

Mobilising *operaismo* in the digital age: Continuities and ruptures with the 1960s 'mass worker' struggles

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cnc**Lorenzo Cini** 

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Abstract

This article examines whether the recent surge in labour mobilisations within the gig economy represents genuinely novel forms of worker resistance, or whether it is a reconfiguration of established patterns of collective action. To achieve this, the article analyses the relationship between workers' struggles and changes to the labour process, comparing contemporary gig workers' mobilisations with those of the 'mass worker' in Western Europe in the 1960s. To explore these dynamics, we employ the notion of class composition, a political and analytical tool developed within the Italian workerist tradition (*operaismo*) to capture the interplay between technological change, labour processes, and collective resistance. Through this lens, the analysis identifies continuities and ruptures between the mobilisations of mass and gig workers in three key areas: the actors involved; the action repertoires deployed; and the demands articulated. Crucially, we develop a taxonomy of the two waves of mobilisation, emphasising their similarities and differences. This taxonomy provides a framework for understanding how transformations in the labour process in the digital age are shaping new forms of collective action and protest.

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Introduction

The resurgence of labour conflicts in today's precarious and gig world of work prompts a reassessment of classical waves of worker struggles (Crouch & Pizzorno 1978a). This resurgence raises questions about whether we are witnessing the emergence of new dynamics of mobilisation in response to the rise of platform-based production (Alberti & Joyce 2023; Gall 2020). This article aims to critically reflect upon whether the return of labour mobilisations in a specific sector of such production, namely, the gig economy, represents merely a case of 'old wine in a new bottle' or expresses, instead, truly innovative features. To address this issue, we find it particularly appropriate to focus on the nexus between worker struggles and changes in the labour process. In this article, we do so by comparing the actors, the action forms and demands of gig workers' mobilisations and those of the 1960s 'mass worker' in Western Europe, which have been considered crucial for the crisis (and transformation) of the Fordist mode of production (Alquati 1975).

To explore the specificities of the two struggle cycles, we employ the concept of 'class composition' (Alquati 1962), which is a political and analytical tool developed in the Marxist tradition of Italian workerism (from now onwards *operaismo*) to grasp the political character of technological change in the labour process (Panzieri 1961). Studies in this tradition interpret capital-labour conflict as a continuous dialectical movement between the technical decomposition and political re-composition of the working class (Tronti 2019 [1966]). While capital attempts to weaken worker power by relentlessly restructuring and reorganising the labour process and the broader division of labour, this process of 'technical decomposition' inevitably creates conditions for new groups of workers to emerge and pursue political (re)composition.

Unlike other approaches that consider the dynamics of capital-labour conflict from a macro-structural perspective (Silver, 2003), or that interpret the increase in labour mobilisations as a consequence of established trade unions' inability to incorporate new actors into the representation system (Pizzorno, 1978), *operaismo* is particularly well-suited to achieving our research objective, as it links worker struggles to capitalist development. Notably – for these authors – the capitalist reorganisation of the production process is a main outcome of the capital-labour conflict. Or, put otherwise, capital is endlessly forced to transform the labour organisation under the permanent pressure of worker struggles.

In this article, we use the concept of class composition to examine the continuities and discontinuities between mass and gig worker mobilisations in response to changes in the labour process. Specifically, we argue that while the assembly line and the physically bounded space of the Fordist factory served as both the main site and catalyst for worker struggles in the 1960s, shaping how conflicts were expressed, today's

digital platform-based labour process plays a similar role in gig worker mobilisations. Although the rise of platforms has decentralised work locations and individualised work activities – seemingly to capital’s advantage – these very features have also influenced gig workers’ mobilisations, shaping their forms of collective action and organisation (Alberti & Joyce 2023).

We review classical studies of mass worker mobilisations alongside scholarly literature on gig workers’ protests, focusing on three key mobilisation features: the actors involved, the forms of collective action employed, and the demands articulated. Two studies, in particular, lay a valuable foundation for our research objective: Crouch and Pizzorno’s (1978a) analysis of mass worker struggles across five European countries during the disruptive protest wave of 1968–74, and Umney et al.’s (2024) study drawing on the Leeds Index of Platform Labour Protest dataset, which documents 1,271 instances of platform labour unrest globally. Together, these studies offer complementary historical and contemporary perspectives that enable a comparative analysis of two waves of labour protests. We focus our comparison on gig workers’ mobilisations in Italy and the United Kingdom, initial epicentres of such protests (Tassinari & Maccarrone 2020), recognising that this geographic focus limits the broader generalisability of our findings. Nonetheless, it allows for an in-depth examination of how actors, action forms and demands have evolved. From this analysis, we develop a taxonomy capturing the key continuities and changes across these mobilisation features. This taxonomy forms the basis of our argument regarding whether and how current gig worker protests constitute a genuinely new form of labour conflict, providing a nuanced framework for understanding the causal dynamics shaping labour mobilisation across historical periods. This taxonomy thus represents the principal analytical contribution of the article.

Remobilising *operaismo* today

In the first decade after the Second World War, Western Europe was facing the difficult years of economic and industrial reconstruction. In relative cooperation with employers’ associations and governments, trade unions and working-class parties were all devoted to accomplishing such a goal. On their part, this implied the search for a broad pacification of social and labour conflicts. In doing so, the labour movement organisations intended to contribute to fostering a generalised economic recovery and boosting industrial growth (Pulignano 2019).

