

# Worker-Owned Platforms: Cooperatives and Collectives of Platform Riders

## *Plataformas de Propriedade de Trabalhadores: Cooperativas e Coletivos de Entregadores*

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the emergence of worker-owned platforms in the platformization of labor context. The analysis presents six cases in Spain, France, and Brazil considering: production processes and work organization, technological challenges and construction of platforms, uses of social media for promoting organization and communication between workers, cooperation between cooperatives, and the future of self-managing experiences. The conclusions point to the central role of social media for communication and work organization, and the emergence of cooperation between cooperatives. The emergence of these initiatives may be the beginning of a broader process of digital platforms for the common good.

**Keywords:** Platform cooperativism, worker-owned platforms, platformization of labor

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### RESUMO

O artigo tem o objetivo de analisar a emergência de plataformas de propriedade de entregadores no contexto de plataformação do trabalho. A análise apresenta seis casos em Espanha, França e Brasil, considerando: processos produtivos e organização do trabalho, desafios tecnológicos e construção de plataformas, usos de mídias sociais para organização e comunicação entre trabalhadores, cooperação entre cooperativas e futuro das experiências autogestionadas. As conclusões apontam para o papel central de mídias sociais para comunicação e organização do trabalho, e a cooperação entre cooperativas. Essas iniciativas podem ser o início de um processo mais amplo de plataformas digitais para o bem comum.

**Palavras-chave:** Cooperativismo de plataforma, plataformas de propriedade de trabalhadores, plataformação do trabalho

# A

THE PLATFORMIZATION OF labor (Casilli & Posada, 2019; Grohmann & Qiu, 2020) is the radicalization and updating of other existing processes, such as neoliberal and entrepreneurial rationality (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999; Dardot & Laval, 2013), datafication (Chen & Qiu, 2019), financialization (Sadowski, 2020), and flexibilization of work, without discarding, of course, that it is also related to the own mechanisms of digital platforms (Van Dijck et al., 2018), as detailed in earlier works (Grohmann, 2021). Thus, platforms are, at the same time, means of production and means of communication (Williams, 2005). They are means of organizing work and communication activities, presenting themselves as organizational forms which are also political (Fenton, 2016).

This platformization, understood as the increasing dependence on platforms to carry out work activities, does not occur homogeneously. Firstly, it occurs because there is a diversity of platforms (Schor et al., 2020) with different mechanisms and materialities. Along with this, there is a multiplicity of worker profiles, with greater or lesser dependence on digital infrastructures, which, in turn, present different ways of extracting value through platforms (Srniczek, 2016). There are different work situations intersected by these social markers of inequalities and differences – race, gender, class fractions, territory, among others. However, despite the various types of platforms (Casilli, 2019; Schmidt, 2017; Woodcock & Graham, 2019), they relate to a broader circuit of labor (Qiu et al., 2014) and infrastructure (Van Dijck, 2021) in a circuit of platform labor (Grohmann et al., on press).

Platformization of labor tends to generalize itself in all work activities (Huws, 2020). However, this does not mean that workers are unorganizable or mere effects of social structures. They build tactics and strategies to act in their everyday work (Sun, 2019) as algorithmic fissures (Ferrari & Graham, 2021). Platform labor is a true laboratory of class struggles (Cant, 2019). The literature on the issue (Cant, 2019; Englert et al., 2020; Patrick-Thomson & Kranert, 2020; Sun, 2019; Wood et al., 2018; Woodcock, 2019) has highlighted the potential for organizing platform workers in the most different sectors and, as this is not a recent trend, this worker organization is the result of previous work experiences and struggles (Cant, 2019).

The pandemic context that started in 2020, as I have shown in earlier works (Abílio, Grohmann, & Weiss, 2021; Howson et al., 2020), made the platformization of labor more evident. On the one hand, the context has helped to strengthen the power of capital through the intensification and diversification of forms of control, including the media strategies of platforms (Grohmann et al., 2021). On the other hand, this scenario has made the

conditions of platform workers more visible (Graham & Anwar, 2019; Van Doorn, 2017) and has led to the emergence of solidarities (Soriano & Cabanes, 2020) among workers, with a central role of social media (Geelan & Hodder, 2017). According to Woodcock and Graham (2019), “communication is an important first step towards collective resistance and organizing” (p. 107). Delivery strikes across Latin America in July 2020 were an example of this type of workers’ organization (Howson et al., 2020), with complexities in their class composition (Abílio, Grohmann, & Weiss, 2021).

This process of building emerging solidarities around platform labor in the pandemic context raised two central questions for this article. The first is that, despite the many differences and specificities between different places in the world, there are articulations and connections in common between platform workers in the most diverse countries<sup>1</sup>. The working conditions of delivery workers in Brazil, India, South Africa, and Germany, as research from the Fairwork project (2020) has shown, reveal many similarities, although the political, legal, and social contexts are very different. This has led many workers to communicate and organize in connection with people from other countries, as demonstrated by meetings such as the International Alliance of App-Based Transport Workers (IAATW), Unidxs World Action, and Platform-Workers Forum: Global Perspectives on Organizing and Policy. These activities reinforce that there is a circulation of workers’ struggles around the world (Dyer-Witthof, 2015; Englert et al., 2020) and that struggling against platformization of labor needs internationalist perspectives both to understand and to act together with these movements still under construction.

