Competition, collaboration and combination: differences in attitudes to collective organisation among offline and online crowdworkers

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Abstract

Drawing on in-depth interviews with a range of platform workers (here termed 'crowdworkers'), this chapter points to differences in attitudes to unionisation between those who work for platforms providing delivery and driving services in real time and space on the one hand, and those working in isolation from their own homes working for platforms providing online digital services. It analyses these differences in relation to crowdworkers' understanding of competitive pressures in platform labour markets and the tensions between competition and collaboration. While recognising commonalities among workers from all types of platform, it cautions against generalising from the experiences of workers in public spaces in the 'physical' world to those working in isolation in other peoples' households or those working from their own homes in virtual global labour markets.

Introduction

In October 2018, representatives from 31 different collectives and unions in 12 European countries came together in Brussels to form the Transnational Courier Federation (Labournet TV 2018). This represented a culmination of spreading efforts over the previous two years to unionise workers in the part of the 'gig economy' devoted to providing delivery services by bike, scooter, motorcycle or car to individual homes or businesses. Using a variety of tactics including strikes, demonstrations and court-cases, these workers had achieved considerable success in drawing attention to their poor working conditions and wages and, in some cases, negotiating improvements. In doing so, they, and their organising efforts, have attracted the attention of a number of scholars (see for example Leonardi et al. 2019, Waters and Woodcock 2017, Goods, Veen, and Barratt 2019, Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017, Degner and Kocher 2018) and

have, indeed, been widely promoted as an example of successful organisation among platform workers.

Similarly, there have been a number of initiatives among drivers working for platforms such as Uber and Lyft which provide taxi-type services, including the formation of new trade unions (such as the UK-based United Private Hire Drivers [UHPD] union[1]), demonstrations, mobilisation within existing trade unions and taking test cases on employment status to the courts, (see for example Lenaerts, Kilhoffer, and Akgüç 2018, Prassl 2018) as well as setting up alternative platform models, such as co-operatives (Scholz 2016). These drivers, too, have attracted considerable scholarly attention (see for example Munn 2017, Rosenblat and Stark 2016, Dubal 2017, Dudley, Banister, and Schwanen 2017, Glöss, McGregor, and Brown 2016, Prassl and Risak 2015).

These two groups are often regarded as emblematic of the new platform workforce and, based only on this literature, it would be possible to draw relatively optimistic conclusions about the scope for development of new forms of collective organisation and representation in the 'gig economy'. Indeed, taken alongside some of the new forms of trade union organisation among other casually employed workers in the retail, warehouse, logistics and hospitality sectors (see for example Caraway 2018, Slaughter 2012, Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness 2018, Reuters Staff 2018, Kollowe and Slawson 2017, Moody 2019) it could even be regarded as heralding a new wave of trade union organisation among precarious workers, paralleling developments in the late 19th and early 20th century such as the 'new unionism' that emerged in the UK between 1889 and 1893, or the mobilisations of US workers that began in the mid-1990s and culminated in the foundation of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW – colloquially known as 'Wobblies') in 1905, growing in importance until the IWW was suppressed during the World War 1 (Matthews 1991). Indeed the largest of the new unions representing delivery workers (since the UPHD affiliated to it in 2017) and drivers in the platform economy consciously refers back to this tradition in adopting the name International Workers of Great Britain (IWGB)[2].

Although there is an emerging body of literature on the collective agenda of platform workers in general (see for example Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018, Moore, Akhtar, and Upchurch 2017, Vandaele 2018, Lenaerts, Kilhoffer, and Akgüç 2018), this mostly analyses emerging organising strategies and the role of traditional trade unions among workers in public spaces. These studies often generalise to all gig economy workers. Apart from a few exceptions (Newlands, Lutz, and Fieseler 2018, Irani and Silberman 2013, Wood, Lehdonvirta, and Graham 2018, Hießl 2019, D'Cruz and Noronha 2016), there is very little literature about collective organisation efforts or understanding about the attitudes towards unionisation of platform workers who work from their homes offering online services and in other people's households.

In this chapter, we draw on in-depth interviews with a range of different workers for online platforms in Europe to cast doubt on the simple assumption that it is possible to extrapolate from the attitudes and practices of workers for these delivery and driving platforms to those of workers working for other types of online platforms that link workers with customers in other sectors.

