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New theories and politics for working class organizing in the gig and precarious world of work

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Abstract
The emergence of labour conflicts across different sectors of the gig and precarious economy is challenging established industrial relations (IR) frameworks and some of its political implications. Despite its analytical merits, Kelly's union-centred mobilization theory appears insufficient to explain these mobilizations, characterized by informal networks and self-organization. Evidence from the sectors of logistics and cloudwork, where processes of digitalization have been rampant in recent years, shows that there is a need to build a more processual account of worker mobilizations in which non-institutional factors play a major role. Drawing on the European social movement tradition, in this article the authors consider two factors, supportive communities and political activism traditions, as key to understanding critical cases of mobilization in the gig economy and renewing IR theories of collective action through a class-based approach.

Keywords
Gig/precarious economy, mobilization theory, political activism traditions, supportive communities, worker mobilizations

Introduction

The debate that followed the publication of Standing's (2011) book on the precariat highlighted the historical exceptionality of industrialized countries' post-war development

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and its influence on capital–labour relations in the social democratic social compact inherent in these relations. At a time when some talk of the return of merchant capitalism (Van der Linden and Breman, 2020) – and arguably a pre-industrial, less formally organized working class – the working class worldwide is increasingly aligned to the informality and precariousness that has always characterized the Global South (Breman and Van der Linden, 2014). Labour protests are nowadays much more likely to be led by grassroots unions and informal groups of workers, often in conflict with existing trade union structures (Bessa et al., 2022; Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020; Stuart et al., 2020). This tendency is heightened by the growth of the platform economy (Joyce et al., 2020), in which workers generally opt to self-represent, with a significant number of worker protests in both developed and developing countries organized by entirely informal networks, online groups and forums, self-organized collectives, or new organizational forms (Anwar and Graham, 2020; Wood et al., 2019).

Even across Europe – where industrial relations (IR) scholarship was born and has developed its frameworks centred on the role of trade unions (Hyman, 1975) – in many cases of gig and precarious workers' mobilizations, longstanding unions have, at least initially, remained on the side-lines (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020), with fewer than 20% of platform labour protests organized by established unions (Bessa et al., 2022). Many mobilization processes manifest the intervention of new IR actors outside the traditional labour movement framework (Woodcock, 2021), including grassroots members-led unions, such as for example 'indie' unions in the UK (Però, 2019), which have recently managed to organize precarious migrant workers in low-service sectors, such as cleaning, security and platform food delivery. Precarious workers' self-organized groups, active in many countries since the mid-2000s, offer representation to precarious workers outside the framework of traditional unionism, for example the French *Collectif des Livreurs Autonomes* or the *San Precario* movement (Cini et al., 2021).

Given this changing scenario, what theoretical toolkits do social scientists have at their disposal to empirically investigate the current dynamics of workers' mobilizations? In the absence of established labour actors, how have gig and precarious workers been able to take collective action? From a more political point of view, which insights for working class strategic organizing can be generated?

In a field where the renewal of organizational forms re-signifies labour conflict, we must refine our theories and approaches on labour conflicts. For more than two decades, the IR field has applied the mobilization theory framework provided by John Kelly (1998) in his influential book *Rethinking Industrial Relations*. Mobilization theory has the merit of bringing the social movement studies (SMS) tradition/vocabulary into the workplace, by exploring factors and dimensions of action building (dissatisfaction, injustice, leadership) central to explaining social movement formation processes. However, application of this framework to a logic of organization building following rigid sequences – leader-driven and union-centred – justified by the need to revitalize a declining trade union movement has always been limited to the sphere of work with formal trade union representation. Relatedly and more importantly, Kelly's theorization drew on the American tradition of social movements, and especially the resource mobilization version (McCarthy and Zald, 1977), characterized by a neopositivist interpretation of mobilizations – formal organizations, their resources and their leaders coordinate

public campaigns that citizens are expected to follow – and a tendency to analyse collective action as the result of the sum of individual actions.

Unlike the American tradition, the European social movements tradition (Melucci, 1996) has paid attention more extensively to the broader non-institutional socio-political and cultural context and its evolution over time to interpret social movement formation processes (della Porta and Diani, 2020). We believe that two sets of factors in particular developed in this tradition – related to the existence of (a) supportive communities and (b) political activism traditions – can serve to integrate recent IR literature on labour conflict and make sense of contemporary mobilizations, with their mixture of bottom-up organizing forms and social movement types of action (Alberti and Però, 2018; Ford and Honan, 2019; Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020). These factors are important because of not just the emerging evidence of their centrality for contemporary experiences of collective organization, but also the links that can be established with the 1970s/1980s IR Marxist and materialist tradition of workplace ethnography and critical trade union studies (see Pollert, 1981, for instance) that, similar to European social movement studies, emphasized the processual and time-imbued character of worker mobilizations. This tradition, now greatly eclipsed by mobilization theory's top-down/union-centred/leader-driven approach and widely diffused application, most importantly connected the dynamics of workers' collective action to the valorization process and, although focusing mainly on the workplace, was able to generate insights into broader class dynamics. By merging the European SMS tradition with the Marxist IR of the 1970s and 1980s, the article aims to open the field to renewed theoretical reflections on workers' collective action more attuned to contemporary evidence.

We do so by examining how supportive communities and political activism traditions have shaped recent mobilizations in the platform labour world. In this new industry of contemporary capitalism (Joyce et al., 2023), where processes of technological innovation driven by digitalization are interwoven with dynamics of work informalization, we believe that such mobilizations are highly representative of labour conflicts in the digital (and precarious) age. We focus specifically on two sectors, namely, logistics and cloudwork, which a growing number of studies have considered as salient cases in terms of bottom-up forms of organizing and social movement types of action (Bessa et al., 2022; Stuart et al., 2020).

