

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exit, voice, and loyalty in the platform economy of Bologna city

Mattia Frapporti¹  and Maurilio Pirone²

¹Department of Computer Science and Engineering, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy and

²Department of Arts, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

Corresponding author: Mattia Frapporti; Email: mattia.frapporti2@unibo.it

(Received 23 November 2022; revised 24 August 2023; accepted 9 October 2023; first published online 28 November 2023)

Abstract

In the article, we will explore the impact of platform labour on urban spaces and the new frontiers of unionism by leveraging a ground analysis and theoretical elaborations from the PLUS project. PLUS was designed to analyse the impact of four platforms (Uber, Airbnb, Helpling, and Deliveroo) in seven European cities (Barcelona, Berlin, Bologna, Lisbon, Paris, London, and Tallinn). In doing so, PLUS supported its sociological investigations with theoretical and historical elaborations concerning the operation of contemporary platforms and the characteristics of the new form of unionism. We will present some results from PLUS, with a focus on the Bologna case, where platform workers express their dissatisfaction with their organizations, attempting to relate their strategies to certain structural aspects of business territorialization within urban spaces. We will draw upon the well-known distinction proposed by Albert Hirschman between exit, voice, and loyalty and adapt it to frame the various strategies that platform workers may adopt.

Keywords: platforms; unionism; urban; worker strikes

JEL Codes: P100

Introduction

Digital platforms are in the process of profoundly altering urban life and spatial configurations across the globe (Strüver and Bauriedl 2022). Their expansion brought multiple effects on work and consumption in everyday life. Nevertheless, this is not a one-way process. People react to platforms, criticise more or less openly their functioning, or propose alternatives. In this paper, we will explore how platform workers express their dissatisfaction to their organisations, trying to relate their strategies to some structural features of business territorialisation into urban spaces.

- The focus consists of four leading platforms, which in turn represent key areas of urban economies: Uber, which has revolutionised taxi and mobility services,
- Deliveroo, which is battling over the dominance of the food delivery,
- Helpling, which provides cleaning services
- Airbnb, as well as the famous short-term rental platform.

These platforms have been chosen not only for their size and revenue but also because they represent crucial areas of the platform economy and urban life more broadly, such as transportation, last-mile logistics, social reproduction, and hosting. The impact of these companies in European cities is today an object of much debate and criticism in relation to issues such as labour regulations and protection, polarisation of housing markets and gentrification, and data accumulation and privacy. Such debates have intensified since the outbreak of COVID-19 as the pandemic reinforced the ways in which platforms have become embedded in our urban life.

Taking advantage from materials produced during the Horizon2020 project Platform Labour in Urban Spaces (based on a trans-urban comparison between the cities of Barcelona, Berlin, Bologna, Lisbon, London, Paris, and Tallinn), we will focus on the city of Bologna as a case study, linking the varieties of workers' strategies towards digital firms with the specificities of the role of the platform economy on local development.

The premise of our paper is that, starting from some commonalities, platforms differ in the ways they hit the ground, meaning that the urbanisation of platforms embeds multiple variables. The way the platforms territorialise – in terms of labour process, employment status, industry disruption – influence the forms of workers' reaction to corporate organisation. Our goal is to explain how different typologies of action towards companies emerged through the platforms' urban dimension. The case of Bologna city will be useful to illustrate factors that determine several potential strategies.

In this sense, we will recall the famous distinction proposed by Albert Hirschman (1970) between exit, voice and loyalty (EVL) and adapt it to frame the different strategies that platform workers may adopt. Indeed, during recent years, a vast literature on new forms of unionism in the platform economy has emerged and consolidated (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018). Nevertheless, much of the focus has been directed towards food delivery riders and their struggles (Heiland 2020; Joyce et al. 2023; Trappmann et al. 2020) to improve salaries and working conditions, with the effect to universalise such subjectivities and its practices as the paradigm of platform workers. The risk of such an approach is to underestimate actions and efforts expressed by other platform workers or to universalise couriers' claims. From our perspective, we will argue that platform workers may assume different strategies towards firms, according to some structural features of corporate territorialisation in a city, from attempts to exit the platform to the conflict against it or the collaboration for a better placement within it. The analysis of the different strategies of action implemented by platform workers in Bologna will be useful to connect them with the specificities of the local background and the ways companies have penetrated into the territory. Put differently, we will argue that the way that platforms territorialise influence the preference for one strategy or another.

We will first present the methodologies and materials at the base of our argument. We will use the data emerged from the field research of the H2020 project PLUS; then, we will interpret these data bearing on the theoretical approach derived from the so-called 'Exit, Voice, Loyalty' model.

In the second section, we will reframe the three main forms of action in case of dissatisfaction towards an organisation – exit, voice, and loyalty – adapting them to the platform economy, and focusing in particular on Bologna city.

In the third section, the structural factors of platforms' territorialisation into urban spaces will be analysed to explain the preference of workers towards one strategy or another.

Finally, we will propose some hypotheses towards a more general approach about the relation between workforce and platforms together with some observations about the value of the EVL model in investigating the platform economy.

Explaining workers' strategies through platforms' urbanisation: method and approach

Within the platform economy, Nick Srnicek qualified *lean platforms* as digital business architectures based on a 'hyper-outsourced model, whereby workers are outsourced, fixed capital is outsourced, maintenance costs are outsourced, and training is outsourced' (Srnicek 2016, 76).

A main feature of most lean platforms is their close embeddedness into urban spaces and their social fabric (Strüver and Bauriedl 2022). Indeed, while platforms may locate at different spatial scales, lean ones generally absorb local and not displaceable services; for example, cleaning must be done into houses or not done at all and food delivery is a form of last-mile logistics connecting goods with local customers.