<sup>1</sup> This research does not intend to be comparative or to present nuances in relation to the specificities of each country.

The second point is that the construction of these emerging solidarities does not take place only in strikes, associations, or unions but in the possibilities of creating platforms owned by workers in different institutional designs and mainly from the well-known platform cooperativism (Scholz, 2016). Thus, delivery workers – one of the most evident examples of the platformization of labor – from many parts of the world have sought to build alternatives to the dominant platforms through the creation of collectives, cooperatives, or other worker-owned ways.

In this context, this article aims to analyze the emergence of worker-owned platforms, especially cooperatives and collectives of delivery workers, as one of the laboratories of platform labor and the circulation of workers’ struggles. We have analyzed six cases in three different countries (Spain, France, and Brazil) from the following dimensions: productive processes and work organization, technological challenges and platform construction, uses of social media for organization and communication between workers,



cooperation between cooperatives (de Peuter & Dyer-Witthof, 2010), and the future of self-managed initiatives. The initiatives take very different paths. In Spain, some cooperatives were born from union struggles. In France, there is a stronger relationship with the federation of rider cooperatives, CoopCycle, which provides its own software based on the principles of digital commons. In Brazil, so far, there is the emergence of small collectives and cooperatives still dependent on social media platforms to carry out their work. This article emphasizes that, despite the disparate contexts, there are commonalities, such as the low number of workers, the central role of social media for communication and work organization, and cooperation between cooperatives, showing that the issue of scale does not need to be a norm in platform economy. This manuscript concludes that this is an ongoing and emerging process which could be the beginning of a broader movement of reinvention of local economic circuits of production and consumption involving digital platforms for the common good.

### **FROM PLATFORM CO-OPS TO WORKERS' PLATFORMS**

Since 2016, one of the most used terms to mention building alternatives to platform capitalism and platformization is platform cooperativism (Grohmann, 2018; Scholz, 2016), a way of “cooperativizing” existing platforms and bringing cooperatives closer to the platform economy. Since then, the directory of platform cooperativism – Internet of Ownership 2020 (<https://www.internetofownership.net/>) – has more than 300 platform co-ops (April 2021) with different profiles of workers, consumers, or multi-stakeholders. These experiences go through co-ops around sectors of cloud service photographers, musicians, journalists, games, music streaming, audiovisual, etc. Also, since 2016, works have shown the potential (Pazaitis et al., 2017; Schor, 2020; Zhu & Marjanovic, 2020) – including in relation to sustainable development – and the limits (Cant, 2019; Sandoval, 2019) of platform cooperativism, including the risks of being co-opted into entrepreneurial activism.

Platform cooperativism, strictly understood, has a specific legal profile – being legally constituted as a cooperative. But the principles of self-management and co-ownership of workers in the context of platformization do not necessarily appear under the label cooperative. As argued by Morell et al. (2020), platforms that are not driven by profit – as horizontal institutions and with value distribution among those involved – can assume different legal profiles, such as cooperatives, companies, or associations, also connecting to different sustainable development goals, such as governance, data policies,

and social responsibility. Thus, the possibilities of building worker-owned platforms include, but are not restricted to, platform cooperativism. An example is the notion of collaborative platforms (Cicero et al., 2016), which provides inspiration in cooperative and collaborative models of governance, understood from participatory decision-making mechanisms.

What is in the foreground, in an expanded form, is the democratization of work relations and self-management in processes that can be intensified with digital platforms, with possibilities for the circulation of the common (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2010; Sodré, 2014). These initiatives can also, according to Morell et al. (2020), be based on platforms (with their own infrastructure) or just be supported by them (not necessarily with infrastructure owned by workers).

Then, we can understand worker-owned platforms as prefigurative possibilities (Sandoval, 2016) – which means building experiments today of the societies we imagine tomorrow, circulating new meanings about platformization and labor in the platform economy in accordance with the idea of real utopias presented by Wright (2010). This means understanding both their potential and limits. Some of them have already been pointed out by Sandoval (2019) and Cant (2019), for example, the risks of co-optation through entrepreneurial narratives, aggressive competition with dominant private platforms – made possible by venture capital –, and the risk of self-exploitation.

This means understanding that there are inherent contradictions in the construction of worker-owned platforms – and that a dialectical movement of non-idealization of these initiatives is necessary (Sandoval, 2016). Furthermore, as Fuchs (2017) reminds us, “a cooperative is not a solving application that can abolish the problems of capitalism when combined with internet technologies” (p. 310). In other words, the construction of worker-owned platforms depends on a set of dimensions – such as governance and work organization, for example –, in addition to the construction of the platform itself.

Realistically, self-managed platforms will not replace big labor platforms in the short term, given the factors listed above. However, as Sandoval (2016) also argues, it is necessary to dialectically face the historical contradictions around cooperatives and collectives between, on the one hand, constraints and co-optations and, on the other hand, possibilities of reconfiguration in relation to the emancipation of workers. Thus, the accent is on gaps, fissures, and attempts to confront the dominant platformization (Ferrari & Graham, 2021), emphasizing the laboratory and experimental character of these self-managed initiatives. As experiments, they do not have a ready formula and have different characteristics and elements depending on the sector or location.