The article is organized as follows. In the theoretical section, we identify the limits of Kelly's mobilization theory for explaining current processes of worker mobilization, before presenting and discussing how supportive communities and political activism traditions can help to reconnect workplace and labour process issues to broader social dimensions. In the empirical section, after presenting the rationale for our case selection and methodology, we illustrate how these factors are key to understanding contemporary worker mobilizations by looking in detail at a number of recent conflicts in the gig and precarious economy, and particularly in logistics and cloudwork, where digitalization processes are rampant, reshaping the material contour of workers' organization and action.

On Kelly's mobilization theory and its limits

John Kelly's (1998) mobilization theory has been used extensively in the IR field, both as a theoretical framework to look explicitly at workers' collective action and as, by default, a Marxist reference for studies with a broader industrial relations policy scope. Kelly's theory's popularity is connected with the political message that he was conveying to a declining trade union movement and to the academic and political left: union power is cyclical and can be rebuilt. To achieve this, Kelly refocused union action and organizing efforts at workplace mobilization level, by providing a powerful theoretical framework to study the micro dynamics and processes of collective action.

Kelly's theory has at its core the pervasive feeling of injustice among workers, whose activation by various types of leaders, able to attribute this to an employer and to well-defined external circumstances, triggers a collective organizing process. This framework, relying heavily on the social movement tradition, constituted an important attempt to bridge the gap between this school of thought, more concerned with socio-cultural factors and causes, and industrial relations, with its workplace focus. The blend of the two traditions was particularly relevant for the revitalization purposes central to Kelly's project. Understanding how to build collective interests by focusing on the micro dynamics of mobilization was a powerful tool in the hands of trade unions to rebuild a strong labour movement.

Economic and Industrial Democracy's special 2018 issue dedicated to the book's 20th anniversary spurred a debate on Kelly's mobilization theory among leading IR academics and Kelly (2018) himself. Some authors proposed specific revisions. Holgate et al. (2018), for instance, argued the need to distinguish between mobilization, characterized as a temporally limited episode of collective conflict and in which Kelly's theory would work best, and organizing, trade unions' more sustained building endeavour in which Kelly's framework would need to be integrated. Darlington, while arguing that the theory was unclear with respect to cases of unplanned action in which leaders emerged as an ex-post result of mobilizations, believed that the theory integrated and gave 'equal consideration to objective and subjective (structure and agency) factors and their interplay' (Darlington, 2018: 631). Overall, although providing some useful corrections and necessary updates, these authors' revisions left Kelly's core tenets substantially untouched.

We, however, contend that some critical aspects of his theory, reinforced by the empirical manifestation of current mobilization processes in the precarious and gig economy, cannot be underestimated. Here, we discuss two that we consider as the most questionable.

Transplanting a theory about rights movements to the workplace

The first problem of Kelly's framework is his overreliance on the North American social movement tradition (resource mobilization theory), with its very formalistic comprehension of social movements, characterized as well-defined organizational entities, capable of deploying vast and various resources (e.g. money, professional knowledge, social networking, organizational structures) to pursue specific declared goals (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). In this approach, movement organizations (and their leaders) are seen as the

main planners and initiators of protest campaigns that ordinary citizens are expected to join massively and obediently. The linear sequence, first organization, then leader-led mobilization, and a formulaic calculation of mobilization processes characterized as the interplay of specific resources and opportunities are a foundational element of this strand of research, found at different stages in Kelly's micro mobilization framework. Kelly uncritically imported this sequence and approach by adapting categories used to understand movements about rights to the different reality of the workplace in which grievances are connected to the (capitalist) labour process and value extraction. In doing this, he probably 'birth-marked' mobilization theory with elements of an explicitly non-Marxist perspective on collective action, in contrast to the overall Marxist objectives and approach supporting *Rethinking Industrial Relations* (Ghigliani, 2010).

A rigid ideal type

A second and related set of critical comments concerns the discrepancy between key aspects of the theoretical framework and its empirical corroboration: the controversial nature of injustice (a subjective concept yet considered as the theory's *conditio sine qua non* [Kelly, 1998: 29]); leaders' centrality in framing and attributing this injustice; the rigid sequentiality of the theory ('Mobilization appears as a clean process of *ready, aim, fire*!' adds Kirk [2018: 651]); and its inapplicability for the analysis of cases of action 'in the making', namely, those occurring before identified leaders can emerge, when workers' grievances are not fully formulated, and their collective organization is still in the formation process. Put otherwise – in Kelly's view – collective action is reconstructed as the linear and ideal typical outcome of a process in which workers' generic feelings of injustice are transformed and made explicit by existing leaders, who attribute the causes of the injustice to the employer and, in the presence of both a minimal organizational structure and a strategic opportunity, call on workers to act. His conviction that workers' experiences of injustice in the workplace help to understand and explain processes of mobilization in environments apparently hostile to such processes is valid and deserves to be taken seriously. However, by overemphasizing the idea that injustice motivates workers to mobilize, Kelly commits the error of underestimating the role of collective and material dynamics connected to the labour process as factors influencing the emergence of workers' action. In short, his framework provides a too rigidly subjective and individually based explanation of workplace mobilization.