Embedding such services, a platform may adapt in a variable way to pre-existing elements, such as established markets, labour-force composition, legislative framework, or urban governance – what Mark Graham calls a conjunctural geography (2020). Put differently, platforms' urbanisation could be framed as a double-way process with firms adapting their operations to local specificities, on the one hand, and cities embedding platforms into their social and economic fabric on the other. Just to anticipate some research conclusions, we will delve into later, PLUS investigation of the four mentioned platforms in the seven European cities highlighted how some common operations characterising platform labour may be implemented in variable ways according to the platform and/or the city. For instance, the same platform may find different forms to enter into a local market as in the case of Uber that in Paris directly operates as marketplace with independent contractors, while in Lisbon it operates through third-party companies. Adopting a concept formulated by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013), we may say that this convergence of layers – general operations and urban varieties – leads to multiple modes of platform labour, in terms of employment status, working conditions, and also forms of protest.

We will argue that the platform urbanisation takes place in multiple forms, and this nonuniformity conveys different potential strategies for workers in case of dissatisfaction towards the organisation.

The arguments we elaborate in this paper rely on the field work materials from the Horizon2020 project, called PLUS, that analysed the labour impact at urban level of four platforms (Uber, Deliveroo, Airbnb, and Helpling) in seven European cities (Barcelona, Berlin, Bologna, Lisbon, London, Paris, and Tallinn) for a general overview see Table 1. In particular, we will focus on Bologna city as case study.

Moreover, we framed these materials adapting Hirschman' EVL model to the platform economy. For this reason, it is important to introduce the collected materials and to review the EVL model.

PLUS data collection

The PLUS project¹ investigated both the features of platform labour (work package 2: *The Impact of Technologies on Workers and Labour Process in the Platform Economy*) and its impact on incumbent industries (work package 3: *Platforms' Socio-Economic Larger Impact on Urban Economies*).

The analysis of platform labour has been based on qualitative methods in two steps, First, a background research of 57 expert interviews sought to map the different economic, social, and institutional actors involved in platform economy; then a massive field research of 229 semi-structured interviews with workers of the four investigated platforms in the seven PLUS cities (see Table 2), as well as 7 focus group discussions, one in each city, were designed to evaluate preliminary results emerging from the interviews (see Table 3). Below the full information, including the Bologna case study.

Table 1. Qualitative field research on platforms' impact on urban economies

City	Accommodation services	Delivery services	Cleaning services	Transport services	
Barcelona	Yes	Yes	Not	Not	2
Berlin	Yes	Not	Yes	Yes	3
Bologna	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not	3
Lisbon	Yes	Not	Not	Yes	2
London	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	4
Paris	Yes	Yes	Not	Yes	3
Tallinn	Not	Not	Not	Yes	1
	6	4	3	5	

Table 2. Qualitative semi-structured interviews on platform labour

City	Interviews	Total
Barcelona	13 Airbnb, 15 Deliveroo	28
Berlin	14 Uber, 15 Airbnb, 13 Helpling	42
Bologna	15 Airbnb, 12 Deliveroo, 2 Helpling	29
Lisbon	15 Uber, 11 Airbnb	26
London	15 Uber, 13 Airbnb, 10 Deliveroo	38
Paris	11 Uber, 17 Deliveroo, 7 Airbnb	35
Tallinn	15 Uber, 16 Airbnb	31
	(70 Uber, 90 Airbnb, 54 Deliveroo, 15 Helpling)	229

Table 3. Local focus groups on platform labour

City	Participants	Total	Format	Date
Barcelona	2 Deliveroo, 2 Airbnb	4	Online	07.10.2020
Berlin	2 Uber, 2 Airbnb, 2 Helpling	6	Online	21.10.2020
Bologna	2 Deliveroo, 2 Airbnb	4	Online	10.10.2020
Lisbon	2 Uber, 1 Airbnb	3	In person	09.10.2020
London	6 Uber, 3 Deliveroo	9	Online	26.10.2020
Paris	1 Uber, 1 Deliveroo, 2 Airbnb	4	Online	12.11.2020
Tallinn	3 Uber, 1 Airbnb	4	In person	06.11.2020
	14 Uber, 10 Airbnb, 8 Deliveroo, 2 Helpling	34		

The analysis of the platforms' larger impact on urban economies included both a secondary data analysis and qualitative field research with local stakeholders (interviews or focus groups).

The Eurostat database was used to collect information relevant sectoral data on urban economies. Through local focus group discussions, data on the impact of platform labour on the economic and regulatory development and working conditions in specific industries have been collected and explored. Due to the pandemic, this method could not be put into practice in all cities because of COVID-19 constraints. Where focus group' discussions could not be conducted, individual interviews replaced the focus group discussion.

In both cases, the aim was to produce a cross-platform and cross-national comparison in order to grasp strategies and circumstances behind the development of each platform.

The EVL model

Where the PLUS project furnishes materials about the way platform labour is organised and impacted at urban level, an adaptation of the Hirschman' EVL approach can not only frame these materials but also outline the strategies adopted by platform workers to express their dissatisfaction towards their companies.

Hirschman formulated its approach first in his famous 1970 book and then made further remarks in subsequent articles (Hirschman 1980). Initially thought to analyse consumers' behaviours, this framework has been adapted widely, to study working conditions, political participation, urban life, and romantic relations.

Even if the proposed concepts seem to be quite easy, the academic debate about the EVL approach has highlighted many issues that still divide scholars. Basically, all of them express in different forms, the dissatisfaction towards (a product or a service furnished by) an organisation: to **voice** means to protest within it, to **exit** means to quit it, while to be **loyal** means to stay bound to it.