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[1] https://www.uphd.org/
[2] https://iwgb.org.uk/

It is important to point out that our research focuses only on the attitudes of online and offline workers to unionization. We do not attempt to document their actual achievements in unionizing because we do not have the data to support this. However, this has been addressed by other authors (see for example Vandaele, 2018, Lenaerts, Kilhoffer, and Akgüç 2018).

The research context

The research we draw on here was carried out as part of a larger ongoing research project funded by the Foundation for European Progressive studies (FEPS) in partnership with the European Confederation of white-collar trade unions, UNI-Europa, with co-funding from a large number of national partners in each of 13 European countries[3]. The research involves national surveys of approximately 2,000 working-age adults in each country designed to capture the extent and characteristics of work obtained via online platforms, termed 'crowdwork' for the purposes of this research. In order to identify 'crowdworkers' and distinguish them from workers doing other kinds of casual work, or using other online means to obtain an income, all respondents in the surveys were asked a series of questions relating to their online activities. In addition to a number of other options, designed to exclude people who earned money from sources other than selling their labour, these included questions whether they had sold their labour via an online platform for a fee in each of three categories: providing driving or delivery services; providing services on other people's premises; or providing work to clients using a computer or other device from their own homes. In each case, questions were worded to include examples of platforms that were well-known in the respective countries, as a prompt. Respondents were asked

> *How often, if at all, do you do each of the following online?*
>
> *This may be done using any device connected to the internet, including a PC or laptop, Smartphone, Tablet Computer or Smart TV, etc.*

Some examples of response options can be illustrated by these options, taken from the UK survey:

- *Look for work you can carry out **from your own home** on a website such as Upwork, Freelancer, Timeetc, Clickworker or PeoplePerHour*

- *Look for work you can carry out for different customers somewhere **outside your home** on a website such as Handy, Taskrabbit or Mybuilder*

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[3] For details of the research in the first seven countries, see Huws, Spencer, Syrdal & Holts, 2017, available online at: https://www.feps-europe.eu/resources/publications/561-work-in-the-european-gig-economy-employment-in-the-era-of-online-platforms.html

- *Offer to drive someone to a location for a fee using an app or website such as Uber or Blablacar*

Those responding yes to any of these questions were then asked further questions including how often they did this type of work and what proportion of their income it constituted. The results could also be cross-tabulated with a large number of other variables such as age, gender, the use of apps to be notified when work was available and so on.

Table 1 gives a breakdown of the answers from seven countries surveyed in 2016 and 2017 showing the proportion of the population involved in each of these broad types of crowdwork. It should be noted that many were involved in more than one type, so there is some double-counting across categories

Table 1: Crowdworkers by type of crowdwork in Austria, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK (% of working-age population)

	Offline driving/delivery work in public spaces		Offline work on other people's premises		Online work from own home	
	Crowdworking at least weekly	Any crowdwork	Crowdworking at least weekly	Any crowdwork	Crowdworking at least weekly	Any crowdwork
Austria	3.3	10.6	6.7	14.0	8.2	17.7
Switzerland	3.5	10.8	7.2	15.3	8.4	16.9
Germany	2.3	7.1	4.1	9.7	4.9	11.1
Italy	5.8	14.7	9.9	19.3	10.4	19.8
Netherlands	1.4	4.4	3.0	6.6	3.9	8.2
Sweden	1.4	5.7	3.0	7.5	4.0	8.8
United Kingdom	1.5	4.8	2.9	7.1	3.9	8.4

Source: Hertfordshire Business School Crowd Work Survey, 2016-2017

Base: 1969 respondents in Austria, 2001 respondents in Switzerland, 2180 Respondents in Germany, 2199 respondents in Italy, 2126 respondents in the Netherlands, 2146 respondents in Sweden and 2238 respondents in the UK (weighted results).

As can be seen from the table, the highest numbers of platform workers are to be found doing 'virtual' online work from their homes in all countries ranging between 3.9 and 10.4 per cent for those who say that they carry out this type of work at least weekly.

In most countries, this is followed by work carried out in other people's homes, with the proportion of the working-age population claiming to do this type of work at least weekly ranging from 2.9 per cent to 9.9 per cent. The equivalent range for those doing driving/delivery-type work in public spaces is from 1.4 per cent to 5.8 per cent. In each country, therefore this is the smallest category of crowd work type, with online work constituting the largest category.