We believe that these flaws fundamentally undermine the validity of Kelly's framework as a general theory for collective action. His theory can still elucidate various factors internal to the construction of workplace collective mobilization dynamics. Yet, it is explicitly a trade union-centred device of collective organization – structured around consolidated labour actors, historically embedded in an institutionally established industrial relations framework. At the time of the book's publication, this view made sense, as – like many authors writing in the UK's 1990s neoliberal anti-working-class environment – Kelly aspired to rebuild trade unions' power by recalling the institutionalized post-war setting. 'If union power in the post-war period was underpinned by state commitment to full employment, why should there not be such a policy in the future?' (Kelly, 1998: 5). This was a legitimate claim and, in that demobilized union-declining context,

mobilization theory played a fundamental role in revitalizing the union movement and labour conflict studies. Yet, it did so by imposing, de facto, a trade union-centred model of collective action, which is today increasingly inadequate to grasp workers' power building in the gig and precarious economy, where workers are experimenting with practices showing a return to mutualistic, associational, pre-union forms of organization well beyond specific workplaces (Joyce et al., 2023). These are precisely the mobilization dynamics that Kelly's theory has never been able to explain and that call for new theorization.

Supportive communities, activism traditions and the quest for self-organization: Our theoretical (and political) argument

IR studies are today still highly dependent on the *pluralist* frame of reference (Heery, 2016), considering trade unions as central, as either policy making institutions or collective organizations representing workers. Even the widely used power resources approach (Schmaltz et al., 2018), which explicitly stresses the need to build workers' power by looking also at factors outside the workplace, is fundamentally a union-based institutional framework that fails to address the non-union and broader class dimension in which workers' power is often inserted (Nowak, 2021). How can we move from a field dominated by institutionalist scholarship to a set of theories able to open new fields of enquiry into the complex, dynamic and contradictory nature of labour mobilizations in tune with contemporary developments?

This is where – we believe – social movement research, and especially the European tradition (Flesher Fominaya and Cox, 2013), can help, because, unlike the American tradition, it has paid attention extensively to the non-institutional socio-political and cultural context in which social movement formation processes take place (Melucci, 1996). Notably, the emergence and unfolding of such processes have been explained by considering specific contextual features, such as a given country's protest culture, a given community's informal networks of activists, the presence of social movement organizations and urban localities' organizational tradition of mobilization (della Porta and Diani, 2020). These studies have explored the evolution of protest forms over time and space by showing how such forms have emerged and spread across movements. These diffusion dynamics seem particularly evident in gig and precarious worker protests, where tactics drawn from social movements – especially anti-globalization and environmental protests – have been widely adopted and re-signified (Bessa et al., 2022).

We believe that the adoption of the European social movement research tradition is also well-suited for our theoretical effort, as it might speak to the classical British IR tradition of workplace ethnography (Pollert, 1981) and critical trade union studies (Hyman, 1975) developed in the 1970s and early 1980s, as well as Darlington's (2006) and Cohen's (2011) studies on leadership and left-wing activism. Albeit showing significant variety in terms of analysis and case studies, this tradition was overall able to connect the dynamics of workers' collective action to the social context and, although focusing on the workplace, to generate insights into broader class dynamics. Today, this

tradition has been revived by a new generation of labour scholars, who have been investigating gig and precarious worker mobilizations across different sectors and regions by paying particular attention to the broader political economic and contextual dynamics of their occurrence (Alberti and Però, 2018; Cini et al., 2021; Ford and Honan, 2019; Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020; Woodcock, 2021).

We maintain that merging such IR scholarship with the European social movement tradition is particularly helpful for identifying and making sense of contemporary mobilizations, as it seems better able to capture the actual processes underpinning their mobilization dynamics, which have been mostly outside the traditional representation channels and have involved resources outside the working environment (Joyce et al., 2023). In line with Richard Hyman's classical interpretation of the (pragmatic and processual) relationship between workers and their established representative organizations, we contend that 'in some circumstances, workers may view the official union as irrelevant to their objectives or even as an obstacle' (Hyman, 1975: 17). Many current worker mobilization processes do not flow through institutionalized channels. To base the study of these processes solely on formal procedures and organizations is, therefore, to impose unacceptably narrow limits to their understanding.

Building on this growing scholarly tradition, at the intersection of labour studies and social movement research, examining the innovative forms of labour conflict involving precarious, migrant and platform workers occurring outside the traditional IR context, we focus on two distinct but related factors, which such literature considers as crucial for understanding the emergence and variety of gig and precarious workers' mobilizations (see for a detailed discussion, Cini, 2023): (a) supportive communities; and (b) political activism traditions. These factors are now illustrated.

Supportive communities

Understanding workers' organizing requires an appreciation of the fact that what occurs in the workplace is shaped by what occurs outside it, as workers' beliefs and practices are fundamentally shaped by their social contexts. In SMS, the communities where movement participants live are considered relevant resources for their mobilization capacities (della Porta and Diani, 2020). Likewise, critical IR scholars, such as Alberti and Però (2018), have identified the presence of strong, supportive ethnic communities as important sources for the organizational practices of precarious migrant workers employed in the low-paid service sector in London. Other critical IR studies have emphasized the support of neighbourhood and solidarity groups in the organization of mobilizations in delivery and wider logistics sectors in Italy (Cini and Goldmann, 2021). Resources are primarily understood here as the social contacts that workers exploit. In Nowak's view (2019: 26), 'these can be family and communal bonds, neighbourhood contacts, political or social organisations, knowledge of a region or neighbourhood or relations to family members in other regions or countries'.

Such communities can thus be characterized as a web of social relations supportive of worker mobilizations, travelling across either time or space: the persistence and the mutualistic support of movement infrastructural networks in a worker's locality are a case in point of the former, whereas the logistical and emotional backing that a migrant workforce

receives from its ethnic community is an emblematic case of the latter. Furthermore, they can emerge and develop either online (social media chat groups) or offline (onsite-based group meetings and discussions).

