Food Delivery Platform Work and the COVID-19 Outbreak in the Metro Vancouver Regional District
FOOD DELIVERY PLATFORM WORK AND THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK IN THE METRO VANCOUVER REGIONAL DISTRICT

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Executive Summary

This report describes labour conditions, self-perceptions, and attitudes toward collective organizing and unionization among food delivery platform workers within the Metro Vancouver Regional District (MVRD). The research was conducted in the Spring 2020 semester by students in Labour, Communication and the Media, a fourth-year seminar jointly offered by the School of Communication and the Labour Studies program at Simon Fraser University.

Proprietary digital platforms have been key agents in intensifying the spread of insecure, or precarious, work. Some observers claim that these platforms generate significant benefits for businesses, consumers, workers, and society more broadly. In Canada, the rise of work conducted through platforms has been prominent in the hospitality industry, where companies like UberEats, SkipTheDishes, and Foodora have developed a new commercial model by mediating between restaurants and customers via their respective apps. While advocates argue that work conducted via such platforms is flexible and independent, a variety of concerns have been raised about the labour conditions of gig workers. Low and inconsistent wages, a lack of benefits or paid vacation, extremely precarious employment, algorithmic management, and policy barriers to unionization, among other concerns, have caused many to question if food delivery work is fair for those who perform it.

Building on qualitative studies of gig workers within the food delivery industry, this report advances research on this form of platform work by gathering information on the labour conditions among food delivery workers in the MVRD, as well as how these workers understand their work and consider the possibility of collective organization. Drawing on a literature review, political-economic investigation of the food delivery platform business, media analysis, reviews of statistical surveys on platform and gig work, interviews with local couriers and labour experts, and observations of online forums connecting local food couriers, this report describes how workers in this industry manage precarious and individualized work identities, and yet at the same time engage in notable forms of mutual aid, solidarity, and communication across a dispersed and mobile workforce.

Significantly, as research for this report was in progress, the spread of COVID-19 in Canada and British Columbia dramatically transformed both food delivery platform work and the wider conditions in which it takes place. Food delivery workers in the MVRD suddenly became frontline workers and were exposed to a new and deadly risk of infection which was unanticipated in the planning stages of this research project. Accordingly, this report describes the responses to the outbreak among the workers we connected with and reflects on the implications of COVID-19 for frontline platform workers more broadly.
Introduction

Like many other places in the world, food delivery apps have become a routine part of life in the Metro Vancouver Regional District (MVRD). As demonstrated by plenty of local media coverage, Vancouverites enjoy or complain about their most recent food delivery app orders, are polarized by the apps’ growing influence on local restaurants, and show an interest in how food delivery businesses make money. Media accounts of the industry – which includes companies like SkipTheDishes, Foodora, UberEats, and DoorDash – tends to focus on its disruptive nature, its effect on restaurants, and the level of convenience it offers the consumer. Comparatively few stories consider the growing workforce powering this new sector: hundreds upon hundreds of people who are performing precarious, low-paid, and under-regulated work mediated by proprietary digital applications, also called “platforms.”

This report outlines the findings of a collective research project undertaken by the students in Labour, Communication and the Media, a seminar offered by the School of Communication and the Labour Studies program at Simon Fraser University in the Spring 2020 semester. Students were guided by the instructor, Dr. Enda Brophy, and the research was supported by the British Columbia Federation of Labour (BC Fed), whose Director of Policy and Research, Chuka Ejeckam, contributed to the research project’s design.

Drawing on a literature review, research into Canadian legal cases, political economy research of the food delivery platform business, media analysis, reviews of statistical surveys on platform and gig work, interviews with local couriers and labour experts, and observations of online forums connecting local food couriers, this report offers a picture of the working conditions and livelihoods of food delivery app couriers in the MVRD in 2020. Significantly, this project was underway during a period in which the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in British Columbia and severely disrupted the economy. Therefore, the research was adjusted to additionally consider the unexpected developments the virus unleashed on platform and gig workers.

We find that food delivery app couriers remain particularly vulnerable to exploitative working conditions because labour standards have yet to be updated to address the novel features of gig work. While gig workers are on the frontlines of the service industry during times of global crisis, worker precarity is exacerbated by on-demand consumption, management through algorithms, and the high cost of living in the MVRD. The spread of COVID-19 in Canada and British Columbia dramatically transformed both food delivery platform work and the wider conditions in which it takes place.
arrival of the virus accentuated these vulnerabilities, while also expanding a spirit of solidarity and mutual aid among this workforce.

In this report, we offer an overview of the literature on the platform economy, platform labour, and gig work. Then, we describe the food delivery market in Canada and four popular food delivery platforms in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland: SkipTheDishes, DoorDash, UberEats, and Foodora (which announced that it would cease operations in Canada in April 2020, as this report was being drafted). We present the results of our interviews conducted with ten current food delivery couriers, one ex-courier, and a trade unionist with the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), which has been active in organizing food delivery workers in Ontario. Finally, we offer a critical discussion of our findings in reference to current literature, expert knowledge, news media stories on food delivery and the COVID-19 global pandemic, and reflections about collective worker action.
Methodology

This research project utilizes an inductive, qualitative methodological approach to analyze the labour conditions, self-perceptions, and attitudes toward collective action marking food delivery platform workers within the MVRD. We build upon numerous empirical, qualitative, and ethnographic studies conducted in a range of settings (surveyed in the following section). This literature suggests that app-based food delivery work shares a number of characteristics with other emergent forms of “platform” work, including relatively low pay, high levels of surveillance, asymmetrical communication interfaces which isolate workers from one another, algorithmic management, ideologies of entrepreneurialism and individualism, the classification of delivery workers as “self-employed,” intensely flexible (or precarious) employment, and, more recently, a wave of labour struggles and collective organizing. We therefore approached this research study with an understanding that the extreme flexibility of this job makes it, oftentimes, a short-lived experience, and that a range of common conditions have been discovered in the first wave of research marking this field. Drawing on research conducted by SFU Communication undergraduate students in a previous study (Bishop, Bengco, Chan, & Dunn, 2018), our working hypothesis was that most of these characteristics would hold true in the food delivery market in the MVRD – except for the labour struggles and collective organization, which have been notably absent in our region.

Our project thus sought to address the following questions around food delivery platform work in Vancouver:

- What are the labour conditions (employment status, payment models, labour process, etc.) marking food delivery platform work in the MVRD?
- What are the perceptions of work among food delivery platform workers in the MVRD?
- What are the attitudes toward the possibility of collective action among food delivery platform workers in the MVRD?

We added a fourth question during the course of the research project in order to adapt to current events:

- What effect has the COVID-19 pandemic had on the labour conditions of food delivery platform workers in the MVRD, and how are they responding?

Since platform delivery work is expanding in the region, capturing an assortment of viewpoints from workers was a key objective of the study. Our focal geographic region, the MVRD, was selected due to our location as researchers, the relatively developed market for food delivery services, and the lack of existing studies exploring this work locally.
Over the course of the study, social media was the primary and most successful means of contacting food delivery platform workers in the Greater Vancouver area. Our main entry point was through local delivery worker social media discussion groups. Once approved by group administrators, we put out an open invitation to members of these groups to gauge interest in speaking with us. In one case a group admin declined to allow us access to the forum but forwarded our request for interviews to group members. A secondary means of contact was through a search for former delivery workers selling their delivery gear (such as branded jackets and warming bags) through classified ads on websites like Craigslist and Facebook Marketplace. Finally, we reached out to personal contacts and friends we know who work, or have worked, in the industry. Our qualitative approach to this topic resulted in interviews with 10 drivers and 1 cyclist over the course of 2 months, each interview lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. While we had originally hoped to interview 15 workers, our research project was scaled back due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were transcribed for coding and assessed for similarity with, or deviance from, broader trends amongst food delivery workers in Canada and internationally. In addition, we have also communicated with local experts in the fields of platforms, labour, and unionization for more perspective on the unique nature of this type of work, meeting with Patrick Johnson, Secretary-Treasurer of the United Food and Commercial Workers, Local 1518 and Dr. Alessandro Delfanti, Assistant Professor in the Information, Communication and Culture Program at the University of Toronto Mississauga.