The first kind of debates relate to the definition of these three strategies. For example, exit is largely considered a binary response, 'a permanent move away' (Sverke and Goslinga 2003, 243) and may be adopted in front of a price surge or quality decline. But there are different ways to exit, for example either expressing clearly one's own dissatisfaction or without public complaints (Dowding et al 2000, 473). Voice, on the contrary, encompasses a wide spectrum of variable actions, 'an articulation of interests' (Sverke and Goslinga 2003, 243), which can be individual for a private good or collective for the good of a community. Furthermore, O'Donnell (1996) distinguishes between vertical voice – towards a superior – and horizontal voice – talking to a peer. Loyalty has also been explored (Leck and Saunders 1992) as a proper independent behaviour or more simply an attitude moderating the trade-off between exit and voice (loyalty would favour voice more than exit). There is more than just one way to perceive being loyal such as an unconscious, passive, or reformist response (Graham and Keeley 1992), or active and passive (Whitey and Cooper 1992), or noisy and silent (Dowding et al). It is also worth remembering that there are different kinds of loyalty: brand loyalty towards a product/service (based on the reluctance to change behaviour) and identity loyalty towards an organisation (based on a deeper positive commitment). Moreover, Farrell and Rosbult (1992), who divided the actions into constructive/destructive and active/passive, integrated the EVL model with a fourth strategy, **neglect**, as a negative attitude to the relation/organisation.

A second issue entails the relationship between the EVL categories. Generally, exit is considered the main strategy in economics, while voice in political demands. But already Hirschman had suggested they can work together. Workers may first try to change the situation and then opt for exit. Or just consider the fact that voice implies a degree of loyalty towards an organisation (and dissatisfaction towards a service), while exit entails a

more radical refusal. This assumption poses the problem of a longitudinal and cross-sectional analysis of EVL model.

The third issue refers to the causes motivating one strategy over another. According to Farrell and Rosbult (1992), there are three main variables to be considered: job satisfaction, attractiveness of alternatives, and prior investments.

The fourth issue considers the barriers dissuading workers from one strategy or another. For example, according to Saunders et al (1992), the propensity of workers to voice depends on their evaluation of the responsiveness and approachability of supervisors. The presence of grievance procedures or a negotiation system, such as in an established industrial relations, may strengthen voice to the detriment of exit (Dowding et al 2000, 484). Nevertheless, there is debate whether unionism can be considered a path towards more voice and satisfaction, or the product of a deep dissatisfaction and negative industrial relations (Sverke and Goslinga 2003). On the other side, a monopoly or a general downgrade (of income, or a service) of the market can avoid the possibility to exit (Dowding et al 2000, 471). Some research showed that 'if boundaries between groups are open or permeable people tend to use individual status strategies, but they turn to collective status strategies in case of closed or impermeable group boundaries' (Dowding et al 2000, 483). Moreover, some studies highlighted how firms may empower employees' loyalty through an internal promotion structure (Cannings 1989).

Once clarified the main critical points of EVL approach, in the next section, first we will test how the categories of exit, voice and loyalty may be useful to map the practices of workers' dissatisfaction in the platform economy (first and second issue). Then, we will consider structural factors that may influence for a strategy or another (third and fourth issue) referring to the ways platforms territorialise their operations into urban spaces. Finally, in the conclusion, we will go back to the general EVL approach, suggesting some specificities of its application to a platform economy.

Different workers' strategies towards platforms

To apply an EVL approach to platform economy means, first of all, to point out the attention on the varieties of action that workers can apply towards their firms. Until now, platform labour studies have focused on specific strategies, but a general and comprehensive approach has never been proposed. Again, food delivery riders who expressed undoubtedly a high-level of struggle cannot be assumed as the paradigm of all the potential actions that platform workers may adopt. There is a great potential for other actions that could be implemented to express dissatisfaction or to improve own working conditions. The point is not only to map all these strategies but also to understand why one is preferred to the other.

Taking advantage of PLUS materials on platform labour organisation, we will show how exit, voice, and loyalty are articulated in the platform economy. We will illustrate such strategies referring to all the seven cities investigated by PLUS, with a particular focus on the case of Bologna. The latter presents a quite clear division of strategies according to the sector: cleaners prefer to exit from Helpling as soon as they can, riders organise voice actions against Deliveroo, while hosts loyally cooperate with Airbnb.

Exit

The tendency to exit can be identified in different practices that share the common aim to escape from demands of platform' rules.

This strategy is partially embodied by the practice of multi-apping that is relatively common, among all platform workers of the PLUS investigated cities. In this case, workers cannot totally move out from the platform economy, but they can jump from one

marketplace to another, in search of orders and better fares. In the city of Bologna, for example, many food delivery riders are registered at the same time on more than one platform, such as Deliveroo and Glovo. This strategy shows the instrumental use that workers make of platforms that are considered at the same time as suppliers of services and as illegitimate intermediation profiting from their labour.

Another form of exit is the attempt to organise cooperatives of platforms workers as an alternative to the extractive platforms (Foramitti et al 2020). In this case, workers move out of firm control and intermediation by creating their own company that can be managed in a more transparent and democratic way – as Barcelona riders explained had motivated their decision to find the delivering cooperative Mensakas.

A clearer tendency towards exit, anyway, can be found in Helpling and sometimes in Airbnb and Uber where worker–customer alliances are generated. Bologna cleaners reported they prefer to circumvent the (commission-heavy) role of the platform and do business informally, without the intermediation of Helpling. This strategy resulted more marginal in bigger cities like London or Berlin.

Voice

Through voice, workers partially or totally refuse the narrative of the self-entrepreneurship with its commission-based payment logic and instead ask the platforms for guaranteeing common rights.

Despite the pervasive algorithmic control and the spatial dispersion of workers, organising campaigns to establish worker–worker alliances has been observed in the investigated cities. Collective action by Uber drivers was evident in some cities (London, Paris) but less or not visible in other cities (Lisbon, Berlin, Tallinn). At Helpling in Berlin, some early stages of organising could be observed at the time of the research. Deliveroo and other delivery platforms face much discontent and protest by riders, who are frequently organised at the grassroots (for example, IWGB in London) or informal unions (like Riders Union in Bologna, CLAP in Paris, and RidersxDerechos in Barcelona). Riders Union Bologna organised couriers from all the food delivery platforms active in the city and networked with other unions and riders' collectives in Italy and Europe. They clearly targeted companies to demand rights as a minimum wage, a guaranteed working time, and social protections, in order to overcome the problems of precarious working conditions as in the informal labour

The activation to voice has been reported as an integrated strategy in the search for alternatives. In Bologna, riders participating in the protests of Riders Union expressed interest for working in a food delivery cooperative and reported to have changed more than one platform.