An interesting example of worker-owned platform is a drivers' cooperative that focuses on data democratization. At Driver's Seat, workers use the co-op's platform to share their data. Then, they collect and sell mobility information to city agencies so they can make the best transport planning decisions. When the co-op profits from selling data, drivers receive the dividends and share the wealth. This helps us to understand how the struggles for the re-signification of the platformization of labor also involve workers' rights over their data, as Christina Colclough (2020) argues. This is in line with the findings of Calzada (2020), for whom platform and data cooperatives have the potential to be feasible alternatives to extractivist and colonialist models of data governance.

According to Huws (2020), it is necessary to combat the generalization of platformization around labor with its resignification in favor of workers and the public good. This means that worker-owned platforms can be a first step toward a reinvention of local economic circuits of production and consumption through platforms that improve working conditions and, at the same time, promote mobility policies, improvements in public transport, and care services, with integration into the health system. This can be linked to principles of design justice (Costanza-Chock, 2020), fair work (Graham et al., 2020), and healthy eating. However, this does not mean that worker-owned platforms necessarily must have a scale, after all, one of their strengths is precisely the ability to articulate and cooperate between initiatives – that is, intercooperation, in a process of circulation of workers' struggles (Dyer-Witheford, 2015; Englert et al., 2020).

In the same direction as the elements, Morell et al. (2020) cite democratic qualities involving digital platforms. These include data commons, free and open technologies, fair economy, democratic governance (including decision-making processes), equality, and inclusion. This means that there are different dimensions at play in the platforms owned by workers, from the design and materiality of the platforms through the work organization and production processes, data policies and algorithms, cooperation among cooperatives (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2010), and media strategies – including social media.

At this point, Fernández and Barreiro (2020) analyze the media strategies of couriers in Barcelona to create the Riders X Derechos union and the Mensakas cooperative in order to confront the grammars of the dominant platform companies that are in circulation, struggling over meanings in relation to what means working for platforms. In relation to social media, this involves understanding a dispute between workers' autonomy and dependence on WhatsApp and Instagram to communicate with customers and other workers,

for example. Thus, we position the role of social media in relation to worker-owned platforms in order to understand the contradictions of a vaunted horizontal communication and dependence on material resources and infrastructure, as shown by Schradie (2019).

On the other hand, cooperation among cooperatives is a key element that, in fact, allows the circulation of workers' struggles. According to Sandoval (2016), "going beyond the level of micro-initiatives and small-scale islands requires building connections between individual cooperatives in order to create a larger movement of cooperatives" (p. 109). This enables interactions and production processes between, for example, riders' cooperatives, coders, and farmers, rearticulating local production and consumption circuits.

The delivery sector is, at the same time, one of the highlights of both the current scenario of platformization of labor and the possibilities of organization and confrontation, whether in relation to strikes and mobilizations, or in the sense of possibilities of building self-managed initiatives. In recent years, at least 30 collectives or riders' cooperatives have emerged and their analysis is still a blind spot in the literature on platform labor.

## METHODS

We conducted exploratory research with six initiatives by workers from three countries, Spain, France, and Brazil. The choices were made because Spain, especially in the region of Catalonia, is an exponent of cooperativism and the digital commons (Morell & Espelt, 2019) and where have emerged cooperatives with great media coverage, such as Mensakas (Fernández & Barreiro, 2020). France is home to CoopCycle, a federation of rider co-ops that aims to promote solidarity among cooperatives, reduce their costs, and create a common force to defend riders' rights. The federation currently has 44 associated cooperatives – only two outside Europe, specifically North America, although negotiations are already underway with cooperatives in other Latin American countries, for example. CoopCycle has its own software with a copyleft license, created to manage the bicycle delivery activity in order to serve the real needs of workers. Finally, Brazil was chosen because it had one of the largest riders' strikes in the world in 2020 (Howson et al., 2020) and, as a result, initiatives by collective of riders began to flourish. The choice of the three countries helps us to visualize articulations, similarities, and differences, in view of a transnational perspective that reveals the circulation of struggles of these workers who are called couriers in France and riders or splitters in Spain.



However, in addition to the transnational articulations of the working class, there are crucial differences in the work relations in Europe and South America. In Europe, gig work may even be a novelty, but in Brazil – like other countries in the so-called Global South – gig economy is a historical feature before the emergence of digital platforms (Grohmann & Qiu, 2020). There were already delivery workers and other activities before platform labor. So, the history of the Brazilian economy is, in fact, that of a gig economy. Information on the context of Brazilian riders on dominant platforms can be found in earlier works (Abílio, Amorim & Grohmann, 2021; Abílio, Grohmann & Weiss, 2021).

In this article, in an effort similar to that of Davis and Xiao (2021) to dewesternize platform labor studies, we show that rider co-ops and collectives do not emerge in the same way everywhere and this is not a symptom of greater development of a particular region in relation to another. On the contrary, imprisoning rider collectives and cooperatives to the same strict model of platform cooperativism can be an epistemic closure.