Alongside conducting the interviews with food delivery workers, the research team collaborated on an extensive literature review in order to provide contextual information for our project. This involved research into pertinent Canadian legal cases involving gig work and food delivery work in particular; political-economic research of the food delivery platform business internationally, in Canada, and in British Columbia, including close attention to the terms of service, hiring policies, and pay structures at the major companies operating locally; an analysis of media stories from the last two years covering the industry and the labour within it; and reviews of statistical surveys on platform and gig work. We also paid particular attention to news stories and research on examples of worker resistance and collective organization by food delivery platform workers in other cities and regions.

Unexpectedly, we expanded our methodology to analyze media coverage of food delivery platform work amid the COVID-19 pandemic in order to observe potential changes in the narrative surrounding gig and platform delivery work. Finally, we crafted additional interview questions for interviewees in order to find out about their responses to the pandemic and spent additional time observing the activity on social media forums to assess responses to the pandemic among the broader courier community.

All researchers involved in the interview process completed the Canadian Panel of Research Ethics’ Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) module. Confidentiality of participants was guaranteed by removing names, information, data, or details in personal accounts that could be traced back to the individual. If participants requested it, they were provided a draft copy of the report before it was published and an opportunity to offer comments or suggest changes. All interviews were saved...
on a secure, password-protected server at Simon Fraser University, while all transcriptions and names were kept in a separate location using only numerical indicators for identification.

Since this study was conducted over the duration of one university semester (roughly three months), it lacks the longitudinal scope of some of the previous research on food delivery platform work. Additionally, our participants only represent an extremely small sample of the food delivery platform worker population in the MVRD, and this is especially so given the high turnover of the job. While we partially corrected for this by analyzing food delivery platform worker social media forums, which include a wider range of worker viewpoints, they still do not represent an exhaustive account of workers in this industry.

While recognizing the limitations of our approach, we also note that “qualitative research is not concerned with numerical representativity, but with the deepening of understanding a given problem” (Queiros, Faria, & Almeida, 2017, p. 370). In other words, the study was not concerned with providing a perfect picture of all food delivery workers’ experiences, but rather a closer examination of a particular subset of workers in the industry. Further, this study offers what to our knowledge is the first scholarly exploration of food delivery platform work in the MVRD.
Platform Economy and Platform Work

In this report we use the terms “platform,” “platform economy,” “platform work,” and “gig work.” By platforms, we mean proprietary digital infrastructures used by companies to mediate between customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and other groups (Baldwin & Woodard, 2009; Srnicek, 2016). The platform economy describes how the platform model has become central to a transformation in capitalism driven by some of the global economy’s most valuable firms, including Amazon, Facebook, Google, Uber, Shopify, and others (Kenney & Zeisman, 2016; Langley & Leyshon, 2017; McKee, Makela, & Scassa, 2018). Platform labour, or platform work, refers to work that develops, supports, or is mediated by, digital platforms (Huws, Spencer, & Syrdal, 2018; Kneese, 2019). Gig work refers to precarious employment, or work that falls outside of the standard employment model of full-time work with benefits, paid sick days and vacation, and the possibility for collective organizing (Jeon, Liu, & Ostrovsky, 2019, Vosko, 2000). Not all platform work is gig work (i.e. full-time engineers at Google) and not all gig work is platform work (i.e. temporary foreign agricultural workers), but, as we will see, there is growing overlap between the two.

Platform companies have been lauded in the business and trade press for their capacity to move quickly, “disrupt” industries, and innovate (Parker, Van Alstyne, & Choudary, 2016). The rise of companies like Amazon, Facebook, and Google to the very top of the global economy since the financial crisis of 2008 has provoked a debate around whether “platform capitalism” (Lobo, 2014) is a qualitatively new kind of economy based on strategic control of digital interfaces (Huws, 2016, Langley & Leyshon, 2017).

What is certain, however, is that many different kinds of service jobs are being dramatically reshaped by platforms pioneered by a group of Silicon Valley companies. When paired with the ubiquity of mobile devices like tablets and smartphones, digital platforms have enabled the expansion of gig work, accelerating the rise of the broader phenomenon labour scholars refer to as precarious employment (Kessler, 2018; Vosko, 2000).

1 “Although there is no widely accepted definition of the gig economy, the term broadly refers to less structured and non-traditional work arrangements. Gig workers are usually not employed on a long-term basis by a single firm; instead, they enter into various contracts with firms or individuals (task requesters) to complete a specific task or to work for a specific period of time for which they are paid a negotiated sum. This includes independent contractors or freelancers with particular qualifications and on-demand workers hired for jobs that are mediated through the growing number of online platforms and crowdsourcing marketplaces, such as Uber, Lyft, TaskRabbit, Upwork, Guru, Fiverr and Freelancer” (Jeon et al., 2019, p. 7).
In recent years, platform companies have also been criticized for the threats they pose to democratic governance, market competition, media independence, urban affordability, and consumer privacy, among others (Noble, 2018; Pasquale, 2015; Rushkoff, 2016; Liu, 2020). One of the areas where they have generated the most controversy has been their effects on employment and workers. A renowned example is the rideshare company Uber, whose workers have accused the company of misclassifying employees as independent contractors, offering inadequate pay, and coercing drivers to work longer hours for the platform, among other concerns (Rosenblat, 2018). Another oft-used example is Amazon Mechanical Turk, a micro-work platform brokering tiny fragments of online piecework in which employers can unilaterally decide to reject work, deny pay, and negatively rate workers (Irani, 2015; Milland, 2016). Platform companies have been described by researchers as developing “asymmetrical” digital labour management interfaces that disempower, silence, and isolate employees from one another (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016), while others have pointed to employment at Amazon warehouses as prototypical examples of physically punishing work that is subject to unprecedented forms of algorithmic management (Delfanti, 2019).

Platform-based work and the gig economy it enables have expanded a series of ambiguous employment relationships for workers (Healy, Nicholson, & Pekarek, 2017). Sowers (2019) explores the difference between forms of permanent, full-time employment with benefits and gig work, which troubles existing policy regimes. At the precarious fringes of the service economy, tech companies have refused employee status to workers, arguing that their platforms merely serve to mediate exchange between customers and service providers (Healy et al., 2017, p. 2). This ambiguity creates a highly precarious situation for gig workers, as they are excluded from employment protections afforded to full-time, permanent employees. For example, as independent contractors, Uber and Lyft drivers are mostly excluded from sick leave, paid vacation, and the possibility of unionization.

Despite the allegedly expanded capacity for gig workers to regulate their own work schedules, this “flexible” work is still subjected to management by algorithms, extraordinary degrees of worker surveillance, data extraction, and volatile customer rating-based ranking systems (Adler-Bell & Miller, 2018; Cant, 2019; Rosenblat, 2018; Waters & Woodcock, 2017; Wood, Graham, Vili, & Isis, 2019). Unsurprisingly, research has found that this flexibility also tends to obscure the downsides of such work, including low pay and long hours (Griesbach, Reich, Elliott-Negri & Milkman, 2019, p. 13).

**SURVEYS OF PLATFORM AND GIG WORK**

The questions of who exactly counts as a platform worker, how many there are, and whether their numbers are increasing or decreasing, have revealed themselves to be challenging ones for researchers (O’Farrell & Montagnier, 2020). Among the main problems faced by scholars surveying the spread of platform work are: 1) researchers have offered varying levels of information to survey respondents about what exactly platform work is; 2) there is a lack of consistency among surveys which hinders comparability; and 3) survey samples are often quite small. As a result, findings regarding the spread of platform and gig work vary widely.
In a survey of attempts to measure digital platform workers, O’Farrell & Montagnier (2020) found studies reporting lower proportions of platform workers in the overall workforce from Norway (0.51% of the working-age population), Sweden (2.5%), and Denmark (1%), while among the higher reported percentages were Finland (7%) and the United States (8%). One of the first transnational studies conducted in the European context uses the term “crowdworkers” to gauge forms of work managed through online platforms in the UK, Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands (Huws et al., 2018). This study found that the percentage of workers using crowdwork as a source of income was 9% in the Netherlands, 12% in Germany, 10% in Sweden, and 9% in the United Kingdom. The term “crowdwork,” as the authors note, can be difficult to distinguish from other types of work as it is associated with “ways of earning an income which do not involve the sale of labour,” but it may also include income-generating activities like selling on eBay or hosting on Airbnb which are not commonly considered to be work (Huws et al., 2018, p. 119).