Among occasional crowdworkers, where the numbers are higher in each case, the same pattern can be found, with the smallest percentage to be found doing offline work in public spaces and the largest doing online work from their own homes, with work in other people's homes occupying an intermediate position.

Qualitative research

To supplement, and help explain, these survey results, in-depth interviews with individual crowd workers have been carried out. This chapter draws on the results of forty of these interviews. These were carried out in three countries: the UK, Germany and Estonia between February 2017 and May 2018.

Respondents were recruited by a variety of means. Some participants were identified randomly as a result of participation in a national survey carried out in the UK. This survey was carried out a year after the original online national survey, using face-to-face interviews, in order to check whether the online method created a bias towards higher levels of crowdworkers because of the survey method used (it did not - or not significantly. See Huws et al. 2017, pages 54-55). In this survey, respondents were asked if they would be willing to be recontacted for a further in-depth interview, and four of our UK interviewees were found in this way. Others were recruited via trade unions and platforms, through snowballing methods, via online discussion group or approached in the street. Eighteen of the interviewees were women and 22 were men.

Most interviews were conducted by Skype or telephone but six were carried out face-to-face. The interviews varied in length from 40 minutes to two hours and 24 minutes, with an average length of one hour and eight minutes. Interviews were recorded (with the consent of participants), transcribed and analysed using Nvivo. All respondents were given nicknames to protect anonymity.

In terms of the three categories outlined above, fourteen interviewees were working in public spaces doing driving or delivery work. Of these, six were drivers providing taxi-type services, one was a courier using his own van to deliver goods and packages and seven were cycle couriers, of whom one sometimes also used her car for delivery work.

Only three respondents were carrying out work in other people's homes using task-based platforms. This was by far the most difficult group to recruit, for reasons which are discussed below.

The remaining 23 interviewees, making up the largest category (broadly in line with our survey results), were working from their own homes. These were all providing 'virtual' services for online platforms, with the exception of one respondent, who was making physical goods to be sold via the craft platform Etsy (and would therefore not have been categorised as a crowdworker in our quantitative survey which placed such workers in a separate category).

In the next section we explore the attitudes of these crowd workers to collective organisation and representation. Because of the small numbers of interviewees working in other people's homes we have grouped them together with the driving/delivery workers under the broader category of 'offline' crowdworkers, who we compare with 'online' crowdworkers. The small numbers make it difficult to generalise but there do, however, appear to be distinctive differences between those workers who work in public spaces, where they have the opportunity of meeting and identifying each other, and those who work in more isolated and private ways in people's homes, so we make clear in all our quotations what specific type of crowdwork the respondent mainly does.

Research findings

In general, our interviews showed contrasting attitudes towards collective organisation between online and offline platform workers. While offline workers had more positive

attitudes towards trade unions and peer groups to support each other, online workers were less interested in traditional trade unions representing their interests. Nine out of 21 offline workers had organised collectively by either becoming a member of a trade union or forming a peer group such as an online Facebook group or participating in regular informal meetings with other workers. Only one out of 19 online workers was a member of a traditional trade union (and she had only become a member because of her other full-time job and was not sure whether the membership would also cover her work on online platforms). The majority of online workers did not consider becoming a member because they either believed they were not entitled to it, because they were self-employed or because they did not see any value in trade unions representing their interests.

The race to the bottom in platform labour markets

Many workers presented an articulate analysis of the labour market in which they found themselves, which, in their view, offered both opportunities and threats.

A major theme in this analysis related to the open nature of labour markets for platform workers. On the one hand, this presents an open door to new workers seeking to enter the field; but on the other this very openness created a risk of a competitive race to the bottom.

In an overall analysis of the large corpus of interview data generated by these forty interviews, it is striking that the workers most likely to draw from this the conclusion that unionisation would be a way to help minimise these risks were offline workers, some of whom were already members of unions.

One such reflection on the overall character of the labour market he was in came from a 32-year-old male rideshare driver in the UK who was a member of a trade union. He placed this analysis in the context of a critique of the 'flexibility' that platforms purport to offer their workers:

> *I mean it says that it, it says that it gives you full flexibility, but if you think about it, you, if everything's so low and so competitive in the terms that you've got so many drivers, you need to be out there more, and by being out there more, it doesn't guarantee you a set amount and once you, and the thing is, it's not as busy as what, as what it used to be, it's way less. So, you still don't end up, and then the thing is you have to work more to get a decent amount, so when you're off, you're off, you're not getting any, not going to get any ex, you're not going to get any money for, you know. (Mustafa, rideshare driver)*

John, a 25-year old delivery rider interviewed in the UK, also pointed to the way that over-recruitment of workers by platforms led to a deterioration in conditions for others.