We chose to analyze a microcosm of cooperatives, but there is a broader context. Other cooperatives and collectives are La Pajara (Spain), Shift (Canada), Urbike (Belgium), Kolyma2 (Germany), Zentrale (Poland), Bici Mensajería Córdoba (Argentina), Kurier (Ecuador), Levô Courier (Brazil), and TransEntrega (Brazil) – which will be present in other articles in the broader investigation that we conducted on the issue. There are factors that unite all these initiatives, such as the criticism of the dominant platformization of labor, promotion of fair work, and issues such as mobility and social and environmental sustainability. Delivery by bicycle is then re-signified through engagement at work and healthy cities. Shift, from Canada, for example, even has a CO<sup>2</sup> emission calculator depending on the vehicle used. Another common point is the love for work in cooperatives, something already identified by Sandoval (2018) in other cooperatives. Kurier workers state on their Instagram page: “we do what we like, that’s why we do it well.” Another recurring statement among riders, and visible on their Instagram pages, is that they like to do the work itself but disagree with the way dominant platforms exploit their workforce.

From the above scenario, we conducted, between September and October 2020, interviews with workers representing six cooperatives and delivery groups: Mensakas (Barcelona, Spain), Rodant (Valencia, Spain), Resto. Paris (Paris, France), Coursiers Bordelais (Bordeaux, France), Senôritas Courier (São Paulo, Brazil), and Pedal Express (Porto Alegre, Brazil). The interviews were conducted through videoconference platforms and dialogue with the initiatives has remained ongoing since then because of the



broader research context. Three men and three women were interviewed. We chose, throughout the analysis, to identify the workers interviewed only by their initiatives, as they granted the interviews as their representatives. Therefore, we do not present individual profiles because what interests us are the statements on behalf of the collective or cooperative.

With this sample, we emphasize not only the international aspect but the choice for each country's initiatives to be from different cities in order to highlight possible articulations and differences depending on the place. From the interviews, with a semi-structured script, we chose the following categories: productive processes and work organization, technological challenges and building platforms, uses of social media for promoting organization and communication between workers, cooperation among cooperatives, and the future of cooperatives.

We also conducted desk research on the initiatives' Instagram channels to identify values and principles of worker property platforms. Morell et al. (2020) identified that dominant platforms have the most followers on Instagram (average of 254,000) and, among non-profit-driven platforms, cooperatives have the highest average number of followers (758). This helps us to understand the digital presence of these initiatives and how their values circulate through social media – as one of the central elements of worker-owned platforms. We show in Table 1 the main information of the cooperatives and collectives of delivery workers, including the number of followers on Instagram on November 22, 2020, which are above the average raised by Morell et al. (2020), although it is still a small number in relation to digital presence. This reinforces, once again, that worker-owned platforms will not necessarily be large-scale.

**Table 1**  
Information about the research sample

Initiative	City	Founded in	Instagram followers in 11/2020	@ in Instagram
Mensakas	Barcelona	2018	2704	@mensakas
Rodant	Valencia	2020	358	@rodantbicimissatgeria
Resto.Paris	Paris	2020	3073	@restopointparis
Coursiers Bordelais	Bordeaux	2017	1004	@coursiersbordelais
Señoritas Courier	São Paulo	2018	3396	@senoritas_courier
Pedal Express	Porto Alegre	2010	3147	@pedalexpress

With the exception of Pedal Express, born in 2010, all the other initiatives were founded in the context of the platform economy, at least since 2017, which helps us to situate them as a reaction to the platformization of labor in



emerging collectivities from the circulation of other logics that focus on workers and sustainability. The choice for these initiatives is also due to the diversity of trajectories – some were born from union struggle, others focusing on gender equality – especially women and LGBTQI+ people, with different stages of development in cities of different sizes.

### VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

The two Spanish initiatives analyzed were born from the union struggles around Riders X Derechos, from Intersindical Alternativa de Catalunya (IAC), which was founded in 2017 from the struggles of platform delivery men. Mensakas was born the following year and has around 15 couriers. Their media strategies, as shown by Fernández and Barreiro (2020), were crucial so they were known by more people. Its main slogan is: “we are the alternative,” highlighting the importance of disputing the dominant meanings in relation to platform labor.

In an interview with Fernández and Barreiro (2020), a platform worker says that it is about putting work above capital and relating to characteristics such as responsible and local consumption, cooperation, and the common good. These values are present on the cooperative’s Instagram from texts such as “a dream that intends to be collective,” “ecologically responsible delivery,” and “labor rights, a better service for you.” They articulate the collective struggle of workers for rights and self-management with social and environmental responsibility – they want to be a totally ecological service.

Rodant, which was born from the Valencia branch of Riders X Derechos, is more recent: it was founded in 2020 with the same argument: to fight precariousness as a demand of today. One of its statements is: “we are companionship.” They started with a crowdfunding campaign and claim that it is difficult to sustain a business if there is no fair price but that, in return, the cooperative will offer fair trade combined with not working with vehicles that emit CO<sup>2</sup>. The cooperative as a fair service is, like Mensakas, a combination of non-exploitative work and sustainable development. On the cooperative’s Instagram, the highlight is for healthy food photos.