Research on platform workers has highlighted the relevance of these communities in providing help to find worthwhile gigs, advice, and tricks to deal with a client or employer or in setting up specific forums, such as Turkopticon or Sub-reddit, to avoid bad employers (Schmidt et al., 2023). This mutualistic and problem-solving associational function creates – as the history of working class organization shows – emotional support, collegiality, and a sense of shared identity, values and solidarity that promote collective action. In our view, the relevance of this mutualistic function created by supportive communities for gig and precarious worker mobilizations may depend on the low level of institutionalization of the IR system in which their working settings are located. In the absence of established actors and rules, specific communities of support may be amplified and play a crucial role in such mobilizations.

Political activism traditions

With no or marginal support from traditional unions, the presence of a specific tradition of political activism in the context in which these mobilizations occur (Nowak, 2019) – we argue – may represent a second (and related) factor, relevant to explaining their rise, duration and variation globally. Such tradition may consist of political activists and their backgrounds, their experiences of activism, and their informal organizations (e.g. collectives, social spaces, associations) embedded in the mobilization context (Cini et al., 2021). Social movement scholars effectively depicted how this tradition operated within a specific political environment when analysing the 1960s movements and their enduring effects on the mobilization forms of the ensuing movements in several countries (della Porta and Diani, 2020). For instance, McAdam (1982) noted how the 1960s' American civil rights movement significantly shaped the organizing modes, action repertoires and collective solidarities of all ensuing US social movements. In short, novel forms of mobilization may arise in specific periods and places and then evolve and spread across time and space. The political tradition of activism, therefore, consists of the legacy and experience of past struggles in a specific locality on which the next generations of activists and rank-and-file leaders may draw to sustain their mobilizing efforts.

The role of these traditions seems particularly relevant for understanding gig and precarious worker mobilization dynamics and their diversity. As highlighted by Maccarrone et al. (2023: 6) in their study on gig worker mobilizations, such traditions 'shape both the opportunity to activate solidaristic relationships that can support gig workers' mobilisation; as well as the organisational attitudes, resources and expertise that gig workers themselves can draw on'. Furthermore, these traditions may travel across either time – as materialized, for instance, in the legacy and experience of past struggles in the locality where workers mobilize – or space – as embodied in the political worldviews and prior expertise informing migrant workers who mobilize. Regardless of their origins, such traditions may provide these workers with different abilities, scripts and resources to employ in their mobilizing efforts (Cini et al., 2021). Such diversity of traditions may, in turn, account for the variation in their mobilization forms.

In the following empirical section, we highlight the relevance of specific communities of support and political activism traditions to make sense of various episodes of labour unrest in the logistics and cloudwork sectors, which we consider as critical to the effect of digitalization on labour precarization worldwide.

Case selection and methodology

Algorithms and the platform economy seem to play a central role in contemporary capitalism (Schaupp, 2023). Not by chance, scholars from various disciplines, ranging from labour sociology to HRM, have started to explore this industry extensively, examining either the specific forms of algorithmic management (Meijerink and Keegan, 2019) or the collective dynamics of worker resistance (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020; Woodcock, 2021). In line with this trend – and especially the labour resistance strand – our study aims to advance a novel theoretical framework, at the intersection of labour studies and social movement research, to make sense of several conflicts in this industry.

To probe our theoretical argument, we adopted a soft crucial case methodology (Eckstein, 1975). 'A case is crucial in a somewhat weaker sense when it is most or least likely to fulfil a theoretical prediction' (Gerring, 2007: 232). Our prediction is that supportive communities and political activist traditions are key in explaining the mobilization processes in platform labour, dominated by digital innovation and still low levels of IR institutionalization. The verification of a soft crucial case entails that the argument is confirmed if at least one of the factors constituting its core is able to explain the phenomenon under investigation. In our study, this means that our proposition is confirmed, if at least one of the two factors we identified in our theoretical discussion, meaning either supportive communities or political activist traditions, is present in the studies making sense of such mobilizations.

To identify and collect these studies, we carried out a systematic review of scholarly literature at global level on Google Scholar, guided by two search criteria: (1) highly digitally innovative sectors, (2) characterized by a negligible role for trade union organizing in their mobilizations. To ease our search on Google Scholar, we chose to further narrow down the scope of our analysis by considering only publications showcasing at least 30 citations since 2015. The year 2015 can, in fact, be considered as the specific year in which the first publication on our subject matter came out: Irani (2015). We then chose to consider only one publication on the same topic, when written by the same list of authors. The chosen publication was selected based on what we considered as the most scholarly relevant criterion: in terms of either the journal's prestige or the ranking in the citation index. This review led us to manually collect 38 items (i.e. journal articles, books, book chapters and policy reports), addressing two sectors, logistics and cloudwork, where the wave of digitalization has been pervasive and worker mobilizations have been characterized by bottom-up forms of organizing (see the online Appendix).

Logistics include a huge variety of transportation services, pertaining to both commodities and people, which have undertaken a digitalization process, or the creation of platform-based work, over the last decade. Here, we focus on digital platforms for (1) ride-hailing, (2) food delivery and (3) warehousing. Cloudwork refers to remotely performed labour mediated by digital labour platforms, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk

and Clickworker. The two main subcategories of cloudwork are (1) microwork or crowdwork, where projects and business processes are broken up into hundreds of discrete tasks; and (2) online freelancing, where creatives and knowledge workers usually with a higher level of specialist training contract with clients for longer-term tasks. For cloudwork, we examined cases from both subcategories.

However, our case selection also exhibits some limitations. First, our review only included English scholarly material, mostly produced in the Global North academia. This limitation may have negatively impacted on the number of studies collected for the probation of our theoretical argument with a Global North biased focus. Second, it is important to bear in mind that mobilization processes are by no means static phenomena and their characters change rapidly across time and space. Our material collection terminated in December 2022, but mobilizations did not do so. Consequently, whether the theoretical model proposed here can help to explain future mobilizations in these and other sectors is a question that can be answered only in the fullness of time.