Loyalty

To exercise loyalty towards platforms means to try to improve income and working conditions basically accepting the situation and moving strategically through its rules. In this case, workers do not struggle to move out or confront the firm with opposing claims, rather prefer to cooperate between themselves to exploit platform functions for their own aims. A general action we detected on Deliveroo, Uber, and Helpling is the use of self-organised web groups for mutual support: workers were frequently in touch through messenger services such as WhatsApp or social media as Facebook. This is a way to directly exchange info and connect. Workers would share tips on bureaucracy duties, blacklists of customers (Helpling, Deliveroo), traffic warnings (Uber), and anti-theft support (Deliveroo). In this way, workers partially integrate the way platforms operate and fix some practical problems. The function of these web groups may vary by the time or the

Table 4. General patterns of platforms' territorialisation

	Uber	Deliveroo	Airbnb	Helping
Market	Collaboration/competition	Competition	Collaboration	Competition
Income level	Medium-low	Low	Medium-high	Low
Management	Direct control	Direct Control	Indirect control	Indirect control

occasion. Indeed, sometimes mutual support is preliminary to the definition of common claims and forms of unionisation.

The platform that is distinguished for its attempt of corporate community-building is Airbnb that employs a sharing narrative in strategic ways, e.g. to lobby for political decision-making, or foster a host identity. During the COVID-19 crisis, Helping also tried to employ a community narrative to foster a charity campaign that was advertised to customers. Here, anyway, the community was made up of the customers, not the workers. While other platforms discourage or oppose collective gathering and networking between workers, likely in order to sustain fragmentation and control, Airbnb embedded self-organisation into a logic of worker-platform alliance that can integrate the limited company functions. In Bologna since 2016 hosts organised into a local association of mutual aid named Local Pal that cooperates with Airbnb. In this case, the interviewee expressed satisfaction in relation to the income level and a self-perception as entrepreneurs; their concerns refer more on how to be compliant with local legislation and tourists' expectations.

The multiplication of platform labour

To sum up, workers have a large spectrum of actions they may adopt, both to express their dissatisfaction and to deal with platforms to their advantage. All these strategies are based on forms of alliance between variable actors (other workers, customers, and the same platform).

What we want to argue now is that the preference for one of these strategies will depend on the specificities of platforms territorialisation for a general overview on the four PLUS platforms see Table 4. Indeed, platform labour, even if characterised by some main commonalities, diverges in the forms of its urbanisation according to the industry sector, the employment status, and the labour process. On this basis, we will show that the specific configuration of these elements does not only define the platform working conditions but also influences the forms and claims of workers' organisation.

Indeed, despite the constantly growing number of studies on platform labour, many researchers have proposed a general homogeneous framework or a focus on specific case-studies. In contrast, our analysis shows that it would be important to find the way to bridge the need for a broader conceptualisation of platform labour together with the attention towards empirical specificities (Cuppini et al 2022). In this sense, the analysis of platforms' urbanisation represents the meeting point between homogeneous operations characterising platform capitalism (algorithmic management, data extraction, cost saving through outsourcing) and the varieties of its territorial implementation. In particular, we identify three factors that contribute to articulate locally to such operations. They are, the connection with established industry sectors (that defines the possibility and attractiveness of alternatives to a platform), the assignment of an employment status (fundamental for some features of job satisfaction like income), and the labour process organisation (determining the kind of investment into a business and the barriers to workers' action). Indeed, lean platforms embed services that are, in a way or another, already furnished at a

local level; these corporations do not create anything new but rather ‘colonise huge areas of the economy formerly dominated by small firms and individual traders in the informal economy’ (Huws 2020, 11). Moreover, established legislative frameworks influence the forms of labour-force employment (Davis and Sinha 2021) with effects on living conditions and social protections. Finally, the labour process may be deployed into different urban spaces – the streets, the domestic spheres – as well as through different techniques, producing variable problems and opportunities for workers (Pais 2020).

The combination of these three factors – the connection with established industry sectors, the employment status, and the labour process – not only simply define the forms of platforms urbanisation but also the approach of workers towards the firm in case of dissatisfaction.

Incumbent industries and alternatives to platforms

Platform companies typically enter markets where incumbent firms have already established their operations. Generally, they place into a segment of the sector. Thus, Airbnb refers particularly to short-term rentals of the accommodation industry, Uber to ride-hailing of transportation, Helpling to domestic services of cleaning, and Deliveroo to food delivery within the courier industry. These sectors can be based either on informal labour or on traditional companies. Platforms present themselves as further alternative suppliers.

Access can vary. Deliveroo and Helpling did not encounter strong opposition because previously their segments were organised mainly through informal labour, with delivery services being furnished directly by restaurants, while cleaning services occurred individually. A remarkable case is that of Helpling, which was by 2020, technically active in four of the investigated cities (Berlin, Bologna, London, and Paris). However, only the Berlin market appeared to be running on a significant scale at the time of our research. Germany is Helpling’s biggest market by far with around 10,000 self-employed workers, so that the company has reached the leading market position after purchasing its main competitors. The market size in Paris and London appeared small but unclear, and in Bologna, the company was hardly existent. More generally, domestic workers find jobs through word of mouth, and they also use online forums to find clients privately and informally. The possibility to establish a continuous relationship with the customer can facilitate the possibility to jump out of the platforms towards informal labour. In this sense, the main competitor for Helpling is the more likely the informal market, rather than traditional companies. By contrast, riders find it more difficult to return to informality² as their services change customers and furnishers constantly. For food deliveries organized by restaurants, the market entry of platforms has had a disruptive effect and presumably largely substituted this specific form of service provision.