Huws et al. (2018) also found that the majority of crowdworkers used income from online platforms to supplement other earnings, with those who reported using platforms as their primary source of income constituting the minority of respondents (25% in the Netherlands and in Germany, 36% in Sweden, and 34% in the UK). From these findings, it is clear that platform work tends to be part of a continuum of income earning strategies, and while some may be able to rely on protections offered by standard employment contracts in their other work, a significant proportion of those who perform crowdwork as their main source of income are excluded from these same protections (Huws et al., 2018, p. 121). Against those who suggest that standard, full-time, permanent employment is the most important part of waged work (Henwood, 2019), this study captures the spectrum of conditions marking the labour market, and (in Europe at least) indicates a shift away from the standard employment model to one that promotes the extreme flexibility of platform work.

In the Canadian context, research on the gig economy has made similar findings. The Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario (PEPSO) research project surveyed over 4,000 individuals and added a series of interviews with precariously employed workers in the Greater Toronto-Hamilton area.
Among the most important findings of the study was that at least 20% of workers surveyed were in precarious forms of employment and that this had increased by half in the last 20 years.

Also referred to with the celebratory notion of the “sharing economy,” observers in some of the first studies highlighting the integration of digital platforms and precarious work noted the growth of a business model that uses online platforms to enable consumers to purchase services on demand (Block & Hennessey, 2017). Researching the pervasiveness of the gig economy in the Greater Toronto Area, a Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives study surveyed 2,304 people and found that nearly one-in-ten respondents had worked in the so-called “sharing” economy (Block & Hennessey, 2017, p. 10).

A recent study conducted by Statistics Canada (Jeon et al., 2019) takes a different but promising methodological approach in determining the prevalence of gig work, utilizing individual and corporate income tax returns and linking this data to census microdata. The authors focus on unincorporated, self-employed workers who file T2125 forms, a requirement for reporting business, professional, or commission self-employment income, and make a number of valuable findings, including that gig work has increased between 2005 and 2016, when “the percentage of gig workers in Canada generally rose from 5.5% to 8.2%” (Jeon et al., 2019, p. 22). This growth was particularly significant for female workers, among whom the percentage engaged in some form of gig work increased by 2.9% during the same period (p. 6). Workers in the bottom 40% of the annual income distribution in Canada were about twice as likely to participate in the gig economy compared to other workers and there was also a vast disparity between Canadian-born gig workers and that of recent immigrants, with 10.8% of male immigrant workers who had been in Canada for less than five years performing gig work, compared to the 6.1% of Canadian-born men (p. 22). Other notable findings of the study were that gig work is increasingly female (p. 15), that the median annual income of a gig worker is extremely low ($4,303 in 2016, p. 13), and that shares of gig workers among all workers were the highest in the so-called “creative” sectors, in other words, among those with main occupations in art, culture, recreation and sport (24.2% for men and 26.6% for women, p. 20). Most strikingly, for many gig workers net total gig income was negative (p. 13).

Less survey research has been focused on food delivery app workers themselves. In the Canadian context, a web-based survey conducted by Griesbach et al. (2019) surveyed 955 platform food delivery workers between the ages of 18 to 64 who worked for one of the leading food delivery platforms such as Instacart, DoorDash, Postmates, UberEats, and GrubHub. The study found that four-in-ten respondents reported working on multiple platforms (p. 5), while 57% of workers reported relying on delivery work as their primary source of income (p. 8).

It is clear that platform work tends to be part of a continuum of income earning strategies, and while some may be able to rely on protections offered by standard employment contracts in their other work, a significant proportion of those who perform crowdwork as their main source of income are excluded from these same protections.

Interestingly but not surprisingly, two spikes of gig worker numbers occurred after the 2008 financial crisis and alongside the rise of the platform economy model in the early 2010s (Jeon et al., 2019, p. 15).
Another recent study (Kostyshyna & Luu, 2019) offers a clearer picture of the size and characteristics of gig work in Canada. The study characterized gig employment as non-standard or informal work arrangements and found that 30% of their respondents (out of 2,000 Canadian households surveyed through the Canadian Survey of Consumer Expectations) reported that they participated in gig work between the second and fourth quarters of 2018 (p. 1). The authors found that the highest rate of participation in informal work was among youth aged 18-24, with 58% of younger worker respondents reporting that they work in the gig economy (p. 4). Significantly, the report found that just over one-third (37%) of respondents participated in such work as a result of weak economic conditions “such as job loss, reduced hours, reduced pay or stagnant wages” (p. 5).

EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND FOOD DELIVERY PLATFORM WORK IN BC

Employment status is a critical dimension of food service delivery platform work. In British Columbia, gig and platform workers such as food delivery app workers are seemingly excluded from the British Columbia Employment Standards Act (BC ESA) in that they are classified by food delivery platform companies as “independent contractors.” This definition of what constitutes an employee leaves food delivery platform workers in a grey area as far as their employment status is concerned. In practice, their contractual status as independent contractors excludes these gig workers from a range of legal protections and allows platform companies avoid the responsibilities normally expected of an employer. The BC ESA defines an “employee” as: a) a person receiving or entitled to wages for work performed for another; and, b) a person an employer

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allows, directly or indirectly, to perform work normally performed by an employee” (BC ESB, 2016). Tellingly, a BC ESA factsheet states that “when deciding if a worker is an employee or an independent contractor, one of the main questions to ask is: ‘whose business is it?’” (BC ESB, 2016).

It is almost entirely to the advantage of food delivery apps to classify these workers as independent contractors and thereby exclude them from employment legislation, health and safety regulation, and employment insurance schemes (Thompson et al, 2019). It also means these workers are denied paid sick leave, a situation which has become particularly serious in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic. As a result of this situation, the classification of employment relationships has been one of the most controversial aspects of the spread of gig work conducted through platforms (Mojtehedzadeh, 2020b). The platforms themselves further complicate these legal considerations by strategically moving their dispute resolution processes to favourable jurisdictions. As was highlighted in a recent case against Uber by a driver which reached the Supreme Court of Canada, the company has until recently enforced mandatory arbitration laws requiring disputes to be “exclusively governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of The Netherlands”, as the place of both mediation and arbitration is Amsterdam, the Netherlands (Uber, 2020, para. 30). This requirement obliged drivers to pay out of pocket for travel to and accommodation in the Netherlands in order to pursue a dispute, effectively putting arbitration out of reach, a requirement Supreme Court Justices Abella and Rowe described as “unconscionable” in their decision rendering the clause invalid (In Mojtehedzadeh 2020b, para. 6).

The BC ESA has yet to be amended to provide protections for the emergent and complex set of employment relationships within the galaxy of gig work, and therefore poses an outdated framework. One food delivery worker we met described the way in which this results in an employment grey area:

*I would say it’s in between, I used to say that it’s self-employment and during my first month I thought, “oh, this is great” and then I was like, “wait a minute,” and you start to see in between the cracks about what the companies are actually doing. So, it’s in between. Like literally, if they had to have it categorized, they would have to come up with a new category and say that its half self-employment and half work. It’s like self-contract but you’re not, because with companies like Skip[TheDishes] now, you can’t decide whether or not you want to take an order because [if you decline the order] you’re sidelined.*

As Colleen Jones, National Director (Pacific) of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers pointed out in our interview, “if this is the way work is changing within our society, then we need to make sure that those workers are protected.” Policy is one route to protect and advance the interests of gig and platform workers, another is collective organization among this growing sector of the working population.
One of the more important developments in the expansion of platform and gig work has been a wave of resistance and collective organizing in response to labour grievances (Johnson & Land-Kazlauskas, 2019). This collective organizing has challenged dominant narratives of platform and gig workers as “entrepreneurs” to whom platform companies are not responsible. The wave of organizing is all the more remarkable given that legal frameworks governing gig workers in jurisdictions across the world tend to restrict individuals from collectively organizing and voicing their concerns to platform companies.