Findings: Understanding the mobilizations of cloudwork and logistics workers

How have cloudwork and logistics workers been able to collectively organize? In answering this question, we show and discuss the roles that specific communities of support and political activism traditions, the key factors of our integrated critical IR/SMS framework, have played in mobilization episodes in the two sectors. The centrality of these factors is assessed for each sector separately.

Supportive communities

Logistics. The empirical material collected clearly shows how the role of various communities of support has been particularly evident in couriers' mobilizations across several European cities, where informal groups of workers have created online (social network chats) and offline (group meetings and discussions) spaces as first forms of mutual help and organization (for a systematic review, look at Heiland, 2020; Vandaele, 2021). Even in a context of a strongly regulated labour market with high union density and extensive collective bargaining like Denmark, couriers' mobilizations have been organized mostly through autonomous courier networks arising from grassroots initiatives. Exploring these mobilizations, Hau and Savage (2022), indeed, highlighted how one of the most relevant initiatives in Denmark is promoted by Wolt Workers' Group, an informal group of food-delivery couriers. Originally started as a Facebook page promoting events and encouraging couriers to network in WhatsApp groups, this group became a space offering bicycle-repair workshops, discussing work-related issues, and organizing offline protests. The group's stated main goal was that Wolt couriers should be given an employment contract including holiday and sick pay, instead of being freelance partners. Thus, this network of couriers can be seen as a digitally enabled worker centre, resembling Korczynski's (2003) communities of coping concept.

As our analysis of the scholarly material seems to point out, the centrality of these communities in the organization of couriers' mobilizations is even more pronounced in the Global South, where employment relations are generally marked by informality and vulnerability, the IR system is generally scarcely formalized, and consequently traditional trade unions play a marginal role. Here, as Basualdo et al. (2021) showed in their report, *Building workers' power in digital capitalism*, a pivotal role is played by various community and neighbourhood organizations operating in the localities and able to provide logistical and organizational support to the couriers in their mobilizing efforts. Hence, couriers' local communities' social webs, rather than traditional labour actors, seem to have become the centre of political organization. Likewise, Bessa et al. (2022) illustrated how in some South American countries, such as Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Chile, combative segments of the workforce have been able to carry out disruptive actions and resist various food-delivery corporations, especially Glovo and Deliveroo, with the help of their local communities, including friends and families (look at Atzeni, 2021, for a similar interpretation). These entities have operated as a key organizational infrastructure for couriers in terms of both material supplies (food, legal assistance) and political support (strategies, tactics for action).

Similar mobilization dynamics have occurred in some Asian and African countries. In Indonesia, Ford and Honan (2019), for instance, highlighted how the creation of grassroots community organizations of app-based transport drivers and neighbourhood members provided these workers with political support regarding their work-related problems and broader social issues. Combining online tactics, such as brand-shaming, with onsite tactics, such as street demonstrations, in a kind of proto-strike, these organizations have been prominent in these mobilizations against transport platforms, at the expense of traditional union organizing. Likewise, Rizzo and Atzeni (2020) showed how in Tanzania, grassroots organizations, consisting of solidarity groups rooted in the local community, have been crucial in the mobilization of precarious workers in Dar es Salaam's delivery sector, by providing these workers with both infrastructural help and political backing (meeting spaces, legal and political assistance).

In a study on ride-hailing in China, Zhou and Pun (2022) depicted how Didi (Uber's Chinese market competitor) drivers have created online spaces of mutual aid, able to overcome individualization, connect as collectives with clear boundaries, and build a feeling of togetherness, by using social network chats, especially through Telegram and WeChat. These online spaces helped drivers to develop mutual connections with high levels of trust and relatively equal in-group relationships, by building a community where drivers feel safe and comfortable to express personal views, air grievances and talk about politically sensitive issues, such as strike actions. Precisely from and within this community of drivers – these scholars argue – various forms of action protest arose and spread out across the region.

In the US context, Maffie (2020) has similarly shown how Uber drivers were able to create and use online communities associated with specific social network group chats to air grievances, exchange ideas and practices, and lately organize some forms of offline collective action. Likewise, Walker (2021) has remarked how discussions occurring within their Facebook and WhatsApp chats about mutual aid helped these drivers convey similar work-related grievances, share ideas and practices, and develop a proto-form of collective identity, which then led them to stage Uber strikes in various American cities.

In the logistics warehousing case, migrant workers carried out similar processes of community-based mobilization in various European countries, among which Italy. There, as Cini and Goldmann (2021) observed, the solidaristic ties and amicable networks arising within ethnic communities were relevant in organizing strikes, as the development of mutual trust among workers played a pivotal role in sustaining the mobilization over time in a dynamic counter-use of ethnic recruitment. For instance, the success of the campaign against Ikea in Italy (Piacenza) in 2012 was attributed to its reliance on channels of communication among North African neighbourhoods and to inspiration gained from the massive Arab Spring demonstrations (Sacchetto, 2015). This was also the case in the TNT and Leroy Merlin mobilizations in 2017 and 2018, where the Egyptian workforce's ethnic community ties played a key role in sustaining actions over a long period by providing moral and affective support to the workers. As immigrants in Northern Italy, these logistics porters encountered a very hostile work and social environment and lacked associational power in the form of support from the confederal unions. However, these workers were able to overcome this barrier to collective action by activating their families, friends and members of their ethnic groups, which participated directly and provided critical logistical and emotional support during their mobilizations.