On the other side, Uber and Airbnb had to deal with highly regulated sectors, such as taxi companies, or individuals were subject to municipal systems of licences; hotels or bed and breakfast accommodation had to comply with regional or national standards. Nevertheless, while Airbnb is placed into a sector where the general growth of tourism has guaranteed access to all competitors, Uber and the ride-hailing business are perceived as a major competitor and are putting pressure to deregulate the industry (Valdez 2023). More generally, after a first disruptive phase competing with incumbent companies, these platforms established collaborations with more traditional businesses. On the other hand, Airbnb is also admitting traditional hotels together with apartment sharing on its platform, while Uber is dealing with transportation companies subcontracting the workforce. This strategy reduces the possibility to exit from the platform towards an alternative, since more often than not the whole sector is ‘subsumed’ by platforms activities.

Employment relations and job satisfaction

Generally, self-employment is the norm for platform labour. This implies that the burden of social security is completely loaded on workers (ILO 2021, Chapter 4). However, the condition of an independent contractor often overlaps with other phenomena, such as multi-employment and multi-apping.³ Some of the freelancers interviewed had integrated platform labour with other jobs which guaranteed social security' coverage. In other cases, especially in delivery and ride-hailing workers operate on more than one platform to enlarge the possibility of getting orders. An exceptional case in terms of employment was Uber in Berlin, Lisbon and to a lesser extent in Paris, where Uber drivers were employed by sub-companies. However, the status of the employee has been evaluated as not sufficient to guarantee decent working conditions and social protections, as clearly emerge by PLUS research. While this was intended to prevent precarious labour circumstances, in most cases, this labour model merely reproduced the precarity of the freelancing model, as Uber's cooperating sub-companies used a wide array of semi-legal or informal practices to circumvent labour law. All platforms aimed to stimulate supply in local markets and increased competition through a structural oversupply of workers.⁴ This arrangement led to a large and increasing tendency of unpaid overwork through prolonged standby time, booking communication, or commuting time.

The employment status on all platforms is tied to a commission-based, piece wage pay system for contractors which make them highly dependent on the market circumstances in the city, as well as on the season and the time of the day. Most workers, especially on Deliveroo and Uber, considered their income was not adequate in relation to their living costs. In this respect, a living wage in Italy is seen to be about 1200 euros gross (1000 net). Deliveroo riders must work between 40 and 50 hours each week, while those who work about 20 hours report earning approximately 500 euros. Furthermore, it must be said that Deliveroo payment systems changed over time in Bologna according to some transformations in the labour process. The interviewees reported a progressive emergence of piece-working, and contemporaneously, a decrease in delivery fees. Piece-working is clearly connected with the intensity of deliveries and can differentiate the income of the workers according to their capacity, first to obtain as many orders as possible, and then, complete those orders in the least time possible. More generally, we may highlight how the Deliveroo payment system totally disrupts the idea of salary as a form of payment that integrates different aspects (social protections, the working time, and collective fees) and makes the income contingent on effective performance.⁵ As a Bologna Deliveroo rider asserted:

Looking organically at the ranking, the forms of payment and the way work is carried out, we have gone from a system in which there were minimal guarantees reduced to the bone to one in which the pressure on the rider is constantly increased while giving the impression that one could earn more.

Riders reported a concern over the uncertainty of their average income because of several reasons, including a decrease in fees, low clarity of deliveries distribution, and lack of transparency in the operation of the algorithm. The interviewees complained especially about the difficulties in obtaining a delivery and the lack of an hourly minimum guaranteed rather. These problems were reinforced by the internal competition among the riders to obtain deliveries; the interviewees report that Deliveroo hired too many couriers – more than what the company effectively needed, especially after the outbreak of the pandemic.

Airbnb, on the contrary, has been described by interviewees as capable of guaranteeing a sufficient or high level of income, at least potentially. In this respect, it seems important

to note that income is totally variable: ‘During the busy months – as a Bologna Airbnb host claimed – I could even get 2.000€. In other months I could get just 40€’. Despite this, to some hosts, Airbnb represents or it has represented, the total percentage of a worker’s salary. Single-listing hosts like students in a shared apartment use the income for the bills and other tax payments, whereas medium-size hosts (with more than one and max. five apartments) could reach a part time salary for all the family. It was the same for a medium-size property manager:

‘The only thing I remember was a nice round of money, but especially if you do things correctly, you get a part-time paycheck at the end of the whole round’.

Big hosts or estate agents are gaining in ‘percentage: ‘From 25% that we take within seven days to 10% that we do for longer periods of time’.

Labour process and workers’ engagement

First of all, it is important to highlight how the urban dimension overlaps with the working space. In the case of Uber and Deliveroo, city streets constitute the lanes of their last-mile logistics services; Helpling and Airbnb are more bordered to the domestic sphere, even if its definition is highly influenced by the urban background, such as in terms of customers’ expectations and social composition.

The management of the labour process inside these expanded working spaces is submitted to a similar array of algorithmic techniques (Huws 2016; Shapiro 2018), including data accumulation, tracking, rating and ranking with the help of customers, gamification, rewards, and sanctions. Although it was present throughout all platforms, the implementation of algorithmic management among investigated platforms varied. There was a tighter organisation and control at Uber and Deliveroo, which could track even small steps of the work process, such as the driver’s or rider’s navigation to the destination. By comparison, Airbnb and Helpling prefer more indirect instruments of control such as ratings and comments by customers to assess performance and increase compliance with platform standards.

All platforms used both punitive measures (sanctions, lockouts, and fines) and incentive-based tools (gamification, nudging, and rewards). Airbnb were notable for a tendency towards more incentive-based tools, although sanctions such as lockouts were present, too. Companies also tried to foster the quality and intensity of work through internal status and bonus systems (superhost status, dynamic pricing bonus, and experienced cleaner status). At Uber and Airbnb, bonus systems such as dynamic pricing or status categories like the superhost status were communicated as a reward, privilege, or (exclusive) appreciation. However, most of these mechanisms usually resulted in a tighter dependence on the company and the threat of losing or not achieving the bonus/status was permanently present.