This activism is one part of a broader “techlash” against platform companies that has included a variety of efforts to organize collectively among workers in the core of high-tech at companies like Apple, Google, and Amazon, but also gig workers on the precarious periphery of the tech sector (see Brophy & Grayer, forthcoming). In Japan and Norway for example, Uber Eats and Foodora couriers have recently formed unions representing delivery app workers. After a five-week strike, 600 Foodora food delivery workers in Norway won a contract including guaranteed compensation for equipment used on the job (including bikes, clothes, and smartphones which are typically paid for out of pocket by workers), and an annual pay increase of around $1,647 for full time workers (Gurley, 2019).

In the United Kingdom, Deliveroo workers have won meaningful victories on issues such as compensation. Meanwhile, riders for Foodora and other companies operating in Italy have organized strikes in Milan, Turin, Bologna, and other cities. In Brazil, food delivery workers went on a national strike day on July 1, 2020, demanding more pay, better working conditions, and an end to the surveillance and disciplining of organizers at Uber, Colombia’s Rappi, and Brazil’s iFood (Rochabrun & Mello, 2020). Some of this action, triggered by changes to the opaque pay schemes at the companies, has taken advantage of legislation around self-employment imposed on food delivery workers, who have simply collectively claimed their coordinated right to “log off” the platform when they wish given their supposedly independent employment status. In Italy and the United Kingdom, unions organizing these workers have been rank-and-file unions on the margins of the labour movement, including the Confederazione dei Comitati di Base (Cobas) in Italy (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020) and the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (see Cant, 2019). In the United States, the formation and rapid expansion to over 2000 members of the independent Rideshare Drivers United (RDU) in southern California points to the kind of organization gig workers are capable of even without the support of an established trade union. These efforts culminated in two highly-publicized and global strikes against both Uber and Lyft on March 25 and May 8, 2019, on the eve of the companies’ initial public offerings (see Dolber & RDU, 2019).

Much of this worker organizing has occurred on or through digital communication platforms. Online forums such as Reddit, work tools such as Slack, or private Facebook groups which allow for anonymous postings and information exchange have emerged as relatively safe spaces to vent and organize, and advertising campaigns on Facebook have brought in hundreds of new members and organizers (Dolber & RDU, 2019). While not always resulting in collective action, some online exchanges on corporate platforms such as Whatsapp have been described by scholars as forms of “embryonic solidarity” within this highly
individualized form of work, forms that are necessary for any potential collective action down the line (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020, p. 36). Even more promising, dedicated platforms for worker communication, including Amazon Mechanical Turk, WorkIT, Coworker.org, Solidarity (developed by the RDU), and others are increasingly playing a role in this labour organizing (Brophy & Grayer, forthcoming).

The examples mentioned here do not suggest that technology can substitute for collective organizing. Organizing online faces unique challenges as well. In a collaborative ethnographic study of the process of creating one such dedicated communication platform, Dynamo, the authors note the “twin perils” of stallling and friction which threatened collective action, where dissidence, fear, and criticism could quickly derail any forward momentum and make efforts around organisation “time-consuming and exhausting” (Selehi et. al, 2015, p. 2). Attempts at unionization by gig and platform workers face multiple challenges in the contemporary labour landscape, including the recognition of the right to collectively bargain, employment status limitations, “explicit exclusions from protection, outdated regulations, difficulties in identifying the employer, and conflict with competition law” (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2019, p. 23).

Despite these challenges, the wave of collective action around gig and platform work has also reached Canada. Here, the headlines have mostly been for Foodora couriers in Toronto who began organizing since early 2019 with the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) under the name Foodsters United. While Foodora maintained its couriers were independent contractors who do not have the right to unionize, Foodsters and CUPW argued that the company controls workers’ pay and schedules and engages in disciplinary action in order to control their labour process while avoiding the responsibilities of employers, such as paying for lost wages following injury, offering paid sick days, or supplying gear necessary to do the job (Manzocco, 2020).
In a significant win for the labour movement, CUPW and Foodsters United conducted an innovative card-signing campaign and appealed to the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) to have workers recognized as dependent contractors. In February of 2020, the regulator ruled that couriers working for Foodora were indeed dependent contractors, which means they have the legal right to organize and certify a union (CUPW, 2020). As this report was being drafted, Foodora announced it would cease operations in Canada, likely in response to the union drive.

The Foodsters United-CUPW campaign mirrors the one carried out in Toronto by Uber Black limousine and SUV drivers through the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), which in January 2020 applied to the OLRB to unionize the drivers (UFCW, 2020). The UFCW has also been advocating on behalf of ride hailing drivers in British Columbia, recently entering mediation with Lyft and Uber at the BC Labour Relations Board (UFCW, 2019). The union argues that the employment contracts that Uber and Lyft require their drivers to sign violate B.C. labour laws, including the fact that “the contracts imply that drivers cannot join a union” (UFCW, 2019, para. 2).

The overall trend is that unions and other worker organizations have been important to successful protests and action by gig workers, not only in developing worker solidarity and a collective identity, but also in providing financial support and a formal structure that assists in navigating labour rights and protections. The surge of organizing activities across tech and platform work, and the renewed social value placed on frontline work, including food delivery work, is very important. At the same time, the announcement of the departure of Foodora from the Canadian scene demonstrates how tenuous victories can be in a sector operating at the very cutting edge of labour precarity.
Food Delivery Platforms: The Market in Canada and the Lower Mainland

The food delivery platform market has rapidly become an integral part of people’s lives across the world. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic turbo-charged the “stay at home” economy (Lin, 2017), food delivery services had developed a business model which profits from the outsourcing of in-house food deliveries by third-party delivery services. The food delivery platform industry is therefore parasitic on the food services sector, as platforms take around a 30% cut of the order, biting into restaurant revenues and incentivizing restaurant owners to add surcharges for delivery orders made through apps (CBC Marketplace, 2018).

In Canada, the food delivery industry is valued at $4.3 billion CDN (Sokic, 2019) and there are an estimated 12 million users of these services (Statista, 2020). Another study suggests 29% of all Canadians have used a food delivery at least once (Charlebois, 2019). Third-party online delivery services are most popular among 18-34-year-olds, with almost a quarter of this age group purchasing online orders once a week (Sokic, 2019). A Research Co. survey found that about 20% of British Columbia residents order takeout from a restaurant at least once a week, where most of these people are doing so on apps like SkipTheDishes, UberEats, and Foodora (In Kotyk, 2020).

The rise of food delivery platforms has negatively impacted the existing restaurant sector according to many owners, including those in Vancouver who have recently decried the fees charged by these apps and urged customers to use the restaurant’s in-house delivery service or order for pickup during the COVID-19 pandemic (Owen, 2020). A study conducted by the Ipsos Foodservice Monitor found that food delivery accounted for 8% of sales for quick service restaurants and 6% of those at full-service restaurant sales in Canada in the first quarter of 2018 (Deschamps, 2019). Another estimate projects the market for this new sector will be worth $200 billion US globally by 2025 (Singh, 2019).

This project surveyed the four largest food delivery companies operating in the MVRD: SkipTheDishes, DoorDash, UberEats, and Foodora. Food delivery platform services have existed in Canada since at least 2012 when the Winnipeg company SkipTheDishes began operations. In 2016 and 2017, transnational food delivery companies entered the Canadian market. The Californian company DoorDash was founded in 2013, and now
delivers from over 1,400 restaurants in Vancouver, serving 14 cities across BC. UberEats, another Californian company better known for its ride hailing services, entered the MVRD market in 2017. The German company Foodora launched in 2014 and entered the BC market in 2016. Overall, SkipTheDishes is the most popular food delivery platform in BC with a market share of 29%, with UberEats coming in second at 14% (Charlebois, 2019).

This research surveyed the Terms & Conditions (T&C) at these companies to gain greater insight into their labour practices. The goal of these documents is generally to protect the company from potential legal issues. As a regulatory framework and legal document, the T&C is aimed to ensure a user’s “voluntary, specific and informed” consent (Luger, Moran, & Rodden, 2013, p. 2687), and technology companies have been widely criticized for forcing users to sign on to impossibly long and dense T&C documents (Zuboff, 2018). As the four major food delivery companies operating locally, UberEats, SkipTheDishes, Foodora, and DoorDash have publicly-available T&Cs which allow some insight into their relationship with workers.