Both Spanish initiatives have dialogues with CoopCycle. But it is in French cooperatives that the relationship with the federation appears most strongly. Resto.Paris, born in May 2020, is a platform created, with the support of the City Council of the city, from a coalition between CoopCycle – as a federation which offers software – and Olvo, legally a cooperative of Écotable couriers, a seal for sustainable restaurants. Olvo is the one who

manages the platform and makes the delivery on cargo bikes through paid delivery men – with a weekly workload of 35 hours, no matter how many rides they make. CoopCycle develops and maintains the digital platform, which is open source.

Resto.Paris, as well as others, also presents itself as a social and environmental alternative to large platforms based on the support of various elements of the local economy, from farmers to cycle-logistics companies. Its principles involve supporting restaurants and other actors in the local food chain, offering citizens sustainable, healthy, and zero-waste food from the local economy, ensuring delivery methods that are socially and environmentally responsible, promoting an economic model based on collaboration, creation, and use of the common. Moreover, for a restaurant to be part of the platform, it needs to fulfill a series of prerequisites, such as offering most recipes derived from sustainable sectors (such as organic and from agroecological practices) and containing at least one vegetarian dish and one dish for less than 10 euros. It is also necessary to promote social integration through jobs and be an association or present aspects of solidarity economy.

Meanwhile, Coursiers Bordelais is CoopCycle's cooperative in the city of Bordeaux. With six couriers and more than 12,580 deliveries and 130,000 kilometers ridden at the end of November 2020, the initiative's principles are based on the worker's voice in decision-making, regardless of their share in the cooperative's capital. Remuneration and working conditions are decided collectively by cooperative members. In the same way as other cooperatives, they refuse the exploitation and individualization of work situations. They claim that the platform service, even though it is more ethical, is not necessarily more expensive. The cooperative's position is that they offer something fairer and cheaper than the competition. Coursiers Bordelais is focused on local development and encouraging cycling, considering the city of Bordeaux a perfect place for mobility.

In Brazil, the two collectives are related to cyclist movements. The Señoritas Courier is a collective of women couriers and LGBTQI+ people who offer services throughout the city of São Paulo, but by appointment. With the slogan "affection and responsibility," the initiative was founded by Aline Os from an initial project in progress that encourages ventures based on the use of bicycles. Founded in 2018, Señoritas was born from the perspective that women are often overlooked in delivery jobs. According to Aline Os, this is because people imagine women as less autonomous and slower in traffic. According to the initiative's Instagram, "having more women cycling on the streets is synonymous with safer traffic." Currently with 37 people



registered and 14 active people, with 3 to 5 delivery people daily on the streets of São Paulo, Senõritas has as its flagship delivery in the cosmetics sector, such as flowers, but they also deliver to notary offices and, to a lesser extent, frequency, food. The values of the initiative are environmental sustainability, the empowerment of women and LGBTQI+ people, and the passion for bicycles – as a synonym for connection.

Pedal is a cooperative of delivery cyclists in Porto Alegre. Founded in 2010, it is a pioneering initiative in the country. Since its beginning, around 50 couriers have passed through the cooperative and there are currently eight workers. Its values emphasize the agility of the bicycle combined with the experience and professionalism of the cyclists. The workers are called rats, a slang term that relates cycle messengers to those who know the city's paths well and move quickly, having the street as a natural habitat. In an interview, the Pedal representative highlights the relationship of trust built with customers and suppliers: "one of the nice things about Pedal is that we work with companies that we believe in, not just anyone."

### **PRODUCTIVE PROCESSES AND WORK ORGANIZATION**

The principles outlined above – mobility and social and environmental sustainability as common points – are the basis for the work organization of worker-owned platforms. Horizontality is a principle stated by all interviewees, but we observed that Senõritas Courier more explicitly presents one of the workers as the manager of the initiative. However, there are attempts to make the decisions taken more collective, in the sense of inserting more democracy in the workplace (de Peuter & Dyer-Witthof, 2010; Scholz, 2016).

Elsewhere, there are variations in the way workers organize themselves horizontally. Mensakas has departments created by the workers themselves (management, economics, technology, communication, logistics, and commercial), each sector with a responsible person. Together, they form a management body, which meets every two weeks, and any member of the cooperative can participate. One of the main challenges, according to the representative interviewed, is that none of the Mensakas workers had previous experience in the business sector and each one had a different degree. In this way, they learned together the best way to organize the cooperative's work.

Pedal also divides the tasks so that everyone knows a little about all the functions and presents departments like Mensakas: finance, customer

prospecting, and communication. In practice, daily, there are four cyclists on the street, a reserve, and a worker who is the base and responsible for managing and recording all deliveries. At Coursiers Bordelais, of the six couriers, there are four full-time ones, and always one person as a base – also doing budgets and all the administration. They also value that everyone performs all functions and tries to adapt according to delivery times. The worker interviewed says that the context of the pandemic has meant that there is not much advance planning:

since the first lockdown, we have had little predictability about which deliveries will be held during the day. Orders arrive at the last minute without being anticipated, which means that there are many gaps during the working day, but also a great rush. (Worker at Coursiers Bordelais, in an interview with the author)

The pandemic scenario was also highlighted by Pedal as a factor that made production processes difficult in 2020.