Overall, these episodes of mobilization involving logistics workers, organized outside the traditional union channels, seem all to be characterized by the presence of a supportive community of various kinds, namely, what we identified as the first factor of our theoretical framework. Materialized across either time, such as the intervention of workers' local social webs, or space, such as the backing of migrant workforces' ethnic ties, these communities have played a key role in helping workers develop a feeling of mutual identification, which is a precondition for collective action to occur.

Cloudwork. As pointed out in the scholarly material analysed (see, for instance, Maffie, 2020), lacking the physical proximity of colleagues with whom to share grievances or to ask for support, cloudworkers have turned to their closest or most familiar communities to find help: the universe of social networks and online forums. Echoing Korczynski's (2003) communities of coping concept, Yao et al. (2022) more recently called these online spaces virtual communities of practice. Such communities act as tools of knowledge dissemination and organization or as spaces for cloudworkers to share personal and community experiences. By creating and joining these communities, they have been able to get to know one another, share their working experience and socialize and plan future actions to take against bad clients (Fieseler et al., 2019). Kellogg and colleagues (2020) noted how some of these workers turned such spaces into a kind of political site for collectively voicing their collective outrage. Once part of these spaces, many found that they had similar grievances to share with other workers and, thus, started enjoying their digital colleagues' comradery and support.

Among microworkers – as observed by Kassem (2022) and Panteli et al. (2020) – one of the most effective worker-run web forums is Turkopticon, a browser plugin for and created by Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers to share advice, negotiate work norms, and strive to establish more interactive and participatory relationships with employers. Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online platform provided by Amazon, operates as an online marketplace connecting workers to clients to perform several types of online

microtasks, such as identifying specific content in an image or video, writing product descriptions or answering questions (Fieseler et al., 2019). A peculiarity of this platform is that MTurk clients can refuse to pay workers if they are not satisfied with the workers' task performance. Consequently – as described by Altenried (2020) – MTurk workers often perform these tasks for free. By creating Turkopticon, MTurk workers aimed to counter this process by coordinating work-refusal campaigns (Woodcock, 2021). Whereas the MTurk platform only allows clients to evaluate workers, Turkopticon offers a counter-review system, allowing workers to rate requesters and, more importantly, making their relationships with the employers visible, allowing MTurk workers to orchestrate shaming campaigns against Amazon with some success (see, for instance, Salehi et al., 2015).

A similar process of online community-led protests has recently taken place within another category of microwork, namely, click-farm workers. Click farms are small platform companies equipped with a light digital infrastructure, whose core business is to boost the social media metrics of selected web pages and contents. To do so, they rely on a very precarious army of workers whose only task is to give as many clicks as possible to these pages and contents. In a study looking at three Brazilian click farms (GanharNoInsta, Dizu and SigaSocial), Grohmann et al. (2022) described these workers' organizing efforts. Like other cloudwork categories, they use social media chats to assist one another, exchange views and organize action. In these chats (usually WhatsApp), workers can air grievances and circulate their discontent. Out of one of these chats, they came up with the idea to shoot YouTube videos to coordinate a public campaign to denounce their employers' mistreatment. During this campaign, workers even acquired a platform owner's phone number and sent their claims directly to him, as a form of direct-action resistance to the platform practices.

As illustrated in Wood and Lehdonvirta (2022), work-related discontent and some capacities of collective resistance are also manifest in the online freelancing sector. Relying on the digital infrastructures of global online delivery platforms, such as UpWork, 99Design and CoContest, freelancers carry out highly skilled macrotasks, such as software programming, web designing, editing and copywriting. Here, clients rate workers following task completion: those with the best scores calculated through an algorithmic ranking receive more work from clients (Wood et al., 2019). In short, getting clients depends on having a good reputation. To increase their scores, online freelancers tend to work long hours without any guarantee that they will receive a paid task. Moreover, they often carry out free supplementary work for clients, meaning fully unpaid work, in the hope of gaining a higher rating. However, even among these globally isolated highly skilled workers, specific forms of mutual support and some instances of collective resistance have emerged. Like for all the other categories of gig work, the creation and development of online communities have been central in the unfolding of these processes. Indeed, the support of such communities has played an important role in socially tempering the urge to provide work for free, by also encouraging, in some circumstances, active resistance to unpaid labour. As vividly recounted in the words of Julie, a copywriter, pointing to the centrality of these communities as a collective form of safeguard against scams and over-exploitation: 'Community is the key, you know. Because without a community you don't know how to support each other. And if you don't support each other, you can easily get like cheated' (Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2022: 11).

In these communities, workers provided one another with moral and practical support in the face of pain and hurt caused by reputational insecurity, disseminated information to support screening practices, and developed norms of resistance in the form of refusing to accept unpaid labour. As noted by Wood and colleagues (2023), by building digital communities, online freelancers were thus able, to some degree, to counter platform algorithms seeking to individualize and disempower them.

Overall, both logistics workers and cloudworkers were more likely to promote a form of shared collective identity and a willingness to political action when joining and actively participating in these forums outside their work setting (Kassem, 2022; Panteli et al., 2020). More broadly, as the analysis of the relevant material seems to have pointed out, inter-worker communication via digital technologies has partly replaced traditional forms of worker organizing, leading to the development of a peculiar form of networked solidarity amongst spatially and temporally fragmented workers, in turn facilitating their politicization process. Hence, our analysis of the first wave of these mobilizations seems to rebut Kelly's theory of collective action still based on the centrality of trade unions, their communication infrastructures and appointed leaders.

Political activism traditions

Logistics. Although supportive communities helped these workers to build a sense of comradery and develop a feeling of solidarity – a necessary condition to overcome labour individualization and fragmentation – it was the active intervention of various politically experienced actors that enabled logistics workers to transform these mutual aid spaces into political organization sites.