The T&Cs of all four companies declare that delivery workers are independent contractors. SkipTheDishes, for example, indicates that couriers are “non-exclusive independent contractors of the Company to provide delivery services” (“Courier agreement,” n.d., para. 1). DoorDash speaks of delivery workers as individuals “engaged in the business of performing delivery services” and as an “independently established enterprise” (“Independent contractor agreement,” n.d., para. 1). As such, these platforms deny workers any responsibility from the app, the company, or the restaurants they are delivering from. Foodora uses similar language to claim that they are only a “method to obtain […] third party transportation services” (“Become a Rider,” 2020, para. 3). As so-called ‘third parties,’ these Agreements also relieve companies from any responsibility or accountability should things go wrong, such as an accident or damages occurring during a delivery.

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3 Foodora distinguishes itself from competitors in that it typically delivers by bicycle within city centres, but it also offers vehicle delivery. Before announcing that it would cease its Canadian operations in 2020, Foodora delivered from over 400 restaurants within the MVRD.
Media Coverage of Food Delivery Platforms

As a part of this project, members of the research team surveyed Anglophone media coverage of the food delivery industry in Canada over the last two years (2018-2020), focusing on over 50 relevant articles from a range of publications as well as archived television news stories. Analysis of this coverage revealed that—especially early on—major news media outlets tended to focus on food delivery platforms from the perspective of the business or the consumer, reporting on, for example, the disruption caused to the food services sector or the quality of service enjoyed by the customers. Smaller and independent news outlets focusing a little more on workers themselves, and this critical scrutiny increased in the mainstream media as a result of important events like the collective organizing at Foodora or Uber Black in Toronto.

One genre of article, which draws on corporate press releases and interviews with company representatives but never mentions labour conditions in the industry, announces the arrival of a new app in a city. A 2017 article describes the arrival of Uber Eats in Vancouver: “You still can’t get an Uber driver to pick you up in Greater Vancouver. But in a few weeks, you can at least get one to pick up your dinner” (Mooney, 2017, para. 1). Business-oriented publications depict food delivery platforms as sites of innovation rather than simply another version of outsourcing. For example, a BC Business story wonders whether the rising popularity of meal delivery means “that the home kitchen’s toast” (Stone, 2019). Beyond speculation, many articles that we read explored the disruptive effects of platforms on food services, symbolized by the rise of “ghost kitchens” in some cities catering exclusively to home delivery (Korstrom, 2019; Rieger, 2019), students ordering meals to their school rather than taking a packed lunch (Purdy, 2019), or outlets like 7-11 offering products like candy bars, condoms, and drinks for delivery via Skip the Dishes (Deschamps, 2018).

Positive media coverage has included reports making the case that food delivery apps help restaurants drum up business during traditionally slower months of the year like January and February. Some media coverage has explored the question of why people continue to order from these apps despite the fact that many restaurants mark up prices to offset the fee charged by the apps (Kotyk, 2020). CBC Marketplace (2018) asked customers if the markup of these food prices bothered them, with a majority of customers reporting not being troubled by the surcharge. SkipTheDishes, UberEats, and Foodora have generally received mixed reviews when journalists have considered the apps from a consumer or market research perspective.
Negative depictions of the industry have tended to focus on the poor experience of customers with platforms (Drewa, 2019) or tensions between the apps and restaurant owners (Buckner, 2019). Reports of credit card fraud, high prices or poor service at the company were common in early coverage of the sector (Alini, 2020; Bregolisse, 2019). Restaurateurs are typically highlighted in media reports suggesting these apps make the restaurant little to no money given the 20-35% commission they charge (Sagan, 2018, para. 14). Workers have made an appearance in some mainstream media stories through reports describing restaurants having problems with the performance of food delivery platform workers, including picking up food orders late, unreliability, and mishandling or damaging the food, factors which can result in negative ratings for the restaurant as opposed to the app (Sagan, 2018).

A subset of news coverage surrounding the food delivery industry in Canada has reported on the experiences of delivery workers at these apps. Numerous pieces reported safety concerns on the job, including physical assaults on food delivery service workers (Abedi, 2017; Gray, 2017; “3 Teens Charged,” 2019; Westoll, 2020). A series produced by the Toronto Star about the “secret life” of food couriers describes how many are forced into this line of work as a result of declining job creation, stagnant wages, and an eroding manufacturing sector (McBride, 2019). A CTV piece we reviewed interviewed a number of gig economy workers in Canada—most of whom were food delivery workers—and reported that the flexibility of this form of work and not having a boss to report to were the main draw, and that the money made from this form of work was generally good (Hensley, 2020).

Another portion of media coverage has featured stories of food delivery workers that are upset about their working conditions, especially since the unionization drives at Uber Black and Foodora in Toronto (“Battle between Foodora and Couriers,” 2019; Bimman, 2019; Mojtehedzadeh, 2020a). By 2019, even commentators at mainstream media outlets like CTV were highlighting the inequities of gig work. Sustained coverage in recent pieces from independent media outlets like The Tyee have highlighted how the encounter between the gig and the platform economies was producing a structurally unfair labour market (Firfiray, 2020; Glavin, Bierman, & Schieman, 2020; MacDonald, 2020; Willcocks, 2020). The aforementioned CBC Marketplace (2018) program interviewed UberEats and Foodora couriers about their working conditions, with the couriers being quoted as saying “we have no rights or voice,” while other CBC coverage has pointed to the algorithmic management at these companies (Pringle, 2019). Mainstream Canadian media has also focusing on how workers at food delivery companies are considered independent contractors rather than employees (“Disgruntled Gig Economy Workers,” 2019). These workers also reported it being hard to become financially stable in this industry, explaining that the long working days that require lots of concentration and focus often end in unpredictable tips (McBride, 2019).
Food Delivery Platform
Workforce Characteristics

The project interviewed ten food delivery platform couriers, most of whom are in their 30s or 40s, with one in their early 20s. Participants tended to identify as working or middle class, with the latter being the most typical response. Interviewees were overwhelmingly Canadian citizens, with one being a permanent resident and another in Canada on a work visa. The workers we interviewed were diverse in ethnicity, including people of Chinese, Filipino, Nigerian, and European backgrounds. All participants had worked in food delivery gigs for more than six months and a few had worked in the industry for more than a year, although not all were working in the industry at the time of our interview. A number of interviewees also worked or had worked for several food delivery platforms, often at the same time. Reflecting the gender breakdown of the industry, participants were overwhelmingly men. In an attempt to have some gender diversity in our sample we reached out to a number of women on the social media groups mentioned above. While we originally planned to interview 15 food delivery workers, due to the disruption caused by COVID-19 we suspended our interviews when we had spoken to 10 food delivery workers (two women and eight men).

Participants were asked to describe the demographics of food delivery platform workers based on their own experiences. We were told that workers meet one another while waiting for orders at restaurants, know other delivery workers in their friend groups, or interact online. Based on these interactions, participants suggested that the courier workforce is diverse in age. Some respondents suggested that fellow couriers tend to be immigrants and people of colour, with fewer white Canadians working as couriers. When asked to describe the demographics of their courier co-workers, one participant responds succinctly: “It’s mostly dudes.” Accordingly, other interviewees suggested that among couriers there are far fewer women than men in the MVRD. Another worker offers a rough estimate: “For every 10 or 20 men you see making deliveries you see one or two women.”

The application process for the four main companies, SkipTheDishes, DoorDash, UberEats, and Foodora is quick and simple. The majority of the platform websites are quite open about the fact that the application takes only minutes, including a minimal, three-step process of signing up, downloading the application, and going to work. An excellent example of this was the Foodora application page, which had a total of
eight questions, two of which were first and last name. These low barriers for application to food delivery companies make the work accessible for many users as long as they have internet access, a smartphone, and a vehicle. This was backed up by our interviewees, who tended to see the job as accessible and convenient.

Food delivery gig workers’ pay depends on variables such as the total number of orders available at any given time, the number and quality of deliveries they perform, and the number of hours they put into a shift. As a result, pay varies, often quite widely. One of the participants suggested that being a food delivery worker in Vancouver is like playing the lottery in Las Vegas: “Some days you think you will not make money, but end up making thirty-dollars an hour, other days you go in with the mentality that you are going to make money, but only end up with ten dollars an hour.”