> *Like in [name of town], [name of platform] have been over hiring riders, which means that there's a huge amount of people for the work that needs to be done. The only difference that makes to [name of platform] is that their orders spend less time waiting until they're picked up and delivered. Of course, the effects for the riders is massive, because they get paid by delivery. So, fewer deliveries per rider means a much lower income, but I mean, [name of platform] doesn't have to think twice*

> *about that, and that's, in no way can we call that efficiency, and yet it's the model. (John, delivery rider)*

He was emphatic about the need for unionisation.

> *I was instantly convinced that joining the union was the right thing to do. I mean, even though I didn't have any, you know, some people have the like, 'ah, I might only have this job for two months so what's the point of signing up for a union?' To me, the case that the union, what it was doing was so, it was so obviously an important thing. (John, delivery rider)*

A 42-year-old female platform worker who works in other people's premises in the UK, echoed the perception that platform employment produced a race to the bottom among workers, especially where there was an oversupply of labour, and linked this explicitly to the use of migrant workers.

> *It's good because you – with [name of platform], it's an even playing ground, you know? So, for example, if someone puts a job out, it's even, the playing ground is even, anyone can go for it, regardless of nationality, age, sex, gender, nothing, it doesn't matter. If you can get that job, you get it. Okay, you get it, it's – the competition is even, but in life, in general, the bias is geared towards – work is biased towards EU migrants, they are the ones that get the work, we are the ones that don't (...)*
>
> *But if we – we're going out of Brexit and these – and they – and the situation changes where they say that EU migrants have to go back home, then it will change, then it will be different.*
>
> *[Interviewer: Do you think it will improve for you? Something will improve for you?]*
>
> *For me it will improve, because I won't have the competition. They will have gone, they'll be disappeared. (Maya, household tasker)*

Such views encapsulate a tension that has a long history in the organisation of unskilled workers between labour market 'insiders' and 'outsiders', with the latter more likely to be migrant workers. It has a particular poignancy when the 'insiders' in the platform labour market are themselves 'outsiders' in the larger national labour market, regarded by traditionally organised labour as members of what Marxian theory terms the 'reserve army' of labour (Huws 2019).

Online workers also demonstrated a strong awareness of the competitive nature of the labour market they were in, including competitive threats from foreign workers. The difference between their views and those of offline workers was not so much in the nature of their analysis of the situation but in the conclusions they drew from it in relation to the possibility for collective organisation to be used to address the challenges raised.

Here, for example is a 36-year old male graphic designer working in Estonia for online platforms.

> *Competition. You live in a super expensive country in a global context -
> Estonia. Well, some places are more expensive: London is definitely
> more expensive, Switzerland, Norway, Sydney (...) There are also some
> nuances but...well, the competition is tough. For example, if you take the
> logo design project, which is a very specific thing. Then usually a person
> is hired within a few hours. For example, the opening is at 9am and if
> you then look at midday they have already found someone. But by then,
> there are 50 proposals. Well, your chances are then 1 / 50 whether you
> get it or not. Something like that. Maybe a little more, maybe a little
> less. (Henry, graphic designer)*

And a 40-year-old German IT worker:

> *On [name of platform], there is in principle no competition but on other
> platforms there is. You can see that there is supply and demand and
> that you can make an offer. This is not the case with [name of
> platform]. This was probably also the reason why I stayed with [name of
> platform] as there is no competition in principle (...) The disadvantage is
> that you have to be really good. You have to deliver a good quality work
> because there are 100,000 people who apply at the same time. And
> whether you get selected or not is a matter of luck. You're just one of
> many, whether you're here or if you're not there, that's completely
> uninteresting. (...) They can come from all over the world, so
> theoretically you have a very few assignments and a million hungry
> mouths (Arno, IT worker)*

While aware of the competitive pressures, however, Arno did not see trade unions as
offering any solution:

> *Because I see trade unions representing the interests of employees. We
> don't know how this is going to develop but another issue is that for me
> it is not a main source of income. (Arno, IT worker)*

Interestingly, his reasoning for this draws on two arguments: first, that he is not an
employee; and second, that crowdwork is not his main source of income. In fact both of
these factors also apply in the case of John, the cycle courier quoted above (who was in
fact combining his crowdwork with a full time job in another sector), but in this case this
had led to a very different form of argumentation.