The horizontality in the organization of self-managed work is also one of the main difficulties of a collective construction of workers, as the Pedal representative points out in an interview: “because it is horizontal, there will always be some difficulty, a quarrel, some problem. As there is no boss, sometimes it generates heavy discussions and demands.” The worker claims that the construction of a cooperative will last forever, according to the workers involved with it at a given moment, which is normal in self-managed experiences. This shows that horizontality – as an aspect of democracy in the workplace (by Peuter & Dyer-Witthford, 2010) in cooperatives – is more a north than a totalizing reality, as it presents nuances and contradictions.

The Resto.Paris representative also highlights the financial difficulties of a cooperative, which end up translating into problems related to daily work: “we need to find time to recruit restaurants and communicate with them.” She points out that there is no way to compete with the large platforms because they are not profitable, and this forces them to find other types of offer and customers, as well as educate customers on issues such as cost of delivery, paid work, and responsible delivery: “our job is to deliver things, and the real price has to be paid for what it costs.”

This was also highlighted by the representative of Mensakas, who added the unfair competition of large platforms and the challenge of finding customers based on their ethical values related to sustainability – something that was also highlighted by the representative of Rodant. The Resto.Paris worker says that the most difficult thing about communicating with customers is that they have



the habit of being served quickly and without paying for delivery. The solution to the problem was to propose bundled deliveries, in which customers cannot make the purchase if the value of the order is less than 35 euros. For the platform representative, this means that customers have to place orders for several people, also encouraging collective consumption. They intend to focus from now on the relationship with companies, as, according to her, they are “places where people can order lunch and group orders.”

### **TECHNOLOGICAL CHALLENGES AND BUILDING PLATFORMS**

Technological challenges in building delivery platforms vary from country to country. As highlighted by Morell et al. (2020), there are initiatives that are really based on digital environments and others that are only supported by these devices. In Brazil, Pedal and Señoritas do not intend, in the short term, to have their own platforms and communicate and organize themselves through proprietary social media. French cooperatives rely on CoopCycle’s infrastructure, based on their own infrastructure and based on logics that involve free and open technologies for cooperatives – as long as they are in tune with its principles. Those in Spain, on the other hand, have dialogue with CoopCycle, although they still do not effectively use their platforms.

The Pedal worker says they considered building their own platform but did not do so due to high costs and not being sure of a return. However, they included an online order page on their website where the customer can fill in the order data by computer or cell phone, which is sent directly to the cooperative’s system. Señoritas, on the other hand, developed a semi-automated form based on the voluntary work of women programmers. In this way, customers can budget deliveries to know more easily what the value will be.

The representative of Mensakas says that their initial idea was to launch their own platform but it has not yet been possible. According to her, in an interview,

we have a very powerful application under development but it demands resources and time. There will be three apps in one, with interfaces for restaurant, delivery workers, and consumers. Right now, we are finishing the delivery worker part so that the application can appear on marketplaces and restaurant websites.

The statement by the Mensakas worker reveals the limits of platforms owned by workers in relation to infrastructure, even if the platform itself is self-managed.

This means that, in the platformization context, in terms of Poell et al. (2019), workers will still depend on the app stores of the dominant platforms, so it is not possible, in the short term, to fully reappropriate the entire platform tree, in terms of Van Dijck (2021).

Mensakas will also partner with CoopCycle on their platform. Rodant, from Valencia, whose platform has not yet been launched, will work from the beginning using CoopCycle's software, as its representative says in an interview: "we consider that creating a new application from scratch is crazy when you don't have much capital." For him, with the federation application, the cooperative does not need to make a large investment in something of its own and can make investments in the most urgent needs of the organization. Coursiers Bordelais already work with the CoopCycle platform and receive support and guidance from the federation.

The Resto.Paris representative also points out that there are no financial resources to build a platform of their own and that fortunately it is possible to use CoopCycle's. The interview with the worker reveals nuances in the relationship with the federation. On the one hand, there is a good relationship, and, on the other hand, she says that the tricky part "is that the platform is not our project, so it is difficult to put in new features." However, it would be financially impossible to build a platform from scratch. She claims that if she were to work at CoopCycle, it would take a lot of working time and that that would not be a priority for her. However, she makes some suggestions for improvement on the platform, mainly in relation to user experience and better features for companies.

Thus, the different initiatives show different involvement in relation to the construction of a platform owned by workers, although the existence of operational and financial difficulties is unanimous – and it is not something restricted to Brazil. Hence the central importance of CoopCycle – even with possible divergences in relation to improvements to be made on the platform – to make possible a non-dependence of couriers in relation to proprietary platforms – as one of the central aspects to confront the platformization of the dominant work.

Moreover, even without having the construction of their own platforms on the horizon, there are technological imaginations on the part of couriers in Brazil who also do not want to depend on a European platform built on their own logic. In the case of Brazilians building their delivery platforms, this would follow the logic of dewesternizing (Davis & Xiao, 2021) the workers' platforms, that is, building technological alternatives from below, considering the needs of real workers (Englert et al., 2020).



### **SOCIAL MEDIA FOR PROMOTING ORGANIZATION AND COMMUNICATION BETWEEN WORKERS**

In addition to building platforms that are owned by workers, social media are central for promoting organization and communication between workers – and also with consumers and restaurants – of the analyzed cooperatives, in line with research such as Geelan and Hodder (2017), Wood et al. al. (2018), Woodcock and Graham (2019), and Grohmann and Alves (2020). The social media most used by workers is Telegram – especially in communication between them.