While some drivers deliver as a full-time job, others drive in addition to other work as a means to make an extra wage or so that they can write off expenses (especially vehicle-related ones) during tax season. For example, one of our participants was drawn to the idea of having additional compensation on top of their job as a customer service worker at a local company, admitting that delivery work appealed to them because of tax write-offs. Drivers mostly felt uncomfortable relying on this type of work as their only source of income, and some even found the idea that a living might be made at it to be far-fetched and even humorous: “I don’t believe it’s ever gonna be fully permanent thing, cuz I don’t think – especially in Vancouver – that anyone can sustain themselves with the income you get from the app.”

As has been highlighted by other researchers exploring app-managed gig work (Rosenblat, 2018; Waters & Woodcock, 2017), the aforementioned unreliability of pay results from invisible algorithmic calculations and a series of subtle and not-so-subtle “nudges” to food delivery workers from the platform itself. High-value deliveries are allocated by the platform to the top-rated workers. Participants described how in the event their percentage of deliveries accepted out of those offered by the platform dropped below a certain threshold, the platform would penalize them and they “wouldn’t get any orders until somebody doesn’t want that order anymore.” Another worker described how the platform disciplines delivery workers by communicating that “if you decide not to take an order, they’ll sideline you for half an hour.” Some platforms also nudge workers to deliver in areas or during times the application wants them to, only enabling orders in certain neighbourhoods to be visible to the worker. By delivering exactly how the platform outlines, compliant couriers receive more money and better deliveries.
The dominant motivation for pursuing food delivery work for the workers we interviewed was the flexibility it reportedly offered to be “your own boss,” “self-employed,” and to make one’s own schedule. Respondents spoke about liking to sleep in, being introverts, disliking traditional nine-to-five schedules, and the petty management characterizing some office jobs. One of the project’s interviewees typified this perspective when he suggested that he enjoyed the freedom of being able to pick his own schedule, explaining how he works “somewhere between four to seven days” a week. This participant described how even when he felt like he needed “to hustle down” he did not typically work for more than 30 hours a week. The sense of freedom and autonomy with respect to a normal working life was therefore a common theme in interviews with participants, who spoke of having taken their lives into their own hands because of their transition away from the ways that they used to work:

I like it. It’s flexible, it’s pretty straight forward [...] I’d like to say that the money is decent for the level of difficulty, so which is kind of zero [laughter]. I like it for the flexibility.

You just go online in the app and get exercise as well. So yeah, it was probably the flexible schedule and getting exercise. They both work really well while I’m going to school, and helps balance everything, make a little money at the same time.

Among the more enjoyable aspects of the job for some of our participants was the excitement of meeting new people and the pleasure of a job well done. One participant described how he prefers to conceptualize his work as a hobby for which he happens to receive a financial reward, highlighting his love for the excitement customers get from receiving their food from the comfort of their own homes. One of the participants we interviewed described how while he did not not have many friends, being a food delivery worker built his self-esteem and helped with his communication and interactive skills with others.

Food delivery workers also shared plenty of irritations with the job. Workers were especially frustrated by the customer review system, the lack of recourse in instances where reviews have been unfair or inaccurate, the algorithmic management, and low and inconsistent pay. While a customer can rate a delivery as three or five stars out of five on a whim, the impact of customer reviews on food delivery platform workers is hard to
overstate: if a courier’s reviews dip below a certain threshold drivers can lose access to the more profitable deliveries or be dropped from the platform. Another problem raised by many workers was the lack of communication and information provided on the customer’s end when the order is placed, leaving delivery workers trying to guess, as one worker described, whether the customer lives in a basement or the main floor. Another interviewee shared these grievances, explaining how customers “don’t know how their complaint system works” leading to a situation where delivery workers “get thumbs down for something that might not be their fault” and are penalized for it. Though not discussed in our interviews, given the demographics of this workforce and the manner in which racialized customers and workers have been subjected to racist treatment via online platforms (Rosenblat 2018, Luca & Bazerman 2020), racism may well be a factor in how workers are rated on the app.4

These and many other problems stem from the delivery platform’s unusual combination of opacity and hyper-surveillance. For example, once an order is placed customers can often follow food delivery workers through the app and see their exact location. But food delivery workers feel that customers tend to not understand how the delivery application works, getting confused and irritated when they see their driver (and their food) heading away from them – a situation where the application might be stacking orders and demanding that the driver follow specific delivery instructions. It is often left up to the drivers to explain to angry customers what happens behind the scenes, making them the first point of contact even when the work is mediated by a platform which dictates the majority of how the delivery must occur. This situation is especially difficult given how delivery workers mostly felt the company will “always side with the customer, which is kind of crappy, because now, like, do I need to buy a body cam?” The highly mediated and impersonal platform-worker relationship leaves delivery drivers feeling alienated, unimportant, and unsupported.

Algorithmic management and control were mentioned as a source of frustration by many participants in this study. For example, UberEats allows workers to access the application at any given time in order to work, but with DoorDash workers have to schedule ahead and only sometimes do they manage to get scheduled for a last-minute shift if they want one. Moreover, the unprecedented surveillance these workers are subject to is often ineffectual or counter-productive. UberEats keeps track of time logged-in so as to limit people from going over twelve hours of driving per day to satisfy work safety legislation but couriers argued the platform is seemingly unable to distinguish personal time from work time, subjecting workers to surveillance on their time off and, unnecessarily limiting people from working when they want.

Low and inconsistent income was one of the key complaints from the couriers we spoke to. Nearly across the board, food delivery workers complained that income from the main food delivery platforms has decreased

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4 As an example of how this impact has manifested itself, we can look to the vacation rental platform Airbnb, where hosts were found to be less likely to accept bookings from Black guests who were made visible by the prominence of profile photos and real names on the platform (Luca & Bazerman, 2020).
Low and inconsistent income was one of the key complaints from the couriers we spoke to. Nearly across the board, food delivery workers complained that income from the main food delivery platforms has decreased as the market for labour has become saturated.

as the market for labour has become saturated. As one worker told us, “at the time that I started, the income was really attractive and it kind of went down.” The diminishing possibilities for making decent income through the platforms was confirmed by another participant who explained how these days “you get one order at a time” and “the earnings have been chopped down quite a bit.” Interviewees described how in order to make up for this lost income many delivery workers are using multiple apps at the same time while they work, utilizing a mix of SkipTheDishes, UberEats, DoorDash, and Foodora by stacking orders among different apps in the same shift. One interviewee took a dim view of such a practice, arguing that it is “ruining the delivery experience” because “if [other drivers are] taking two different orders from different companies, one customer’s food is going to be late. That customer is going to get a bad taste of that company and never use it again.” Other interviewees saw the practice of stacking orders as a necessary evil given the challenges of securing an adequate income through only one platform.

Tipping is yet another factor in the broader picture of unpredictable income for food delivery platform workers. Couriers depend on tips but are therefore at the mercy of the whims of customers who do not tip as predictably as in restaurant service. When asked what the greatest complaint among couriers is, a moderator on a social media forum laughs and confirms: “They really just complain that some people just don’t know how to tip.” One of the most common genres of posts on social media forums involves couriers posting a screenshot of the app with the low tip they’ve received and the amount of distance they covered in making the order.

Many of the couriers’ complaints display a sense, in the words of one worker we spoke to, that “The job is designed to favour
the company, not the person working.” As a part of this, interviewees also pointed to the uncertainty of the job and the responsibilities offloaded on them due to their status as independent contractors:

"Being self-employed is hard. You have to be organized and keep all your receipts and if you don’t enter all your information on a weekly or bi-weekly it just doesn’t work. Sometimes you make more sometimes you make less, there’s no guarantees. It’s fine if you’re ready to take on the risk of never knowing how much you’re going to earn, for people who are business minded and it’s something they want to explore."

The treatment received from companies as a result of their employment status was especially galling for some workers: “Yeah, they’re alienating their own workforce and they’re not engaging properly with their own workforce, or their subcontractors, or whatever you want to call them.” Some went further, suggesting the companies were an expression of structural unfairness in society:

"It does kind of feel like we’re risking more of our lives than we really should have to considering Uber is making so much money doing this. I know they’ve had losses, but it does kind of feel like we’re peasants, just kind of working under the behemoth that’s Uber."

