

Precarization of platforms: The case of couriers in Spain

Precarización de plataformas: El caso de los repartidores a domicilio en España

Karol Morales Muñoz^{1*}, Paula Abal Medina²

1 Universidad de Cádiz, Cádiz, España

2 Universidad Nacional San Martín, Buenos Aires, Argentina

* karol.morales.m@gmail.com

Received: May 15, 2019

Accepted: March 11, 2020

Background

The growing importance of digital work platforms is unquestionable. At a global level, private initiatives are multiplying and expanding, offering consumers the possibility of satisfying their needs on-demand, and workers the possibility of obtaining income by providing specific services, working as much as they want and when they want. Indeed, images of flexibility and autonomy persistently accompany the spread of this model as an attractive alternative to supplement income easily and quickly.

The circumvention of fiscal, tax and labour regulations is undoubtedly one of the most controversial aspects of this business model.

Regarding work, by replacing the labour contract with commercial modalities of service provision, digital platforms actively promote the weakening of a labour relations model that recognized the asymmetry between capital and labour and therefore guaranteed a set of protections that ensured levels of well-being for workers. This is the last stage of an expulsive process of precariousness, in which workers are no longer only expelled from their workplaces, but also from the recognition of their weakness in relation to the company that organizes their productive activity.

On the other hand, the autonomy and flexibility formally attributed to working on platforms have been discussed because of the existence of a particular mode of management. In this, the algorithm operates as a technology for controlling the labour process (Ivanova et al, 2018). The algorithmic control is embedded in a process of production of labour subjectivities defined by individual responsabilization of social problems, which has accompanied the set of measures to promote autonomous work at the global level. This form of subjectification expresses, according to Crespo and Serrano (2012) a process of political psychologization of work characteristic of contemporary capitalism. In this labour scene, home delivery platforms are at the centre of public debate and concentrate an important part of the current conflict around these new business models.

Aims

In this paper, we address the main characteristics of work organization and working conditions in digital home-delivery platforms and their relationship with the emerging conflict within them. All this, while considering the role played by claims to freedom and autonomy as a peculiarity of the platform model. This study focus on the case of Spain, where the couriers have carried out strikes and demonstrations, have formed collectives and unions, and there have been several judicial sentences regarding the workers' status.

Method & Procedure

We present a case study with an ethnographic approach. This design allows for understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of the members. In fact, we address the perspective of a specific group that plays a critical role in the problematization of work in home-delivery apps: delivery workers collectives. The data production tools were multiple: participant observation of open and closed meetings in different cities, semi-structured interviews with workers and former platform workers, review of official written and audio-visual documents (court rulings, press releases, social network releases, etc.), and field notes. The analysis consisted of identifying distinctive aspects of work and conflict on the platforms, which are presented in the form of a narrative of the couriers' organisation process.

Results & Discussion

The results show that the work on the platforms has two central features that are relevant to the experience of the deliverers. The first one is the absence of labour protections and the total transfer of risks on workers, which makes

evident the expulsive precarization. The second one is the exacerbation of controls over workers by the platform. A fundamental role in this is played by the scoring systems, which permanently emphasize individual responsibility while overlapping the coercion exercised by the platform's algorithm.

Thus, the conflict unfolds around the lack of protection, but also around a work process that is organized in a way that contradicts the autonomy and freedom promised by the platforms. The distributors develop formal and informal forms of collective organization, in which communicational activism and judicialization are central strategies since they are able to confront the asymmetry of power in the relationship with the platform.

Conclusion

We wonder if this 'business model' would allow the stratification of the new social question defined by André Gorz (1997). Couriers exalt many of the defined traits of the notion of servants.

Keywords: Platform economy, delivery platform, labor conflict, political psychologization of work

References

- Crespo, E., & Serrano, M. A. (2012). La psicologización del trabajo: La desregulación del trabajo y el gobierno de las voluntades. *Teoría y Crítica de la Psicología*, 2(0), 33-48.
- Ivanova, M., Bronowicka, J., Kocher, E., & Degner, A. (2018). The App as a boss? Control and autonomy in application-based management. *Arbeit/Grenze/Fluss-Work in Progress Interdisziplinärer Arbeitsforschung*. <https://doi.org/10.11584/arbeit-grenze-fluss.2>
- Sassen, S. (2015). *Expulsiones: Brutalidad y complejidad en la economía global*. Katz Editores.
- Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism*. Polity Press.
- Vandaele, K. (2018). Will trade unions survive in the platform economy? Emerging patterns of platform workers' collective voice and representation in Europe. Disponible en <https://www.etui.org/Publications2/Working-Papers/Will-trade-unions-survive-in-the-platform-economy-Emerging-patterns-of-platform-workers-collective-voice-and-representation-in-Europe>

Financial support: Postdoctoral Fellowship Program Abroad, Agencia Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo (ANID), Chile.

How to cite this article: Morales Muñoz, K., & Abal Medina, P. M. (2020). Precarización de plataformas: El caso de los repartidores a domicilio en España. *Psicoperspectivas*, 19(1), 1-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5027/psicoperspectivas-vol19-issue1-fulltext-1680>



Published under license [Creative Commons Attribution International 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)