Arno's pessimism about trade unions was also shared by another German online
worker, this time a 37-year-old woman for whom it provided the only source of income.

> *I don't think there is much that can be done. I believe that for self-
> employed there is always the risk of not getting enough assignments, or
> that it doesn't work out. Thus I do not know what could be done. Last
> year, there was this suggestion that trade unions could do something.
> And last year, this trade union [name of union] had discussions with
> [name of platform] but I am not really clear what a trade union could
> do or how they could support. I am not sure how something could be
> implemented on a practical level, and what should actually be changed.
> As a result, it could happen that [name of platform] will have less
> assignments and in worst case they could stop existing. And because one*

is not employed with them there is no social security that one would otherwise have if one was employed. (Manuela, IT worker)

Similar views were expressed by another German online worker, 51-year-old Monika, who carried out a variety of tasks for several different online platforms on top of employment in another job.

I cannot imagine it [being a member of a trade union] at all and I am not sure how it should work because if I was a member of a trade union and worked through a platform then I am not employed. The platform does not owe me anything. A trade union cannot fight for anything, as I have no right to expect work from this platform anyway (Monika, multitasking online worker).

In other cases, the attitudes of online workers to trade unions were more ambivalent. They recognised their value in principle but were sceptical about the possibilities for success. Here, for example is another German online worker, a 49-year-old woman for whom IT work for online platforms constitutes the only source of income.

It should be organised differently because this form of work is not compatible with the form of work that trade unions cover. Sometimes I wish that there was more teaming up with other workers on the same platform (...) It would be good if there was a possibility to have a dialogue [with the platform], to have the possibility to say 'hey people, this [change or decision] was not good and I want to tell you why...'. However, I cannot imagine having a proper labour dispute about something because I think we are the co-creators of something that is not finished yet and where there are no ready-made solutions for everything. To be honest, I would find a trade union strange. Having contact [with other workers] is good and valuable. It would be good for letting off steam when one gets upset about something. But a traditional trade union where an outsider who is not even on the platform organises something for us ... I would find it strange (Adriane, IT worker).

Thirty-eight-year-old Amelie, a German writer and translator who relies on her income from platforms as a freelancer, also expressed some scepticism about whether traditional trade unions could represent her interests, but did see some possibilities for using online means for new forms of organisation and information exchange.

I think that traditional trade unions have all the wrong answers or no answers to these kind of problems related to digitalisation. I do not expect much but maybe that we react to digital forms of work with digital form of unionisation - so with digital trade unions. I can imagine this. Another thing that we have criticised [together with other online workers] is that platforms have closed down online forums where we could exchange our experiences. [name of platform] still has a forum but there does not seem to be any interest in bringing workers together so that they could speak with each other.

... I sometimes use their forum but rather in order to get help with assignments and to understand how to interpret the instructions etc.

and less in order to organise with other workers. However, I think it could be used for this but they [platforms] do not want this. (Amelie, writer and translator)

Despite the much higher level of pessimism about the possibility for trade unions to be able to improve their situation found among online workers, it would be mistaken to conclude that the attitudes of offline workers were uniformly optimistic. A lower level of positivity about the prospects for unionisation was also found among the (admittedly rather few) offline workers we interviewed who were carrying out work in other people's homes.

Here, however, these attitudes seemed to have been shaped in large part by the experiences of how the platforms in this sector had behaved when workers had attempted to organise. Online platforms are often seen by workers as a first step into a labour market for services such as cleaning or household maintenance, with the longer-term aim of trying to find a regular client for whom they can continue to work directly, without the platform taking a cut (Huws et al. 2017). As a result, the platforms go to great lengths to ensure that all communication takes place via the platform in order to prevent one-to-one communication between workers and clients. This makes it extremely difficult for workers to be contacted by other means (a factor which contributes to the difficulty of recruiting interviewees in this field).

One UK interviewee, a 38-year-old migrant worker, described how an attempt to set up an online forum for workers for a particular platform had been shut down by the platform.