For Rodant workers, each social media is used in a different way, with pros and cons for each one: “we use social media for communication and promotion of the cooperative,” with WhatsApp for personal relationships between workers and Telegram for organizing the work, something that could be translated, respectively, as social composition and technical class composition (Englert et al., 2020). The Mensakas worker reports the centrality of the different groups on Telegram for productive processes, serving to check times for remuneration, profitability accounting, and the existence of other one-way information channels. She emphasizes that it is a process in continuous construction: “we need to keep optimizing these methods. We were reducing the groups, because sometimes the information is lost. That’s why the meetings we have every two or three weeks are important.”

Pedal also uses Telegram as the main means of communication between workers on different channels, as well as a group for workers to relax. They use WhatsApp as the main social media for communication with customers and Instagram only for promoting the cooperative. WhatsApp is the main means of communication on social media in Brazil (Evangalista & Bruno, 2019) but self-managed initiatives have sought to use Telegram as an alternative, such as Señoritas. The worker points out that, before creating the collective, female riders were uncomfortable with the WhatsApp groups of delivery people who work for large platforms because they are sexist spaces, in line with findings from the research by Cant (2019). For Señoritas, it is about thinking of social media groups as safe spaces for women.

Coursiers Bordelais, on the other hand, uses Facebook and Instagram for this promotion but admit that “honestly, we are not very good at this. We are lucky to have a lot of visibility in the national media thanks to our engagement against platforms and uberized work,” according to the worker interviewed. This confirms the data presented by Morell et al. (2020) in relation to the digital presence of cooperatives in social media.

Resto.Paris, meanwhile, uses Slack for project and task management, as well as communicating with customers, but the cooperative worker recognizes that, when demand increases, it can become more complicated



to use this tool: “I think it is not very friendly for restaurants and for people who are not connected to their smartphone all the time.” In the meantime, they have created a WhatsApp group with the restaurants, which, according to them, is preferred. In this way, Brazil, although it uses WhatsApp on a larger scale, is not the only country to do so. However, for the cooperative, as for the others, the relationship with social media is a continuous, almost experimental, construction.

### COOPERATION AMONG COOPERATIVES

In terms of scale, rider-owned initiatives feature a much smaller number of workers compared to large digital platforms. However, this is definitely not a problem for cooperatives, given that one of their central points is the articulation between different initiatives. One of the central principles of cooperativism, intercooperation or cooperation among cooperatives (de Peuter & Dyer-Witford, 2010) is enthusiastically seen by the workers interviewed as one of the aspects of the circulation of workers’ struggles. In France, the relationship with CoopCycle has favored dialogue with other courier cooperatives. The federation has also had contact with cooperatives in South America, especially Brazil and Argentina, highlighting the dialogue between workers. French cooperatives also have a relationship with cooperatives of accountants and programmers, in addition to having some cooperatives as customers. Resto.Paris is thinking of launching a project with a network of farmers’ cooperatives. This shows, as proposed by Huws (2020), the potential for building local ecosystems by bringing together different sectors.

In Brazil, the two initiatives analyzed present more contacts with other collectives and non-profit entities than with other cooperatives, showing difficulties in dialoguing with the traditional Brazilian cooperative movement. Both Pedal and Señoritas present dialogue with cycle delivery collectives across the country. Pedal is seen in the Brazilian cycle delivery scenario as a reference and sees other collectives as partners: “we always see this as a partnership, not as someone who is stealing our work.” In this sense, they understand that the relationships with other similar initiatives are to aggregate and not distance, making the values of mobility and sustainability circulate among workers.

The vision of Spanish cooperatives is in the same direction. Mensakas sees the ethical criteria of cooperatives as important and potent connections for building alternatives to the dominant platforming scenario. They are in contact with several cooperatives of farmers, programmers, and delivery workers – not only in Barcelona and Europe but also in Latin America.



Rodant's relationships are more restricted to the regional scenario of Valencia but with cooperatives of all sizes from the relationship with the Valencian Federation of Cooperatives. In the cycle delivery sector, they have dialogue with about five other cooperatives.

### **THE FUTURE OF WORKER-OWNED INITIATIVES**

These connections represent emerging solidarities and collectivities in the sense of articulating cooperative principles around the world, as well as the principles of these initiatives that are put into circulation – such as mobility and social and environmental sustainability. This emergency character signals that the experiences of these cooperatives are a laboratory of platform labor. In this sense, when asked about the future of worker-owned platforms, initiatives expect more stability and growth. The Mensakas worker hopes that the cycle delivery sector will be stable and expects to receive funding and that there will be full working hours for all delivery workers, in addition to being able to raise the price of deliveries and increase the cooperative's profitability. Rodant, on the other hand, has a more modest objective: in five years, they hope to operate in the entire Valencia region.

Meanwhile, Pedal hopes to strengthen a collective entity that does not depend on the people who make up the initiative and, thus, continues to be a national reference. They also reveal a desire to participate in world delivery championships. Señoritas Courier hopes to be able to broadly develop cycle delivery based on the principles of feminist economics and, perhaps in the future, build their own platform based on these values.

