

Pandemic Meets Precarity: The Case of Platform Delivery Work in Latin America

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A feminist analysis of the working conditions of platform delivery workers

The Covid-19 pandemic reaffirmed and deepened social, sexual, and racial division of work, putting some bodies on the frontlines. Without these ‘essential’ workers, life itself would not be possible, let alone during the quarantine.

Equally, the pandemic aggravated the exploitation workers already faced. With little recourse to labor rights, minimum wage or fair payment, delivery workers are not just invisibilized but are also forced to work during the quarantine, at great risk of contracting the virus.

The article undertakes a feminist analysis of the working conditions of platform workers in the Covid-19 moment. The authors suggest that as economies gradually reopen, we must question which bodies matter in the so-called “new normal”.

On the morning of April 22, the streets of Quito, Ecuador were not empty. It was the Day of the International Strike of Delivery Workers, and strikers—platform delivery workers across the city—had gathered at the Glovo store. Some placed goods and luggage on front doors of stores to stop deliveries, while others pressed upon colleagues the need for a strike. Some workers recognized that the strike was a means to claim

their rights but pointed out that they had to keep working because they live hand-to-mouth. Ultimately, solidarity and shared experience allowed workers to suspend deliveries while also supporting those who could not afford to stop working.

Platform Economy and Covid-19: Who Wins? Who Loses?

The Covid-19 pandemic has placed at the center issues that have long been discussed within the framework of feminist economics: systemic crisis; social reproduction of life; the key role of care work; hierarchization of certain bodies; and the conflict between capital and life. It has interwoven with preexisting issues, widening inequality gaps. Through the declaration of a state of “sanitary emergency” and the imposition of a so-called “preventive and mandatory social distancing” by many governments across the world, the burden of social reproduction work has doubled. In fact, the very boundaries between paid and unpaid care work have blurred.

Delivery workers, among others, have been at the frontline of the pandemic. Everywhere, including in Latin America, they have made mandatory social distancing and preventive lockdowns possible. But their salaries, working conditions, and the degree of social protection accorded to them are a poor reflection of how ‘essential’ they have been to this crisis. Those who benefited from this arrangement were those with relative privilege—who could stay home and order in meals and medicines through on-demand services.

During the pandemic, platform companies, whether in the global North or South, started promoting ‘delivery without contact’ and ‘without cost’. Delivery startup Colombia Rappi, for instance, introduced a fleet of robots. In countries like Ecuador, the government promoted the use of applications to attract new customers and workers. It is worth mentioning here that delivery workers are not recognized as workers and are not protected by labor laws. Besides, even before the Covid-19 crisis hit, the delivery space had already been reduced to a bunch of transnational food companies that offer takeout services, propping up the multi-million earnings of corporations like UberEats, Glovo, Rappi, PedidosYa, and Deliveroo, while leaving workers to contend with increasing precarity.

World over, the pandemic aggravated the exploitation workers already faced. With little recourse to labor rights, minimum wage or fair payment, delivery workers are not just invisibilized but are also forced to work during the quarantine while facing a high risk of contracting the virus. While Amazon’s advertising campaigns assured us that employees’ “safety and care” was top priority, union struggles in French warehouses show little evidence of such “care”. Some companies had to be legally forced to close their warehouses and pay full salaries to workers. In Ecuador, the livelihoods of most families, especially immigrant families, depend on delivery work, with family members often working for as many app-based delivery platforms as possible. In an interview with the national press, the general manager of Glovo in Ecuador stated that the glovers had received equipment for their safety and hygiene. This statement,

however, was refuted by delivery workers. These developments contradict any assertions that the virus has affected everyone equally, regardless of social class and ethnicity.

For women, the situation is even worse as they must combine their poorly-paid delivery work with unpaid care work which has increased during the quarantine. As schools and daycare centers closed during lockdowns, most women were forced to leave their work in the public sphere because the responsibility for children's education and care work primarily rests with them. In Argentina, the Association of Platform Workers told us that female workers who are "household breadwinners" end up working "fewer hours because they cannot leave their children alone because schools are closed". Besides, "algorithm condemns" those who cannot juggle "work and family" with an impact on delivery orders and time, and also the type of delivery. Female immigrant delivery workers in Argentina do not have access to emergency family income (IFE). Like male workers, they are not provided with safety equipment and healthcare, and are prohibited from accessing toilets.