They can exchange what they think about [name of platform], you know. I read that they were having some forums but they shut them down because of the negative things that people were talking about. So, they obviously don't want people - in a way they don't want people to discuss - I remember once on the one meeting someone - the woman that was saying there was - she was saying that they cannot fix the rate on which people are working because they would run into problems that [name of another platform providing driving services] has. So, they have certain understanding of negative things people say about this kind of work and platforms, and so, you know, I think it would be nice if people could at least communicate and say what they think, without being controlled, you know, obviously. But the group is dead. I mean, no one is, you know, the people don't - no one is joining this group; I think I can as well cancel the group. (Janek, household tasker)

Maya, the 42-year-old household tasker, was also pessimistic about the prospect of unionisation in this type of work. In her case this was largely because she saw it as a stop-gap: work that, in her view, people only took on out of desperation, because it was the only source of income she could find. The implication was that as soon as anything better came along they would cease doing this type of work.

I've been with a union with my other jobs but not with the platform job, no. It's not something you think about. People don't think about these things. People just need to earn money to pay bills (Maya, tasker).

Tensions between competition and collaboration

An important dimension of the ambivalent attitudes to collective organisation among crowd workers is a tension between competition and collaboration among fellow workers. When probed about this, there were some respondents who saw other crowdworkers primarily as colleagues and others who saw them primarily as competitors, but the majority expressed considerable ambiguity, seeing them as a mixture of both, sometimes (but not always) with the allegiance varying according to their nationality. Even when other crowdworkers are defined primarily as colleagues this does not necessarily involve the idea that this could provide a basis for organising themselves. They often see others as colleagues for the purposes of knowledge exchange rather than fellow-fighters for better working conditions.

A 30-year-old German product designer provides an example of an online worker who regards other crowdworkers primarily, and straightforwardly, as competition.

> *Think about it. I think that I even enjoy a little bit this competitive nature as a whole because I can then see my own progress. I notice the change: how at the beginning it was difficult for me to get assignments and also deliver work but then how it gets better once the work becomes more familiar...(Stefan, product designer)*

A 29-year-old platform tester, also German, who combines his work testing websites and apps for an online platform with being a student, expresses a view that is more nuanced, making a distinction between foreign competition and competition within Germany.

> *[Interviewer: But how do you see the other people? Are they colleagues or rather competitors?]*

> *That depends a little bit on the person and on his or her character. You get the idea about the person when you read the bug reports and descriptions. Generally speaking, I consider them as colleagues and I don't like the idea of being in competition. However, when I do the tests in English (well, this certainly also happens with Germans but even more with English speaking people) there are always people who copy things from other people and submit for themselves. This is a bit unappealing and that's when I see it more like a competition.*

> *[Interviewer: Does this mean that German-speaking people stick together and when it gets more global then less so?]*

> *This is a very subjective view. I don't know if it's really like this. I take it a little bit like that. So also with others. For example, I do not remember what that was...I think he came from Poland or so or Ukraine...obviously there are also many nice, wonderful people...but there are also some...they are probably in minority who are exhausting because they copy content, for example. They misbehave in chats or make allegations or have a discussion about various things. And this is just annoying. But that's also the case with Germans but maybe a bit more with English speaking people. I think it is because they believe more in competition. I can see that for Germans it is usually not their main source of income,*

they do it as a side activity. Hence they are a bit more relaxed. And whoever makes it for a living, for example someone in Eastern Europe or somewhere like that or in India, I just think that there is a different kind of pressure. And then I can understand that their tone is a bit rougher. (Dietrich, platform tester)

Another German online worker, a 35-year-old IT worker who carries out a variety of different IT-related roles via several different platforms to supplement his income from his main job, expresses a similar ambivalence towards fellow-workers.

*[**Interviewer**: Are they colleagues of competitors for you?]*

(laughing) It's a damn good question, so ... because I said that I do not do that full-time, they are rather no competitors for me. They are more like colleagues than competitors. So I do not know, I see that rather neutral. So there is a test and who gets the job, he or she then just does it and if not, then not. Well, I see it very collegial. Maybe collegial is the wrong word because I don't know them. I sit in front of my screen and they in front of theirs and we don't know each other. Competitors - I am not sure about it. If I had to make a living out of it then they would be competitors for me but I don't. These are for me at most people who may somehow have an interest in it, maybe because of the technology, somehow want to earn extra money. That's OK too. As I can see who gets which assignments, they are not really competitors for me. (...) So in principle you have a lot of time, but the problem is that there is always competition, because every bug can only be reported only once. You are paid per error. And of course I'm not the only one testing - the later I start, the more bugs others have found. So the later I start, the less productive I am because I have to search even more and see what else I can do. And of course it is sometimes frustrating even if you find things you realise that someone else has already registered. And then you have nothing and that upsets you and you stop. So it's worth starting early, but you do not have to. But it's worth it. (Benjamin, IT multitasker)