Not surprisingly, almost across the board delivery workers saw the job as a temporary situation to which they were unwilling to commit long-term. One interviewee’s sentiments are exemplary: “I don’t see myself doing this for six years. This is something that I said, ‘hey, give it two years and see what you want to do after that.”"
Opinions on Collective Organizing Among the Food Delivery Platform Workforce

Given these sentiments and the aforementioned wave of organizing activity, our research project sought to gauge the attitudes around and interest in collective organization and unionization among food delivery workers in the MVRD. Each of the interviewees was asked how they felt about the prospect of unionization for food delivery platform workers in the MVRD given the recent wave of organizing elsewhere in the world, and online discussion forums for these workers were scanned for mentions of unionization or collective action.

Broadly, the couriers we spoke with were ambivalent about the possibility of collective organizing in their industry. Interviewees often seemed unclear about how the certification and collective bargaining process works at full-time permanent positions, not to mention how it might work at a platform company. Ideals of individualism and flexibility, which are heavily promoted by platform companies, shape delivery workers’ beliefs around unionization. Some interviewees noted that generating momentum to unionize would be a big challenge based on how individualized the perception and experience of platform work is. A number of interviewees shared what we could describe as an agnostic position on whether a union might be able help food delivery workers. One courier, for example, argued that it would make sense for those who made all of their income through the platform, but it would be a hindrance for others:

*There’s a place for everything. So why would I say yes? Why would I say no? Why would I say yes [to collective organizing among platform delivery workers] is, obviously people want to be protected. There’s some individuals – or even myself in the worst case scenario – if I have to really fall onto Uber and Doordash as my primary source of income, yeah [it’s a good idea]. Then I have that sense of security. Someone’s out there to look after me, right? [...] But unfortunately, the way it’s set up is as independent contractors. As an employee... I’m not able to write off any expenses. As a self-employed independent contractor I am, so unless I see myself doing this full time, then I might want to have as much service as possible.*

Other interviewees expressed similar sentiments around unionization, suggesting it was better-suited to full-time, permanent employment and a workforce that cares about their job:
For people who depend more on the industry, [they] would like to have a regular status and get benefits and everything, but for me I'm more into it for the flexibility and being able to work or not work whenever I want which is what I like [...] For me the flexibility is more important but for somebody trying to make a full-time income, getting a status is important.

That would be a good idea, but at the same time, I'm like “hmmm, “because at least sometimes I bump into other drivers and it looks like they don't really care that much about it. So I'm not sure how it would impact, how it would come forward here.

Oh interesting. I think I heard about [the union drive at Foodora in Toronto]. I think in Vancouver there's just too many people doing the job that don't care.

Despite supporting unionization themselves, other interviewees linked the lack of union drives in the MVRD to fear of retribution in an employment situation where firing a worker is as simple as kicking them off a platform:

I'm all for it, but I can also see that it can also work against the gig economy, because when workers unionize, they do not have to get rid of the couriers if they do not want them or don't want to deal with them anymore, they just don't have to give [them] a shift.

Another interviewee pointed to the formidable opposition platform companies could offer to any union drive:

[Workers] think [unionization] is not going to work and they feel it's not worth it. Because then you get your picture out there and then, I mean these guys are really powerful people. And they're not even here. Uber is an American company. Doordash is an American company. They could completely mess you up and then go back to the states and nothing will happen to them. Those guys are just making money here and are perpetrating it back to the states. I don't think they're really concerned with development efforts or anything.

While most interviewees seemed lukewarm to the idea of unionization or even unclear as to how it worked, there were also those who were in favour. Posts in social media discussion groups for food delivery platform workers in the MVRD occasionally raised the possibility of unionization in response to problems faced as a result of delivering via the platforms. One ex-food delivery worker who had been unilaterally dropped from the platform for a social media post reflected on the difference it might have made for them:

I think it'd be really beneficial. I mean, I've heard of Foodora in Ontario actually being one of the first to unionize. And that's a big step, especially if it's independent contractors. And I know we're not Ontario, but towards like, having benefits for workers compensation was involved, that would be really beneficial especially for someone who is new to the country who doesn't understand English very well [...] More or less, I think it's a great idea because of the fact that, if something like this were to have happened when I got let go the first time, I don't think it would have happened in the way that it was supposed to. [...] And they should at least have someone fighting for workers in the back corner. I still would've liked to have someone in my back corner saying, “hey, you can’t do this.” So, I think it would be very beneficial.
Food Delivery Platform Work and COVID-19

WORKER PRECARITY AMIDST COVID-19

As research for this report was in progress the spread of COVID-19 in Canada and British Columbia dramatically transformed both food delivery platform work and the wider conditions within which it takes place. Food delivery workers in the MVRD and elsewhere were suddenly seen as essential front-line workers and along with others were exposed to a new and deadly risk of infection, creating a situation that was unanticipated as this research project was devised. This last section of the report describes changing attitudes toward food platform couriers as evidenced by anglophone media coverage in North America, relates the responses to the outbreak among the workers we connected with and observed, and considers the implications of COVID-19 for frontline platform workers more broadly.

As the COVID-19 pandemic gathered force in late March of 2020, cities in the MVRD closed restaurants to dine-in operations and limited consumers to take-out or delivery. Restaurants and other facilities that prepare and serve food were deemed by the Provincial Government to be an essential service so long as they followed rules for physical distancing and other recommendations from public health officials. The onset of COVID-19 has resulted in increased business for food delivery platforms, although the evidence is sometimes anecdotal (Sarmiento, 2020). A poll conducted in April suggests that four percent of Canadians have been ordering from food delivery applications more since the outbreak began (Brehaut, 2020). With MVRD inhabitants on lockdown and the hospitality sector facing a crisis, restaurants have increased their dependence on companies like SkipTheDishes, UberEats, and Foodora in order to stay open, but they have also pushed back more vigorously against the platforms for the high commissions (Owen, 2020).
As the pandemic only began to unfold in British Columbia as we were conducting this research and is still ongoing at the time of publication, we observed not only how COVID-19 exacerbated many of the problems food delivery workers were already facing, but also how public perception of delivery workers shifted. COVID-19 changed societal views of frontline workers, bringing a new appreciation not only of health care workers, but of those working in service industries like food delivery. A small example of this growing goodwill was a cutout page in The New York Times from April 12, 2020, featuring a colourable cartoon which, above a very large “Thank You,” depicts an ambulance heading in one direction and a masked food delivery worker cycling in the other (Figure 1).

CHANGED MEDIA NARRATIVES AROUND FOOD DELIVERY PLATFORM WORK

Media coverage offered a useful window into public perceptions of food delivery workers during this time. As suggested above, before the COVID-19 pandemic, media coverage of the food delivery industry tended to focus on its impact on the restaurant sector and customer experience, with the (relatively limited) coverage of actual food delivery work mostly coming in the wake of unionizing efforts in Toronto. With the arrival of the pandemic in Canada, media coverage began to focus more attention on those working for food delivery companies. A piece in Slate made the case that food delivery app workers should be considered alongside Instacart shoppers, grocery Whole Foods clerks, Amazon delivery drivers, and dangerous jobs, with which “Those with means are now potentially outsourcing their health risk-taking—and, at its most extreme, their mortality” (Quart, 2020, para. 7). Vice Media reported on the “indescribable fear” experienced by Ali, a Chinese-American food delivery worker in New York City, the early epicentre of the outbreak in the United States (Moody, 2020), and Canadian coverage encouraged customers to tip more to acknowledge the additional danger now faced by couriers (Carleton, 2020).

Also in the news has been discussion of how their employment status denies food delivery app workers access to labour protections amid the pandemic. Since delivery workers for companies like UberEats and Foodora classify their workers as independent contractors, a chorus of voices have argued that food delivery apps should reclassify workers as employees. The most high profile call came from Democratic US Presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren who accused DoorDash, Grubhub, UberEats, and Instacart of “failing to provide
appropriate and necessary protections” given the “serious health and economic vulnerabilities as a result of their jobs” (In Rodrigo, 2020, para. 2). At the insistence of Democrats in the United States, gig workers, including food delivery platform workers, were eligible for unemployment insurance in the $2 trillion USD relief package (Edmondson, 2020), and in Canada, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was expanded to include gig workers in April 2020 (RideYVR, 2020).