Europe was the hotbed of couriers' mobilizations in the first years of labour conflicts against the transnational food-delivery platforms (Woodcock, 2021). As stressed in various reports examining the type and number of platform workers' protest events worldwide (Bessa et al., 2022; Stuart et al., 2020), most of these mobilizations were supported by rank-and-file unions, social movement organizations and far-left parties, confirming once more how, even in an area with an established IR tradition such as Europe, the role of politically engaged actors at the crossroads of labour, migration and class was pivotal in the emergence and variety of couriers' mobilizations. The distinct traditions of collective organizing, related to couriers' various mobilization contexts, have shaped these workers' mobilization forms in specific ways.

As reported in Heiland (2020), workers' self-organization was a relatively typical pattern in the first years of courier mobilizations in Italy, Belgium and France. In Italy, the first food-courier mobilizations were executed by the workers themselves, organized in collectives and informal unions with the key supporting role of political activists and social centres, in the cities of Milan (Deliverance), Turin (Deliverance Project) and Bologna (Riders Union). Such experiences of activism operated as a sort of training course for these workers, who learned how to organize protest events and assemblies and lead demonstrations and rallies. Put otherwise, this training helped them to become informal leaders and politically skilled militants in the couriers' mobilization. In France, one of the most politically significant contestations was a strike staged by the self-organized collective of workers, *Collectif des Livreurs Autonomes de Paris*, during the Football

World Cup final to affect platforms' profits during one of their most profitable weeks. In Belgium, workers founded the *Collectif des Coursier-e-s/Koeriers Kollectief* and organized couriers across different platforms, established a strike pot, and held several protests in 2017 and 2018.

In Spain, Germany and the UK, food-delivery couriers' collective mobilizations were organized mostly by rank-and-file unions, giving rise to radical forms of unionism (see, for instance, the account by Joyce et al., 2023). In these countries, such unions, with a longstanding presence and a political, class-struggle orientation, have, in fact, been able to intervene in the food-delivery sector and attract the consensus of several courier groups in their organizing efforts. In Spain, Deliveroo couriers went on strike in Barcelona and Madrid in July 2017, organized by various rank-and-file unions. Some of the main actions were organized in collaboration with trade union organizations, such as the *Confederación General del Trabajo* (a trade union with anarcho-syndicalist origins that is now a radical left-wing union), against the business model of the digital platforms and other forms of labour precarity. In Germany, Foodora couriers mobilized by relying upon the independent rank-and-file union *Freie Arbeiterinnen und Arbeiter Union*, which has an anarcho-syndicalist orientation. In 2017, this union took direct action by organizing various protests in the form of flying pickets in front of the company's offices, where hundreds of couriers gathered to demand improved working conditions, as reported in Heiland (2020). In the UK, couriers have been organized since 2016 by the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB), a rank-and-file union that previously organized precarious migrant workers in sectors such as cleaning and security (see on this the accounts by Cant, 2020 and Cini et al., 2021). When protests started at Deliveroo, IWGB organizers helped workers to coordinate demand formulation and negotiation, to avoid victimization of individual workers.

As presented in the analytical interpretation by Stuart and colleagues (2020), the role played by specific activism traditions in shaping these mobilizations was also central in several countries in the Global South, especially Latin America and Southeast Asia. In these regions, informal coalitions of workers and left-wing-oriented social movement and political activists proved essential resources for couriers' mobilization – as reported in the study of the Brazilian mobilizations by Abilio and colleagues (2021) – leading to region-wide coordinated strikes in protest against the health risks and dangerous working conditions in which workers were forced to operate during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Experiences of self-organization have also occurred in the ride-hailing sector in various regions (see the scholarly report by Basualdo et al., 2021). In South Korea, app-based transport workers relied on various networks of local community activists to mobilize and ameliorate their working conditions. Like in many other cases of informal organizing, they did not follow Kelly's linear mobilization model. Quite the opposite: they first exploited various political resources and opportunities for mobilizing present in the local community and then pursued an institutionalization process by demanding legal recognition from the city authorities. Indeed, in 2019, Seoul Metropolitan Government granted legal status to Riders Union – the first union in app-enabled food delivery.

Uber drivers in the US context have adopted similar self-organization processes, with some degree of political success. Notably in California, the campaign of Rideshare Drivers United, an association of app-based transport drivers founded from below, thanks

to the commitment of local activists and the most experienced drivers, contributed to the enactment of Assembly Bill 5 (AB5) in 2019, which makes it harder for companies to misclassify workers as independent contractors. The creation of associations like Rideshare Drivers United demonstrates the ability of these workers to mobilize and wage a successful anti-precarity campaign, without the involvement of traditional unions but with the support of an informal network of activists.

Finally, similar experiences of bottom-up mobilization have occurred in the logistics warehousing sector. For instance, in Italy in the last 10 years, rank-and-file unions, political activists and solidarity groups provided a logistical infrastructure that was fundamental for the mobilizations of TNT and Leroy Merlin warehouse workers. As stressed in various analytical accounts (Cini and Goldmann, 2021; Sacchetto, 2015), these workers were attracted to rank-and-file unions and solidarity groups because they provided them with resources for self-organization rather than speaking on their behalf. As Andrea, a rank-and-file unionist, recounted: 'We did not follow a predetermined pattern of intervention and organization, but we bowed to the needs of the workers' struggle' (reported in Cini and Goldmann, 2021: 962). The readiness to engage in conflictual forms of action with the support of solidarity groups and independent unions meant that these workers were able to exert and develop their mobilization forms without the support of established IR actors but relying on specific activism traditions which have been able to be resilient either across time or space. While the backing of experienced activists in the locality where these mobilizations occurred was a case in point of the former (i.e. time), the capacity of some of these workers of self-organize their collective resistance based on their prior political expertise was an exemplificative case of the latter (i.e. space).