However it seems unlikely that this relaxed attitude to competitors is a simple by-product of the fact that Benjamin has a steady income from his main job. A very similar view was expressed by 37-year-old Manuela, another respondent interviewed in Germany, who has no regular employment but pieces together an income from advertising revenue from her blogs and a similar type of product-testing, often on the same platform as Benjamin. This suggests that their attitudes may be shaped more by their similar work experiences than by their personal circumstances.

[Other people working for the same platform] are more like colleagues, yes. I do not see them as competitors... And there were people who behaved a bit as if they were competitors. One of them asked me about my approach and if I could give him hints about how he could also find better bugs. And then I thought 'no, I won't do that'. This was the first time I saw someone as a competitor because I thought that I cannot reveal all my tricks because only the one who finds it [a bug] first gets paid.

> *[Interviewer: So there is a bit of competition?]*
>
> *Yes, a little but I do not feel it that strongly. However, I found this one case blatant. I thought 'no, I'm not here to give out information about what I typically do because I've found my own way how I work and I don't want to tell anyone about it.' But I think that other workers feel even more like competitors (Manuela, blogger and IT worker)*

This ambivalence between collaboration and competition is by no means restricted to online workers. Offline crowdworkers sometimes expressed similar views. Here, for example is a 42-year old, male Estonian rideshare driver.

> *Well, basically they [other drivers) are my competitors. They also look for customers. And the less cars there are, the better for me. But the more cars there are, the... Well, I'm not ... in a nutshell, I'm relatively neutral. I have maybe had a conversation with one or two drivers about 'well, how are you doing?' Are there a lot or a little /assignments?' That's it. However, I know that two of my acquaintances also drive. (Paul, rideshare driver).*

In general, however, offline workers exhibited a stronger sense of solidarity with fellow workers. Another Estonian offline worker, a 35-year-old woman who carried out deliveries by bike and car, expressed it in these words:

> *There is no sense of competition against other couriers. We openly talk about how many orders we have made. For instance, you have managed 120, but I have only 110 ... with 120 you get a bonus ... there are still 10 left till a bonus. Then one delivery driver says that he/ she is going home today so that I will get enough assignments. We rather help each other to get enough assignments. The one who gets enough manages his/her goal and goes home earlier. A new counting starts tomorrow. For me a team is very important in life. A collective. I have never had such a good collective, team, work. I feel I'm in the right place. I'm in Tallinn what I wanted. I can leave whenever I want - exactly the day I want (laughs) and at the time I want. (Mia, courier)*

Interestingly, none of the Estonian respondents in the survey were members of trade unions. This is not surprising in a country which formerly formed part of the Soviet Union in which trade unions were often viewed with suspicion as instruments of the state. As a consequence, trade unions are relatively weak and membership low (Eamets and Kalaste 2004). Nevertheless, this has clearly not prevented offline driving and delivery workers from building up a comradely, collaborative work culture.

A similar sense of camaraderie was found among couriers in other countries. One 32-year old delivery rider, Tahim, who was interviewed in Germany but had also worked for the same platform in the UK, and was interviewed in English, was combining this work with being a student. He compared the work favourably with working for a supermarket which, he said, paid more, but entailed 'lots of stress'. One of the things he enjoyed most about being a delivery rider was 'every time when I'm riding I saw lots of [name of platform] driver, when they're not busy we talk, we gossip'.

Thierry, another student/delivery rider interviewed in Germany, a 20-year-old man, also described the friendly relationships among fellow workers:

> *Between [name of platform] riders we always say 'hi' to each other when we meet. And if two [name of platform] riders, or even [name of rival food delivery platform] riders, are waiting at the restaurant we start chatting as well. … We have a good communication, yes. (Thierry, food delivery rider)*

This interaction extends beyond casual greeting to include pre-arranged meetings, combining work-related and social contact.