Apart from Deliveroo, all platforms have established reciprocal rating systems on their apps that made it possible to rate customers back (Uber and Airbnb had established this system from early on, whereas Helpling had only just implemented such a system at the time of our research). However, a worker’s rating usually had little weight and did not challenge the power asymmetry that was geared towards the companies and customers.

Refusing orders proved to be an important marker of worker autonomy for interviewees and was referred to repeatedly when describing problems with the company. Declining orders (or cancelling bookings/dates in advance) is highly sanctioned at Uber, Airbnb, and Helpling. At Deliveroo, declining orders was possible and crucial for the legal status of freelancers.

Table 5. Patterns of EVL in Bologna

Platform	Workers' main strategy	Barriers to other strategies	Job satisfaction	Market	Labour organisation
Helping	Exit	Workers' dispersion	Low income and few social protections	Strong informal market	Low investment and high level of control
Deliveroo	Voice		Low income and few social protections with relevant safety risks	Scarce alternatives and similar conditions in all platforms	Low investment and high level of control
Airbnb	Loyalty	Strong identification with the platform	Medium-high income	Market in expansion	High human capital investment

EVL in Bologna

In the case of Bologna city what emerges is that platforms disrupted previous businesses. Apart from cleaning sector, where informality endure, the employment status as independent contractor disappoints all workers but not hosts who declare to have a satisfying income level. The self-entrepreneurial organisation of labour stimulates material and immaterial investments into the business except for the case of food delivery riders who often perceive the platform as a proper employer. Moreover, the pervasive control by algorithmic management and territorial dispersion impact on the capacity to express dissatisfaction. These results can partially explain why in Bologna Helping workers opted more for exit, Airbnb hosts for loyalty, and Deliveroo couriers for voice (see Table 5).

Exit appeared to be specifically connected to algorithmic and impersonal forms of management on platforms. The company's physical absence from the labour process enables the coalition between workers and customers. Nevertheless, quitting is possible only when alternatives are strong enough to guarantee labour continuity. Helping cleaners in Bologna reported how they struggle to bypass the high commission fees of the platform and to establish direct contact with their customers. Nevertheless, while this strategy seems to not impact deeply on the firm expansion in other cities like Berlin, the situation is different in Bologna where the company found difficulties in enlarging its base of workers and customers and so, was struggling to disrupt the informal market. The domestic dimension of the labour and the enduring role of informal market in the city, together with the restrained dimension of the city which favours direct contacts, contribute to weaken the capacity of the platform to embed the service efficiently and disarticulate other competing markets.

We may hypothesise that the preference for voice-oriented strategies is more common for platform workers who experience low-income levels but high-control techniques with few possibilities to establish long-time relationships outside the platform. Bologna riders clearly experience a high level of direct control by the algorithmic management, and this contributes to the perception of the platform as a counterpart directing their work. As for cleaners, they express complaints about their income and employment status but have scarce possibilities to fully exit because the informal sector squeezed, and all platforms have almost same prices. Nevertheless, riders' visible presence in the city facilitated processes of encounter and organisation that require more effort in the case of domestic labour.

Loyalty strategy can be pursued in a case where the platform may ensure high levels of income and does not exercise an oppressive direct control over workers, giving them the possibility to develop forms of mutualism or self-organisation that empower the identification with the company. Airbnb hosts in Bologna reported they could gain sufficiently from the platform and, moreover, the expansion of the tourism sector obviated the need to search for alternatives. Their aim is more to exploit the possibilities offered by the platform.

Conclusions

We have argued that platform labour, even if characterised by some main commonalities, diverges in the forms of its urbanisation according to the industry sector, the employment status, and the labour process. Indeed, when platforms territorialise, they have to embed a social fabric dismantling previous market relations, to produce a self-entrepreneurial workforce and to ensure an algorithmic management of the labour process. Nevertheless, the degrees and the ways these variables occur define the peculiarities of platform and of a place, so that, for example, some incumbent market relations may endure, and the management may adopt a softer approach. Put differently, the multiplication of labour is the condition of existence of the platform capitalism's common operations.

Moreover, the way platforms territorialise, create different conditions of opportunity that favour several strategies of action for workers. These strategies may focus on the definition of non-mediated relations with the customer against platform rules, on the claim for collective standards against a self-entrepreneurial logic, on the exercise of mutual aid inside a digital ecosystem.

The EVL model has not been applied to research into platform labour in a systemic way to investigate how workers react to dissatisfaction towards digital firms. There are other studies that have explored the relationship between EVL and job insecurity, the latter a feature that is often associated with platform labour. These studies remarked how 'insecure workers typically express less loyalty to their organisation and are more inclined to exit from it' (Sverke and Goslinga 2003, 260), while 'voicing one's concerns through active involvement in union affairs does not appear to be a frequent strategy to cope with job insecurity' (Sverke and Goslinga 2003, 258). For this reason, in the conclusion we want to highlight some specificities about the application of EVL approach to the platform economy taking advantage of the analysis of the role of urban dimension in the definition of strategies, causes, and barrier.

First of all, we may underline some differences between the way EVL are generally conceptualised and their features in platform economy. Exit is considered operationally dichotomous, while our research highlighted its porous characters. Workers may join and quit platforms constantly, as a strategy to increase working possibilities and income rate, not just to express dissatisfaction. So exit could be a constructive strategy, not a simply negative attitude. Collective voice has to be framed beyond the traditional unionism as informal organisations seem to be preferred by platform workers, especially in the food delivery sector. Individual voice seems to be more difficult as workers reported several problems in dealing with their company because of the impersonal character of algorithmic management. Loyalty has undoubtedly an important role, as platforms are structurally based on the constant engagement by workers who have to match with standards and procedures, as well as to gain a good ranking and rating. Self-entrepreneurship means that there is no space for a neglect strategy, because to be totally passive implies to be excluded from shifts and orders. Furthermore, some forms of collective loyalty – like mutualism to fill a platform's gap – seem quite close to horizontal voice as reciprocal aid sustains the creation of common claims and actions.