In response to these appalling work conditions, delivery workers across Latin American countries called for a day of international strike. On April 17, some workers in Ecuador gathered to protest against meager pay. Since the beginning of the quarantine, delivery workers in the country were forced to make group deliveries. This meant that two or more orders are delivered, charged individually and regular-priced to users while delivery workers received payment for one order plus a so-called bonus of 0.30 cents:

"On November 25, 2019 Glovo lowered the mileage and base rate at the national level, introducing high bonuses for the first days, compensating the rate reduction. These high bonuses only lasted until the app became more efficient and effective, which made us do group deliveries that ensured more benefits for us because we would earn more. Before the pandemic, bonuses fell to 1.10 and 1.15; currently they are at 1.2 and 1.5, and we are paid 0.8 cents. Recently, Glovo informed that bonuses would be withdrawn."

—Delivery worker from Glovers in Ecuador

Ever since the quarantine, the government of Ecuador has, through endless decrees and agreements, legalized labor precariousness, exploitation and flexibilizations, culminating in the approval of the Humanitarian Support Act. The Act stipulates precarious employment contracts, working conditions, wage terms, and access to social security. In the face of this emergency situation, unions gathered data about wrongful terminations and formulated response strategies. But they faced a big roadblock in the absence of institutional structures for redressal. Where would workers present their demands if the Ministry of Labor is leading these anti-worker measures?

Organizing Against Extreme Precarity

Thereafter, on April 22, delivery workers or riders in Argentina, Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Peru and Spain collectively joined the call for the international strike. According to a release issued by the strikers, “Riders across Spain went on strike and mobilized against the 50 percent payment reduction imposed by Glovo. In Peru, delivery workers face the closing of on-demand service applications through an arbitrary decision made by the State, leaving thousands of workers with no livelihood amid a global economic lockdown. In Costa Rica, they removed multipliers, rain bonuses and applied double orders (companies charge consumers for two orders but pay workers only for one)”. Furthermore, our peers in Ecuador, who have already expressed their support and subscribed the release, went on strike recently, on April 17, denouncing salary reduction and lack of inputs”.

Workers protested against falling wages, lack of safety and hygiene equipment, precarious work conditions which left them exposed to crime on the streets as well as police abuse. Their demands draw attention to the fact that while app-based on-demand services have proliferated, labor reforms have failed abysmally to keep pace.

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Even though Brazil was one of the countries that did not join the strike, there too, workers are using other means to fight for their rights. A few weeks ago, a call for a *cacerolazo* (banging pots and pans as a form of protest) was made in Sao Paulo to raise awareness about the fact that most delivery workers are afro-descendants who have to work in extremely vulnerable conditions. In Chile, as part of the delivery workers’ movement, riders of PedidosYA denounced the appalling situation they face at work due to systematic and arbitrary policies of the company. On April 27, these workers called for suspension of work to collectively agitate against the arbitrariness of PedidosYA where they are not considered workers.

“Companies know that we do not have other employment alternatives. Instead of recognizing and rewarding the work we carry out as delivery workers, putting our lives and that of our families at risk, they take advantage of circumstances and personal needs. Payment rates are reduced harnessing the fact that they are the only companies allowed to work during these times. We observe deterioration across the world. All of them are swindlers and thieves. In Chile, we are holding a rally to show that many big things can be attained through collective actions.”

—Delivery worker of PedidosYA in Chile

In Argentina, the Association of Delivery Workers (ATR, by its Spanish acronym) and United Glovers Argentina called for a national strike on April 22, organizing virtual assemblies. On May 8, they mobilized in different cities across the country, demanding safety and protection equipment, a doubling of payment per order, the reinstatement of workers who had been laid off, and justice for two workers who were run over on the streets, with neither insurance nor coverage for risks and accidents. Their main

demands are as follows: to be recognized as workers instead of “self-employed”, a doubling of incomes for every order delivered, and the provision of safety and hygiene equipment by platform companies. In some cities in Argentina, mobilizations were repressed citing non-compliance with social distancing.