> *We talk about everything and nothing. For example, if we want to meet in a bar, or, I don't know, we ask about our experience with one of our riders, for example, I don't know, we talk about everything and nothing. (Thierry, food delivery rider)*

It should be noted that Thierry was not a trade union member and said that he had not heard of any other food delivery rider being a member.

It is apparent that offline courier workers, even when they are not unionised, have managed to build a kind of collaborative and solidaristic culture that could be an important precursor of collective organisation. It seems likely that the chance to interact with each other in person, in real time and real space, has played an important role in this.

The importance of face-to-face meetings for trade union recruitment was borne out by the testimony of John, the UK delivery rider quoted earlier who was an active trade union member. Indeed, he suggests that the platform he worked for was so concerned about this that they had taken steps to reduce the amount of direct time that riders spent together waiting for tasks.

> *It has changed a bit now but they [the platform] used to have a lot of emphasis on what they called the zone centre, which is a spot they've calculated to be equidistant from all of the different restaurants you might pick up from. In [district in South London] it was a square, they also tried to try and, I think they used to try and make it a place you could also hang out, where there were some benches or something, and in [name of district] it happened to be a square, in [another London district] it's just off the High Street, there are no benches but there are restaurants that have outdoor seating thing, also there's a place to park your bikes and stuff, like a bike rack. I think they've tried to de-emphasise the zone centre a little bit recently.*

> **[Interviewer**: Why?]

> *Because it was crucial in, it's like really, it facilitates communication between drivers, which is the only way really that there's a kind of tangible sense of all being in the same boat with [name of platform], otherwise you're … you're just one rider in the city. Where you see other people in the same uniform, there's not a connection there. So it was, it has been key, that zone centre, in fermenting strike movements and resilience towards bad practices. (John, delivery rider)*

Taken together, these accounts lend strong support to the hypothesis that direct social contact between workers plays a strong role in building collective identities and

organisation. However, it is also clear that an employed service worker in the retail has more connectivity than a self-employed courier worker. And while access to social relationship plays an important role in organising, it is not the only factor that easies unionization. Crowdworkers still face barriers that range from cultural/ historical environment to the legal classification that makes organising difficult.

Conclusions

This study is part of a larger work in progress. The relatively small number of interviews drawn on for this analysis, and their uneven distribution, make it problematic to generalise too broadly from them. There is clearly a need for further research, especially among the hidden population of crowdworkers working in other people's homes to validate our conclusions. Nevertheless, we believe that these results shed interesting light on the attitudes of crowdworkers to trade union organisation and open up important questions to be addressed in any further research.

First, they caution us against generalising from the experience of one occupational group of crowdworkers to those in other occupations. Even when there are strong similarities in their situations as platform workers in relation, for example, to their formal status as self-employed workers, the unpredictability of work and the negative effects of competition in a flooded labour market, it cannot be assumed that the reactions to these situations will necessarily be the same. Even a similar interpretation of the problem will not necessarily lead to the same political conclusion.

There are of course many factors that shape attitudes to collective organisation. One might expect that one of the strongest of these factors might be the extent to which a crowdworker is actually dependent on his or her income from crowdwork to make a living. Somewhat surprisingly, on the basis of these interviews, this is a much less important factor than whether the worker is involved in delivering offline or online services. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to investigate the many other factors that may form the attitude of platform workers to unionization. These must be the topic of future research.

We can surmise that the opportunity to meet with fellow-workers in real time and space plays a strong role in building up a sense of solidarity, mutual trust and common purpose which, in turn, can provide the basis for collective organisation, but further research will be necessary to establish this.

The results of our research also raise the question whether trade unions need to change in order to meet the needs of platform workers and the changing landscape of work. However, our interview material did not provide evidence of this. Any conclusions we draw from them about the need for unions to change, or what these changes might consist of would be speculative.

There could be other explanations for the differences we found, perhaps including a realistic assessment of the prospects for success of trade union organisation. Here, it is possible that success breeds further success, as news spreads of successful examples of organisation and representation, inspiring others to join and follow their example.

Nevertheless it is also clear that the propensity to organise is contingent on specific circumstances and cannot be read off from the simple fact of being a platform worker.

This suggests that, useful though it is in bringing real benefits to the workers represented and drawing public attention to the challenges facing platform workers,

trade union action is unlikely, alone, to bring about a universal improvement in their conditions, and must be combined with broader political action and policy interventions to regulate the platform economy and provide basic employment rights to platform workers.

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