevant facts happening around the world facing the global dimension of workers' rights through coordinated global campaigns.

Discussion and Conclusion

The representation gap has been a central topic of debate in labour studies. Scholars have extensively discussed the challenges faced by trade unions in revitalizing themselves while attempting to involve new members, many of whom are precarious, young, and migrant workers (Alberti et al., 2013; Hodder and Kretsos, 2015; Keune, 2013). In this article, we analysed how the main collective actors organising food delivery platform workers in London and Milan managed to develop successful organising practices through the building of alliances on both a national and transnational scale.

In line with previous studies, we found that the 'new' social movements represent key allies in tackling labour market insecurity, being part of broad and variegated networks of

collective actors, including also well-established trade unions (Cha et al., 2018; Perrett and Lucio, 2009; Smith, 2021) that interact with them, sharing significant and common struggles but also supporting their initiatives. In particular, data collected showed how, both IWGB and DM built alliances with anti-racist and environmental grassroots groups at local, national, and transnational level. As far as trade unions are concerned, at the local level, both organisations studied only had informal contacts with individual trade unionists. At national level, DM showed instead a stronger orientation towards alliances, although not without difficulties and mutual suspicion, not only with grassroots groups but also with well-established trade unions. This was not the case for IWGB, that had limited interactions with well-established unions within the national context. Finally, at the transnational level, both IWGB and DM were able to build fruitful alliances with other British and Italian unions respectively. Indeed, IWGB became the key actor of the campaign without being a member of ITF, the international transport federation that founded the network, and fruitfully interacted with other British trade unions, despite their conflictual relations at the local and national level.

Besides the differences due to the institutional contexts and the types of organisation – an independent trade union and an activist group – a fine-grained analysis of collected data led us to conceptualise the detected alliances into two main groups, which are distinct for analytical purposes but combine in practice at different scale level and in different contexts in the same organisation. The originality of this work therefore resides in focusing neither on the ‘who’ – i.e. the new members facilitating alliances, such as young, migrant and precarious workers (Cha et al., 2018; Perrett and Lucio, 2009; Smith, 2021; Underhill et al., 2020) – nor on the ‘what’ – i.e. the resources or technologies used to build effective trans-organisational and transnational alliances (Geelan and Hodder, 2017; Kelly Garrett, 2006) – but on the ‘how’ and ‘why’ alliances are activated and co-constructed. More specifically, going beyond the traditional distinction between labour and movement research, and in an attempt to challenge the long-standing perception of trade unions as defenders of their members’ interests and social movements as advocates of shared values and intangible issues (Grote and Wagemann, 2018; Johansson et al., 2019), we identified, on the one hand, *purpose-oriented alliances*, when the focus is circumscribed to well-defined frames and goals connected to the representation of the workforce; on the other hand, *value-oriented alliances*, when the purpose is broader, in some cases more blurred, not circumscribed, or go beyond the representation of specific groups of workers. In our case studies, indeed, general ideological factors based on shared values, such as social justice and civil rights, were the main drivers that triggered the motivation for participation and the strategy for political influence. Both types of alliances were detected

during the fieldwork in the cases of both IWGB and DM at local, national, and transnational levels.

An example of a *purpose-oriented alliance* was the protest against Ocado Zoom promoted by IWGB, where the coordination with the NOcado campaign and Black Lives Matter emerged as being quite significant. The former contributed to increasing the pressure on Ocado Zoom, showing how misbehaviour was not limited to workers but included local communities. The latter supported the Ocado Zoom protest, reinforcing the message that the discrimination was especially oriented against migrant workers. Similarly, the IWGB protest of riders against McDonald's in Dalston (London) also showed a convergence of different collective actors, such as members of Tenants' trade union or members of the local Socialist Party as well as some local councillors from the Labour Party. In the case of DM, the most interesting purpose-oriented alliance concerned the national network 'Riders 4 Rights'. The involvement of different grassroots groups and two confederal trade unions, CGIL and UIL, in a national network, opened the possibility of a coordinated interaction with the Ministry of Labour and forced digital labour platforms to react, participating in consultations to defend their interests. Moreover, both IWGB and DM also experienced a significant purpose-oriented alliance at transnational level. The ITF network – aimed at boycotting the Deliveroo IPO on the London Stock Exchange – was a successful example of an alliance between well-established unions and new collective actors able to affect Deliveroo's reputation and the effectiveness of the IPO, later turning into a stable online network following the campaign.

Regarding *value-oriented alliances*, the involvement of IWGB in the 'Kill the Bill' protest was an example of ongoing efforts to strengthen ties with civil society. Active involvement was therefore a matter of consistency with the values of IWGB, yet characterised as a long-term goal, also by being less committed to the representation of gig workers. DM instead took part in the protest against the detention of undocumented migrants as a way of expressing support for the migrants that constituted the core workforce of food delivery. In this case, the participation was perceived as a sort of moral duty and again a matter of consistency, combining therefore shared values and immaterial concerns. At the same time, the involvement in the NO-CPR network was limited, as happened with the initiatives of other self-organised groups during the pandemic, because it went beyond the core purposes and energies of the organisation. At the transnational level, a similar situation arose in the case of the global network AUWA, which indeed resulted in the expression of 'at distance solidarity' during meetings and through digital social networks, mainly because of the absence of a strong common frame and a concrete and clearly defined common goal.