For the worker at Coursiers Bordelais, the idea is to grow little by little and develop his own food supply: "you have to do things slowly and intelligently, so you don't miss a beat." Resto.Paris expects to become a reference for deliveries, especially in relation to business lunches, and also be a protagonist with restaurants that monitor environmental conditions: "maybe people who are used to ordering from Uber Eats or Deliveroo will say: 'ah, maybe it's better to order from Resto.Paris.'" The interviewee also hopes that it will be a profitable initiative and that it will not depend on public resources. And she thinks it would be interesting if, in the future, the customers themselves could be members of the cooperative.

### **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The worker-owned experiences analyzed are from three different countries, two in Europe and one in South America. On the one hand, they present specific

social and political contexts. In 2020, Brazil experienced its biggest rider strikes and self-managed experiences began to gain more visibility. The platformization of collectives and cooperatives is still not a big issue. Moreover, if their own platforms are built, they do not want to be dependent on software with a logic that is not built from below or does not dialogue with their local realities and needs. In Europe, Spanish cooperatives were born from union struggles and French initiatives are related to the CoopCycle cooperative federation – which has even strengthened relations with groups of workers in South America, especially in Argentina – and the construction of its own platforms is essential, and something that is at hand.

On the other hand, we reinforce the international character of the confrontation with the platformization of labor and the potential of the circulation of workers' struggles. Thus, even coming from different contexts, we emphasize that the experiences have connections between them, as initiatives under construction, both from the point of view of the work organization and the use of social media – even though most of them are owned by large platforms – for communication between workers and with customers, in addition to publicizing the cooperative itself as a media strategy for digital presence. These similarities and possible transnational articulations are inserted in a perspective of circulation of workers' struggles.

Workers do not agree with the idea that the construction of worker-owned platforms is only a technological issue since even the construction of one's own platform is problematized in the financial and organizational dimensions. It is, rather, about building productive processes that are owned by workers – and, in this sense, horizontality in management and the division between departments, in which all workers have a voice, is a central aspect for democracy in workplace. In relation to production processes, the initiatives highlight that it is a continuous construction, and that horizontality is also a center of disputes and contradictions.

CoopCycle is an entity with a fundamental role in relation to the feasibility of a platform for the use of cooperatives, although it is not necessarily a project of the workers from below – as evidenced by requests for improvement by Resto.Paris in relation to the experiences of users and to relationships with companies. Although it has a smaller dialogue in relation to Brazilian initiatives, CoopCycle also has a central role in connection and articulation with other cooperatives, favoring intercooperation.

We consider cooperation among cooperatives to be a key aspect for the development of worker-owned platforms, given that self-managed experiences will not have the same scale of workers as large platforms and that this is not a problem, but a feature. In addition to fostering cooperativism and solidarity



economy, the principle of intercooperation helps in the reinvention of local economies from below based on new production and consumption circuits in which delivery workers are just one of the links in the value chain, also involving coders, farmers, small restaurants, among others. Thus, in addition to the production-consumption circuit, there is the circulation of meanings – with a central role of media strategies – of self-management experiences based on values such as sustainable development, urban mobility, open technologies, data policies and algorithms that favor the worker, and healthy food. Of these points, the data and algorithm aspects are still a blind spot in the initiatives interviewed. Furthermore, open technologies are, in addition to CoopCycle, more of a promise than a reality.

The relationship with social media for communication and work organization is understood by workers as essential but without a ready formula on how to use them. In this sense, there is the use of several platforms, still in an experimental way. Most social media are proprietary, especially in Brazil, with widespread use of WhatsApp. However, we understand that the apparent ambiguity in the use of these commercial platforms (Lazar & Davidson, 2020) is justified by the need to dispute the dominant spaces with a greater digital presence of cooperatives and delivery workers, in the sense of greater media visibility. These are frontier struggles that the workers need to face in order to put more people – workers and consumers – into building alternative circuits for the platformization of labor.

The process of building worker-owned platforms is part of emerging solidarities and collectivities and may be the beginning of a broader scenario of facing the generalization of dominant labor platformization. This can happen with the construction of platforms for the public good, in line with the aspects defended by Huws (2020). The analysis shows that the dominant scenario of platformization is not inevitable and that there is a circulation of workers' struggles for the construction of experiences – even if initial – to re-signify the meanings of work through platforms as a true laboratory of class struggles. Thus, the experiments described here are worker-owned laboratories.

In theoretical terms, we expand the notion of platform cooperativism to encompass the different institutional designs that have as a principle the self-management of workers based on the notion of worker-owned platforms. This shows that the construction of worker-owned initiatives in the context of platformization is not something that follows a predefined model or that is necessarily related to a concept defined a priori. They are diverse and have different relationships with digital presence, according to Morell et al. (2020). Understanding this diversity of self-managed possibilities is somehow also

seeking to dewesternize platform studies (Davis & Xiao, 2021), in the sense of avoiding only replicating certain successful models in Europe, for example. Groups of riders in Brazil have potential in terms of work organization and communication between workers that go beyond pre-established definitions of how these initiatives should be.

As a challenge for future studies, we address the need to analyze the entire production and consumption circuit of these initiatives, ranging from platform design and materialities and work and worker organization to media strategies and data and algorithm policies, in addition to the ways people consume worker-owned platforms. This means understanding a whole circuit of work on worker-owned platforms. ■

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