Moreover, there are other important remarks in relation to the causes and barriers to EVL.

Considering the causes that motivate platform workers to express their dissatisfaction, the need to better articulate such categories emerged clearly. Job satisfaction cannot be reduced to income level but has to integrate with social protections, safety, and possibilities of personal career. All these elements overflow the simple formal employment condition. Alternatives are not limited to other similar business, since the return to the informal sector or the creation of a cooperative, are both considered attractive options. This is especially the case because platforms are often conceived as illegitimate intermediation because of the high costs they impose and the opacity of their functioning. Prior investments are more than material or financial. Proprietors or debtors (like Uber drivers who need to own a quite latest car to be admitted) are clearly bound to the platform, but their relation resemble more the service loyalty. Nevertheless, some companies greatly valorise the social and human capital of their workforce through self-entrepreneurial ethics. These create the dynamics of identity loyalty, where the worker identifies him/herself with the organisation due to the investment of values, aspirations, and desires into the platform. The promotion structure of ranking, ratings, and income level contribute to create a sense of career promotion and empower loyalty. In this sense, Airbnb investment in local community-building favours processes of identification and dissuades from quitting or conflict.

In relation to barriers to EVL, it seems important to integrate the elements already identified by the literature with two more: the level of dispersion in the territory and the pervasiveness of control. Difficulties to meet and organise in person with colleagues, weaken the possibility for collective voice while exit and loyalty can also be exercised individually. This barrier is partially circumvented through the use of digital tools of communication. Nevertheless, spatial dispersion could affect exit strategy, especially in large cities where the access to informal market in some sectors seems to be more difficult. Algorithmic management techniques, on the other side, allow companies to trace almost all workers' activities, and this partially disables the possibility to disintermediate the relation between workers and customers, as well as the communication between workers. To pursue exit, indeed, workers must avoid strong management control techniques and establish a disintermediation between users and workers, through building an enduring relationship or operating in a well-defined place. At the same time, such systems empower workers' active loyalty through gaming, ranking, and rating tools.

Funding statement. The research reported in this paper was funded by European Union, Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, "Platform Labour in Urban Spaces: Fairness, Welfare, Development" (<https://project-plus.eu>), Grant Agreement No. 822638. The views and opinions expressed in this publication are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission/Research Executive Agency.

Notes

1 Work Package 2 has been led by University of Luneburg / Humboldt University team, while Work Package 3 by FORBA (Working Life Research Centre) of Vienna. In particular, we refer to the deliverables 2.3 *Final Report on impact on technologies on workers and labour process in the platform economy* and 3.1 *Comparative Analytical Analysis across seven city-specific reports*. The authors contributed to the data collection and analysis at local level, as well as to the trans-urban comparison in the case of WP2.

2 Food delivery platforms are expanding their services horizontally and vertically. In this sense, we may refer to the emergence of dark kitchens, a franchising system where food is prepared specifically for Deliveroo in industrial areas or containers, and of grocery services. In those cases, they compete with more regulated sectors as restaurants and supermarkets.

3 The practice of multi-apping was very frequent at Uber and Deliveroo, and indeed, increased during Covid in some cities such as London. It was in rare cases done by Airbnb hosts, but not by those Helping workers we

interviewed. Multi-apping was a way for workers to deal with contingency, long standby times, and dependency on the platform company. While multi-apping has advantages for workers in terms of more earnings and less waiting time, the coordination of two or even more apps at the same time is challenging and sometimes dangerous.

4 All of the platforms we researched asked for little to no qualifications to start working. An exception was Uber, where a driving licence and in most cities some form of training and payment, was necessary for a taxi/ride-hailing licence. Still, these requirements were much lower than conventionally required in the taxi sector. Low-entry barriers provide easy access to the labour market for platforms and the possibility to fuel an 'oversupply' of workers. Nevertheless, our interviews clarified that various skills and qualifications (both formal and informal, explicit and tacit) were crucial for workers' success on the platform. On the one hand, platform work requires skills typical of digital labour such as digital literacy, i.e., the ability to manage the smartphone and several apps. On the other hand, platform work entails skills typical of the service economy, such as communication, language, advertising and marketing skills. Moreover, an invisible affective and emotional work towards the customers is needed. This could be observed the most by Airbnb hosts (especially when renting out their private spaces) and Helping cleaners. It was also present to a strong degree for Uber drivers, who had to interact with customers in close proximity, and to a lesser degree for Deliveroo drivers who saw customers only at the point of the delivery pick-up. Finally, skills related to the urban space, such as the ability to orientate in different districts of the city, are necessary to comply with the job requirements.

5 It is possible to identify three main systems, corresponding to different moments in the evolution of Deliveroo in Bologna. When PLUS started in 2019 its field research some workers still had a payment system based on a fix fee (7.50 euros gross hourly, 5.90 euros net) and 1 euro gross as bonus for each delivery. Gradually, it has been introduced what Deliveroo called the 'dynamic fee', a retribution variable according to the time and distance of deliveries with an hourly minimum guaranteed (7.50 euros gross hourly) in case the rider accepts the deliveries. A short-distance delivery is generally paid around 4/5 euros gross. Finally, together with the collective agreement signed by Assodelivery and UGL in September 2020, Deliveroo decided to introduce a new payment system based on the free login, which means no more shifts and statistics but open possibility to all riders to work during all working time. The payment is based on piece-working with a minimum of 10 euros gross for each hour of deliveries estimated by the platform and some additions related to the distance.