As these and many other stories suggested, food delivery work was an even more dangerous undertaking at this point. The New York Times reported on government data which suggested couriers risk on-the-job exposure to COVID-19 at almost the same rate as nurses, social workers, and paramedics (Gamio, 2020). A survey conducted in April 2020 suggested that one-in-four frontline workers in Canada did not feel safe at work, with the figure being slightly higher for women as well as younger workers. Partly as a result of this dangerous new reality, gig and platform workers engaged in a fresh wave of collective action across the United States, where walkouts and other forms of protest and strike action occurred at Amazon (Fujita, 2020), Instacart (Vakil, 2020), Target (Gurley, 2020), and Whole Foods (Evelyn, 2020).

FOOD DELIVERY PLATFORM WORKER RESPONSES TO COVID-19

Given these events, we decided to check back to see how the virus was impacting the wages, workload, and health and safety of those we had interviewed. We also spent time on the social media forums to get a sense of the impact of COVID-19 on food delivery workers in the MVRD. Many of those we interviewed and workers on the forums shared positive stories of higher wages, larger tips, more substantial order volumes, and less traffic on the roads to contend with. Not surprisingly, others told us that the virus had negatively affected them emotionally and had made work more challenging as a result. Food delivery workers were irritated that restaurants closed earlier than usual, and upset that they were often put in the position of having to pay for their own safety equipment.

The measures delivery platforms have taken to ensure the personal health and safety of their couriers and customers have ranged from modest to minimal. Participants reported that DoorDash was offering gloves and hand sanitizers, but that these came at the expense of worker-paid shipping fees since they were arriving from the United States. DoorDash and UberEats offered employees up to fourteen days paid leave if they are diagnosed with COVID-19 or are required to self-isolate (Peters, 2020). However, testing is difficult to access for many couriers, including one New York delivery worker who asked, “but what about those of us who are sick but have no access to a test, or feel healthy but are staying home out of caution for ourselves and the people we live with?” (Chan, 2020). SkipTheDishes drivers who inquired whether their company offered similar coverage received an email stating they would not receive sick pay in case of infection. On the social media forums, we observed many couriers who felt offended by this decision, suggesting the platform was putting them at risk. As an anonymous post on a public Reddit forum discussing this case suggested, “If Skip is not going to look after workers, expect workers to get sick and still do deliveries. It’s not like rent is going to take a vacation” (JCMoney1987, 2020).

However, food delivery platform companies were eventually forced to make further adjustments to ensure the safety and the labour of those who delivered food. In late May, companies implemented a ‘no-contact’ delivery method to encourage physical distancing (e.g. “No-Contact Delivery,” n.d.). Some platforms, like DoorDash and Uber Eats, started paying higher rates or giving bonuses for deliveries. On the social media
forums, couriers were aware of the overall trend of frontline workers expecting and receiving higher payment as they exposed themselves to the virus, especially in industries that benefited from the outbreak such as grocery stores and home delivery services. The incentives that DoorDash and Uber Eats offered were also widely seen by couriers on the social media forums as ‘bait’ for them to risk their health so the company could earn more profits. We observed numerous instances of delivery workers dissuading others from working on the platform due to the risk involved. It does seem as if the overall trend was that most couriers have continued to work during the crisis, and even that many more joined as workers on the forums complained of a “surge” of hiring by the platforms to respond to growing demand. Many delivery workers took safety into their own hands, such as one who told us: “I wear disposable gloves and carry around hand sanitizer as well as an alcohol spray bottle. If a restaurant looks too crowded, I cancel the order.”

A key finding of our research was that despite the dispersed, disconnected nature of the workforce and the seemingly low interest in unionization, we witnessed pervasive signs of what scholars have called “embryonic solidarity” (Cant, 2020; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020), or forms of support and mutual aid among workers which can and have become the basis for more overt forms of collective organization. The key place this happened was the social media forums. Even before the virus struck in BC, we observed couriers assisting each other online with everything from advice on how to get in touch with the support line at their platform, what the best companies were to work for, and how to properly document deliveries that went unpaid. Posting on the social media forums acted as a kind of emotional support as couriers commiserated about slow delivery days, platforms going down in the middle of a shift, restaurant inefficiency, silly algorithmic route recommendations, customer rudeness, and poor tipping.

Once the pandemic struck, this sense of embryonic solidarity only increased. Drivers gave each other tips on how to stay safe during deliveries, where to find washrooms and hand sanitizer in town, and how to qualify and apply for the CERB. Couriers shared their anxieties about touching door handles, elevator buttons, and buzzer screens in high-traffic areas as they delivered to apartment buildings. As COVID-19 advanced, Vancouver’s Mad Laboratory Distillery donated 4-ounce bottles of hand sanitizer for couriers, news of which was shared and celebrated on social media forums along with restaurants offering free snacks, sanitizer, and wipes for delivery workers. Couriers complained about customers not respecting physical distancing measures and mocked the delivery platforms for low-paying orders, joking that they were not going to risk their lives for $4. Many of them repeatedly advised colleagues that staying home was the best and safest form of action during a pandemic.
Conclusion and Summary of Main Findings

Food delivery platforms have rapidly become a routine part of life for those living in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia and in cities across the world. These apps have thrived at the intersection of the rising platform economy and the broader outsourcing of work. English-language media reporting on this expanding sector in Canada in the last couple of years has tended to focus on the disruption apps like Doordash, Foodora, and SkiptheDishes have caused to the restaurant industry and the customer experience these platforms can offer, providing less (and late) coverage of the labour conditions faced by food delivery platform workers.

Our conversations with food delivery platform workers in the MVRD suggest they perceive their work as a temporary form of employment rather than a long-term source of income, much less a career. For many couriers the feeling of flexibility, independence, and “working without a boss” are incentives to work on food delivery platforms. There is a markedly individualistic streak in the workforce and even a degree of competitiveness among some of the couriers. At the same time, their labour conditions are deeply precarious and relatively few workers rely solely on delivery work to make a living. The fact that couriers themselves do not see these apps as a feasible source of securing a living wage raises serious questions about the industry’s business model, which has relied on large injections of venture capital, a parasitic relationship with the food service industry, and a low-paid workforce.

Our research found that workers also have significant misgivings about food delivery platforms, including inflexible management by algorithms, opaque payment systems, inadequate company support in the face of problems with customers or deliveries, unforgiving customer review systems, and low pay. The companies classify couriers as independent contractors, but these workers are clearly managed by the platforms, which “nudge” the couriers to accept orders and deliver in particular areas or during certain times.

Despite some expressions of interest in interviews and on social media forums, workers in the MVRD seem to have little overt inclination toward collective action as a means to improve their conditions of work at this time. When asked about unionization, some expressed the feeling it might be beneficial in some respects
and it was raised as an option for discussion on social media forums, but most also felt it was unrealistic given their status as contractors or the dispersed, individualistic nature of the workforce. Many couriers also seemed to have only an approximate understanding of how unionization works.

At the same time, through observation of interactions among food delivery workers on online social media forums, we found a significant degree of mutual aid and support among couriers, whether it was providing advice on how to maximise income or commiserating about inadequate support on the platforms, unfair customer reviews, or bad tips. Forms of emotional support intensified during the spread of COVID-19, as the danger of exposure to the virus increased for couriers. These seemingly minor examples of solidarity suggest that collective organization may well be possible for food delivery platform workers in the MVRD so long as there is clear, compelling, and accessible communication regarding the benefits of collective action, once leadership from within this community emerges. Targeted use of social media in such a campaign would be well advised, as the highly successful example of the Rideshare Drivers Union in southern California demonstrates (Dolber & RDU, 2019).

This research project was conducted during a decisive time for the food delivery platform industry in Canada. Foodora’s announcement—as the pandemic ramped up and its sales jumped—that it was terminating its operations in Canada in the wake of a successful union drive with CUPW in Toronto highlighted the footloose nature of this industry and the company’s lack of commitment to its workers. The onset of COVID-19 has also put couriers in the spotlight as frontline workers, and may well have nudged food delivery platform workers in the MVRD a little closer to considering collective action.
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