Cloudwork. In the development of a more political orientation vis-a-vis cloudwork platforms, the involvement of a political network of engaged academics and activists tended to play a key role. Massa and O'Mahony (2021) called the political intervention of an informal leadership of core activists and experienced workers *networked activism*. In the Amazon Mechanical Turk workers' mobilizations, such a network operated as a sort of emerging tradition of activism globally – although based mostly in the US (Panteli et al., 2020) – on which these workers could draw and build to develop their forms of collective action. More notably, this network of people, with progressive political leanings and previous experience of participating in struggles involving online workers, provided Amazon Mechanical Turkworkers with logistical and political know-how – such as collaborating in designing and creating online forums, public campaigns denouncing corporate platforms' misbehaviour, and politically guiding the discussion – fundamental to their various collective actions (as reported in both Altenried, 2020 and Irani, 2015).

An example of joint action between activists and Amazon Mechanical Turk workers was the establishment of Dynamo, a platform engaged in global public campaigns. The first of these, developed in 2014 by a group of Amazon Mechanical Turk workers and researchers (as described in Berg et al., 2018: 97–98), aimed to set 'guidelines for academic requesters on the platform *Mechanical Turk*'. The guidelines explained how good microtasks should be created and what fair pay should look like. The purpose of these guidelines was not only to help Amazon Mechanical Turk workers develop better conditions with their clients and Amazon, but also, and more importantly, to sensitize public

opinion about bad practices of the company and its clients (see, for instance, Jones and Muldoon, 2022). Dynamo's second campaign directly targeted Jeff Bezos, the Amazon CEO and head of the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform. Salehi and colleagues (2015: 1628) reported how these workers were asked to write a personal letter 'to let Jeff Bezos . . . and the rest of the world know . . . that *Turkers* are not only actual human beings, but people who deserve respect, fair treatment and open communication'. The campaign was widely reported in various media outlets. This initiative was 'primarily aimed at the public sphere to exert pressure on the platforms, appeal to their corporate social responsibility, and achieve an improvement in working conditions' (Heiland, 2020: 47). More specifically, this campaign, espoused predominantly by Indian workers, succeeded in making Amazon Mechanical Turk change its payment mode from cheque to direct payment. As recounted in Panteli et al. (2020), this success generated further collective identity and support for the campaign on the forum.

Overall, our analysis of the scholarly material concerning logistics workers' and cloudworkers' collective organizing seems, thus, to confirm the centrality of the second factor of our theoretical framework, namely, the critical role of political activism traditions in their mobilization dynamics. In the absence or marginal intervention of established labour actors, these workers have mobilized relying on various traditions of political activism, rooted in various contexts, either online or onsite, but, thus far, persistent across time and space.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this article was to offer a theoretical toolkit to understand workers' collective action in the contemporary world of work. Indeed, the recent upsurge of mobilizations in the gig and precarious world of work is raising old and new questions as to whether and how novel forms of actions, grievances and actors are emerging in reaction to the transformations of this new world of work. Addressing some of these issues, our study showed how and why most of these mobilizations are driven mostly from below, through processes of worker self-organization.

Drawing on the European social movement tradition and IR literature, our focus on supportive communities and political activism, as key factors explaining cloudwork and logistics workers' mobilizations, aimed primarily to emphasize their evolutionary and informal character. In contrast to Kelly's trade union-centred mobilization theory, and in continuity with the Marxist-inspired IR tradition of the 1970s, we highlighted the role of these factors as critical in reintroducing mutualism, bottom-up solidarity and self-organization into the picture and analysis of contemporary collective action. Indeed, whereas specific supportive communities helped these workers build a sense of solidarity and identification, the traditions of activism provided them with political scripts and resources, as well as the self-confidence needed to transform this solidarity into political action. The picture that emerges highlights the inadequacy of the linear and sequential models of worker mobilizations, whereby first organization is formed, then mobilization occurs. By contrast, these workers have first mobilized and conducted innovative actions and, only later, may have striven to build more stable organizing forms. These findings

rebut the still widely held, but mistaken, belief that existing unions are the main cause of labour unrest. This represents the first and scholarly contribution of our study.

More broadly, our analysis seems to demonstrate that the relationship between collective organization, union membership/non-membership and collective protest is much more fluid and dynamic than believed in the IR institutionalist tradition. Reflecting on the evolution from embryonic solidarity to political action that cloudwork and logistics workers have undertaken in their mobilization processes provides us, however, not only with a theoretical insight but also with a broader political message: working class organization cannot be limited to trade union representation. In an epoch when capitalist expansion is creating a pre-industrial landscape, characterized by a less formally organized working class increasing in number and precarity, a focus on the dynamics of self-organization, which have always characterized pre-union forms of working class organization, seems fundamental. Starting our analysis from the material conditions that allow the initial formation of supportive workplace communities to expand and interact with the political and social context, and consolidate, that is, by effectively looking at how value extraction and exploitation are translated in practice, through different passages, into conscious collective struggles, rather than from established preconditions and forms, facilitates a better understanding of contemporary struggles in the gig and precarious world of work, their strengths and weaknesses, and their mobilization forms.

Whilst there is still a need to examine specific workplace dynamics, their linkages with the wider community and with larger political mobilizations seem already to have proven essential to understanding the current developments of labour conflicts. In this sense, worker collectivism seems to persist even under work conditions less conducive to traditional forms of organizing. Through our study, we hope to contribute to developing a fruitful (interdisciplinary) agenda for research on labour mobilization and to relaunching a class-based approach to the issue in such debate. This represents the second (and more political) contribution of our study.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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