At the beginning of the quarantine, the ATR had issued a release with similar demands. A statement from this release said, “we don’t want to be heroes, we want safety equipment, time-off and quarantine compensation”, was displayed prominently in front of company signs showing delivery workers wearing masks. This was a pointed pushback by workers against companies that promoted “no contact delivery” as a marketing strategy, but failed to provide masks, hand sanitizers and gloves to those doing these deliveries.

“We are talking about extremely precarious workers (...) The municipality should have called on the entire trade and delivery industry to: adopt a common protocol for the delivery of essential articles; help platforms buy masks and alcohol at reasonable prices; distribute protection equipment at stores; allow workers’ access to restrooms for the hygiene of delivery workers.”

—ATR statement

Given that platform delivery workers are not covered by “any risk system” if they get sick, “more than heroes, they have become a risk factor”, the association pointed out. Women workers, in particular, have no protection at all. Calling attention to the “emergency” measures that apply to other workers, the ATR insisted on “having the same system of extraordinary paid time off that workers in general enjoy”.

In Spain, the General Workers’ Union (UGT, by its Spanish acronym) has denounced the changes made by Glovo, Deliveroo and UberEats aimed at reducing the value of orders, and thus payments to workers, as consumer demand adjusted to the crisis. As the UGT put it, “if they [workers] are considered to be essential, it is essential to grant them rights and recognize them as workers”. Local riders’ organizations such as those in Valencia, Madrid and Barcelona have organized protective equipment and “resistance funds” to cover legal proceedings and health expenses.

Towards a New Normal?

In the face of the imminent ‘economic harm’, many countries adopted the war logic. It was said that the economy could not be allowed to remain stagnant for long and the focus once again, would shift to the market, no matter the risk the resumption of economic activity posed to human lives. Prior to the pandemic, many countries were already imposing brutal economic decisions through labor and pension reforms. These processes sped up during the pandemic. The situation in countries like Ecuador, Chile and Brazil (with high infection rates and death tolls) was the result of the absence of a rights-based framework and labor protections for workers in general, and, platform workers in particular. Many questions remain unanswered. In Argentina, where

delivery workers belong to contractual or self-employed categories, how will risk evaluations be made to those who are exposed to the virus? How can they be protected by Decree 367/2020 that recognizes Covid-19 as an occupational disease? How can they request sick leave in case of infection, or to take care of a family member, if the option of paid leave does not exist.

In these ways, the Covid-19 pandemic reaffirmed and deepened social, sexual, and racial division of work, putting some bodies on the frontlines. Without these ‘essential’ workers, life itself would not be possible, let alone during the quarantine. These ‘essential’ workers make it possible to sustain life in this new regime of social distancing and quarantine. Among them are peasants, informal market workers, public transportation workers, delivery workers, healthcare and education workers. Many of them are women workers, who also carry the burden of emotional and unpaid care work that is invisibilized and devalued. These workers have no recourse to social security benefits. For them, staying at home is not an option if they are to provide for their families on a daily basis.

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The International Strike of Delivery Workers and the mobilizations across the cities have visibilized these workers. This is an important political gain. But there are also setbacks as companies skillfully avoid their obligations, shutting down operations by declaring “financial difficulties” precisely when their employees are recognized as unionized workers (as was the case with Fodora Delivery Hero in Canada). In the face of workers’ demands, companies have also blocked protesting workers from apps, hired new ones to replace them, and reinforced gender biases in the algorithmic assignment of work.

Given this backdrop, what strategies for resistance do we look towards? Is it enough to talk about a boycott of the (platform) system? As researchers and feminist activists, we have decided to ride along with workers in this struggle and help bolster the solidarity networks. We are lending our support through sensitive and sustained dialogue. In the face of an upsurge of necropolitics, we have no other choice but to challenge how the State and transnational platform companies have responded to this pandemic by stripping away workers’ rights. We must urgently assess the terms under which life is being sustained in the Covid-19 context. As economies gradually reopen and are reactivated, we must question which bodies matter in the so-called “new normal”.

A Spanish version of this article was first published in LATFEM, a feminist website in Argentina, and the English version in Bot Populi.

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