Looking at the dynamics of the interactions between old and new collective actors and the attempts to find common ground for action (see Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017) allowed us to investigate how and why different types of alliances are built with or without well-established trade unions, a perspective so far overlooked in the debate on the renewal of representation (Behrens et al., 2004; Dörre et al., 2009; Heery, 2009). To fill this gap, we addressed a specific sector – platform work – where both well-established unions and new collective actors face an unprecedented set of challenges in the attempt to organise workers, ranging from overstaffing and the heterogeneity of work arrangements proposed by digital labour platforms to geographic dispersion and work overload, carried out in constant isolation (Author 1 et al., 2021; Cini et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2019). Starting from the standpoint of activists’ knowledge production, we offer an approach that combines the interest in trans-organisational alliances at the local and national level with that of networks built instead on a transnational scale, which redefines the kind of relations as well as the actors involved and the chances of being successful.

In particular, we argue that although they strengthen each other and are both vital to the process of collective organising, what we have defined as *purpose-oriented* alliances, more focused on specific struggles and often in response to specific initiatives taken by platforms, seem to be more effective than those perceived by activists as almost exclusively *value-oriented*, characterised by long-term goals and in some cases by the involvement of dozens or even hundreds of organisations. In dialogue with other studies according to which the joint collective action of unionists and activists must deconstruct structural and motivational dichotomies in the analysis of trade unions, on the one hand, and social movements, on the other (Grote and Wagemann, 2018; Johansson et al., 2019), we show that – even in the case of activist groups – the identification and sharing of values does not erase other more instrumental concerns about the expected effectiveness of specific mobilisations, mainly due to precarious working conditions and limited availability of time.

The focus on trans-organisational alliances at local, national, and transnational level developed by new collective actors is able to shed light, through a different perspective, on the debate on the renewal of workers’ representation and union revitalisation, which have been classically union-centred (Gall, 2009; Simms and Holgate, 2010; Underhill et al., 2020). A change of perspective can indeed show how new forms of activism (Cha et al., 2018), arising from indie unions (Però, 2019; Smith, 2021) and other new collective actors (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017), can bridge effective alliances with trade unions as well as other groups of activists, combining a complementary expertise in accordance

with local and national conditions (Lévesque and Murray, 2010). Effectiveness emerges especially when common purposes are built through democratic and inclusive paths to which each participant can flexibly contribute according to their knowledge, expertise, and specific role in the alliance. The representation of poorly represented groups (Dörre et al., 2009) – especially the BME communities (Perrett and Lucio, 2009) to which most food-delivery riders belong – therefore becomes a feasible opportunity in the context of platform work, where no consolidated strategies are at stake and new repertoires of contention (McAdam et al., 2004) are on trial. To conclude, a focus on alliances – looking in particular at the way they are constructed and the motivations behind them – allows to show possible spaces – at local, national, and international level – for triggering inclusive processes of workers’ organising, even in highly hostile working contexts.

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Notes

¹ GMB has been the official name since 1987, before that it was GMBATU: General, Municipal, Boilermakers' and Allied Trade Union. PCS is the Public and Commercial Services Union. UNISON is the union focused on public services. UNITE the UNION, commonly known as UNITE, represents workers from construction, manufacturing, transport, logistics, and other sectors.

² San Precario and its collective were born on 29th February 2004 with an action in a Milanese supermarket open that Sunday (despite the then-existing prohibition on holiday work). The day was chosen because leap years are intermittent, like the income of precarious workers. At its peak in 2004-2006, the San Precario movement attracted media and labour collectives from all large Italian cities. This movement, which also spread at the European level, went into decline after 2008 (Foti, 2017).

³ The protest started on 17th September 2021 at Kingsland High Street McDonald's after the owner of the shop prohibited couriers from using the McDonald's Abbot Street car park as an alternative to the crowding of the adjacent square, about which local residents had complained.

⁴ <https://www.hackneycitizen.co.uk/2022/01/21/fast-food-couriers-protest-parking-dalston-mcdonalds/>.

⁵ Official website of the local community: <https://nocado.org/>.

⁶ The Black Lives Matter movement started in the USA in July 2013 and gained widespread attention in 2020 when African American George Floyd was killed by a white police officer. The movement is strongly rooted in the UK, especially in the big cities.

⁷ The 'Kill the Bill' protest began in the UK after the national government tried to approve strong restrictions on the right to protest, claiming the right to stop a protest for security issues or even because it was too disturbing or noisy.

⁸ Novara Media is an independent, left-wing alternative media organisation based in the UK: <https://novaramedia.com/>.

⁹ Pianoterra's website: <https://www.pianoterralab.org>.

¹⁰ The public prosecutor's office of Milan detected diffuse illegal hiring practices in Uber Eats. Due to this, the prosecutor's office imposed external administration on Uber Eats, also initiating a proceeding against Uber Eats managers and the managers of the cooperative that contracted riders on behalf of Uber Eats.

¹¹ Official Website of Alianza Unidxs World Action: <http://unidosworldaction.com/> (consulted on 30/11/2022).

¹² Official Website of Mobile Workers Alliance: <https://mobilealliance.org/> (consulted on 30/11/2022).

¹³ Proposition 22 (PROP 22) was a Californian ballot initiative promoted by Uber, Lyft and Doordash, which invested US\$25 million to promote it. In a November 2020 state election, PROP 22 passed with 59% of the vote. This allowed app-based transportation and delivery companies to classify their platform workers as independent contractors instead of employees, thus avoiding recognising them as eligible for employee benefits.