References

- Cannings K (1989) An exit-voice model of managerial attachment. *Journal of Economic Behaviour and Organisation* 12, 107–129.
- Colliers & The Hotel School of the Hague (2018) Airbnb in Europe. Major Cities Compared. Available at chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/file:///C:/Users/61402/Downloads/EMEAairbnb_Top5_2018_final.pdf
- Cuppini N, Frapporti M and Pirone M (2022) When cities meet platforms: Towards a trans-urban approach. *Digital Geography and Society* 3, 1–6.
- Davis G and Sinha A (2021) Varieties of uberization: How technology and institutions change the organization(s) of late capitalism. *Organization Theory* 2, 1–17.
- Deloitte (2019) Delivering growth: the impact of third party platform ordering on restaurants. Available at <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/financial-advisory/articles/delivering-growth.html>
- Dowding K, John P Mergoupis T and Van Vugt M (2000), Exit, voice and loyalty: Analytic and empirical developments. *European Journal of Political Research* 37, 469–495.
- European Federation for Services of Individuals (2018) *PHS Industry Monitor*. EFSI. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/http://www.efsi-europe.eu/fileadmin/MEDIA/publications/2018/PHS_Industry_monitor_April_2018.pdf.
- Farrell D and Rusbult CE (1992) Exploring the exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect typology: The influence of job satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment size. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 5(3), 201–218.
- Foramitti J, Varvarousis A and Kallis G (2020) Transition within a transition: How cooperative platforms want to change the sharing economy. *Sustainability Science* 15(4), 1185–1197.
- Graham JW and Keeley M (1992) Hirschman's loyalty construct. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 5(3), 191–200.
- Graham M (2020) Regulate, replicate, and resist – the conjunctural geographies of platform urbanism. *Urban Geography* 41(3), 453–457.
- Heiland H (2020) *Workers' Voice in Platform Labour. An Overview. Study 21*. Düsseldorf: Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut (WSI). <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/225444>

- Hirschman A (1970) *Exit Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Hirschman A (1980) "Exit, voice, and loyalty": Further reflections and a survey of recent contributions. *The Milbank memorial fund quarterly. Health and Society* 58(3), 430–453.
- Huws U (2016) Logged labour: A new paradigm of work organisation? *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation* 10(1), 7–26.
- Huws U (2020) The algorithm and the city: Platform labour and the urban environment. *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation* 14(1), 7–14.
- International Labour Organization (2021) *Making Decent Work a Reality for Domestic Workers: Progress and Prospects Ten Years after the Adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)*. Geneva: International Labour Office.
- International Labour Organization (2021) *World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The Role of Digital Labour Platforms in Transforming the World of Work*. Geneva: International Labour Office.
- Johnston H and Land-Kazlauskas C (2018) *Organizing On-Demand: Representation, Voice, and Collective Bargaining in the Gig Economy. Conditions of Work and Employment Series, 99*. Geneva: ILO.
- Joyce S, Stuart M and Forde C (2023) Theorising labour unrest and trade unionism in the platform economy. *New Technology, Work and Employment* 38(1), 21–40.
- Leck JD and Saunders DM (1992) Hirschman's loyalty: Attitude or behavior? *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 5(3), 219–230.
- Martin R and Belen Munoz Ruiz A (2020) PHS-QUALITY Project Job Quality and Industrial Relations in the Personal and Household Services Sector – VS/2018/0041 Overview Comparative Report, European Commission. Available at https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/60685435/comparative_report_phs_final_amos_munoz.pdf
- Mezzadra S and Neilson B (2013) *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Moody K (2014) *In Solidarity: Essays on Working-Class Organization in the United States*. Chicago: Ill Haymarket Books.
- O'Donnell G (1996) Illusions about Consolidation. *Journal of Democracy* 7, 34–51.
- Pais I (2020) Digital platforms and the transformations in the division of labor. In Zimmermann KF (ed), *Handbook of Labor, Human Resources and Population Economics*. Cham, Ill Springer, 1–16.
- Saunders DM, Sheppard BH, Knight V and Roth J (1992) Employee voice to supervisors. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 5(3), 241–259.
- Shapiro A (2018) Between autonomy and control: Strategies of arbitrage in the "on-demand" economy. *New Media & Society* 20(8), 1–18.
- Srnicek N (2016) *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge, MA: Polity.
- Strüver A and Bauriedl S (2022) *Platformization of Urban Life. Towards a Technocapitalist Transformation of European Cities*. Bielefeld: Transcript Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839459645>
- Sverke M and Gorling S (2003) The consequences of job insecurity for employers and unions: Exit, voice and loyalty. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 24(2), 241–270.
- Trappmann V, Bessa I, Joyce S, Neumann D, Stuart M and Umney C (2020) *Global labour unrest on platforms labour and social justice. The case of food delivery workers*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Available at <chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnipcgjclefindmkaj/https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/16880.pdf>.
- Valdez J (2023) The politics of uber: Infrastructural power in the United States and Europe. *Regulation and Governance* 17(1), 177–194
- Withey MJ and Cooper WH (1992) What's loyalty? *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 5(3), 231–240.

Mattia Frapporti is a Junior Researcher within the HorizonEurope INCA project at the Department of Computer Science and Engineering, University of Bologna. His main interests are the analysis of the political role of infrastructures and the relationship between logistics and politics. Since many years now, his research also focuses on the platform's world and their impact on urban spaces. He is a founding member of the research group Into the Black Box and he is on the editorial board of *Zapruder* and on the board of the Foundation Jean Monnet pour l'Europe.

Maurilio Pirone is a Junior Researcher for the HorizonEurope INCA project at the Department of Arts, University of Bologna, where he teaches political philosophy. He is a founding member of the research group Into the Black Box and he is on the editorial board of *WOLG - Work Organization Labour & Globalisation*. His main interests are Capitalism 4.0 and the role platform play in labour and society.

Cite this article: Frapporti M and Pirone M (2023). Exit, voice, and loyalty in the platform economy of Bologna city. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 34, 651–666. <https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2023.45>