A related factor contributing to explaining such orientation was the overall positive conception that these organisations had of capitalist development. Indeed, most of them viewed the development of the productive forces as part and parcel of a neutral process of social progress, as they ‘remained loyal to the orthodox idea of the progressive development of the productive forces, motor of humanity’s march towards communism’ (Turchetto 2008: 286). Thereby, the organisational transformations that were occurring to the labour process – epitomised by the introduction of the assembly line – were seen as a positive outcome of such progress. In brief, the capitalist organisation of production was accepted in the main.

Against this backdrop, radical Marxist militant groups and politically committed workers began to proliferate across Western Europe between the late 1950s and the

early 1960s, opposing what they considered to be a betrayal of the interests of the working class. Among them, the French group of radical intellectuals coalesced around the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and the Italian collective of Marxist militants formed around the journal *Quaderni Rossi* (Wright 2002). Especially the latter, founded by the socialist militant and Marxist intellectual Raniero Panzieri, became the hotbed of a set of innovative and radical analyses of the capitalist development and of various episodes of labour unrest that were beginning to spread across several factory plants in Northern Italy. These analyses formed the tenet of what has been afterwards known as the thought and practice of the Italian *operaismo*, a Marxist tradition of radical intellectuals and militants who were highly critical of the official organisations of the Italian labour movement (Panzieri 1980).

‘. . . and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class’

While a full account of the *operaista* tradition’s sophisticated interpretations of capitalism would be valuable, only two insights are especially relevant to our analysis: (1) their critique of technological determinism; and (2) their view of class struggle as the driving force of capitalism (Wright 2002). The first insight challenges the view that technological progress in capitalist production stands apart from class relations. For these authors – especially for Panzieri (1961) – science, technology and the organisation of labour are not neutral development of the productive forces. They emerge, instead, as the fundamental site of the despotic domination of capital (Turchetto 2008). From this angle, ‘the relations of production are internal to the forces of production and the latter are fashioned by capital’ (Panzieri 1961: 55). In brief – for these Marxists – the capitalist development of technology in the workplace is not neutral. The ‘technical’ organisation of the work process constitutes the real heart of the (capital–labour) problem. From this follows that the labour process and the role of technology in it are a central arena of class struggle.

The second, and related, reflection elaborated by these theorists has to do with the specific view of class struggle and of its ‘causal’ nexus with capitalist change more in general. Challenging the Marxist orthodox view that, to understand capitalist modernisation, one needs to know first the laws of development of capital and then workers’ needs and activities, for these intellectuals, it is instead necessary to reverse such causality relation. As Mario Tronti (2019 [1966]) claimed, labour and not capital has a ‘logical’ and ‘historical’ priority in the transformation of capitalism: class struggle comes first, capitalist development follows. In the militant journal, *Classe Operaia*, Tronti (1964) wrote on the primacy of labour over capital by stating:

we too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head . . . and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class (p. 1).

Thus, worker struggles, and not business competition, are the motor of capitalism (Tronti 2019 [1966]). The main political implication is that workers’ self-activity and

their antagonistic attitude in the workplace must be considered as the focus of working-class organisations' political strategy (Wright 2002).

On the theory of class composition

Although *operaismo* has never produced a unified theory, given the various strands that have developed over time, offering alternative interpretations of capitalism's evolutionary stages (Pitts 2024), a certain theoretical consensus appears to have emerged regarding the nature of capital–labour antagonism (Wright 2002). This can be referred to as the *operaista* formula of class conflict. The formula entails that the way in which workers are organised and exploited in the labour process shapes their forms of conflict expression (Thompson et al. 2022). The first term of the formula is called *technical composition*, and the second is *political composition*. The former includes the division of labour, management practices, the use of machinery and the overall design of the labour process; the latter points to the way workers are both shaped and able to react to such technical composition, and includes tactics of resistance, forms of collective organisation and the workers' political expression of the class struggle more in general (Wright 2002). For these authors, the dialectical movement between the workers' technical and political compositions determines the general movement of (working) class composition (Alquati 1962). The dialectic of class composition entails a permanent interplay between the movement of technical decomposition of the working class enacted by capital to weaken workers' power and the working class's movement for its political re-composition (Thompson et al. 2022). For *operaismo*, it was such a dialectic that determined the antagonistic potential for struggles of the working class (Pitts 2024).

Militants of *operaismo* used the lens of class composition to interpret the struggles of the 'mass worker' within the 1960s Fordist factory (Panzieri 1980). At a time when even professional and white-collar employees were subject to deskilling dynamics, the analysis of workers' technical (de)composition was designed not only to understand the mutations of the labour process, but also to identify the most radical sections of the working class capable of acting as a privileged agent of political re-composition (i.e. the militant 'method'). For the *operaisti*, the mass worker – epitomised by the unskilled worker on the Taylorist assembly line (Alquati 1962) – embodied a new revolutionary subject capable of overthrowing Fordist capitalism (Tronti 2019 [1966]). Through their capacity and disposition to block the production flow, mass workers' acts of work refusal marked a qualitative rupture with the previously dominant figure of the professional worker, whose struggles centred on defending the dignity and value of labour and achieving control over production (Tronti 1964). By carrying out various acts of sabotage against the assembly line, the workers were signalling their total rejection of wage labour and, consequently, of the capitalist mode of production itself. Ultimately, for these militants, the political re-composition of the mass worker, expressed through antagonism within the factory, was intended to accelerate the crisis of Fordism.

Operaismo at work in the gig economy

If we adopt the *operaista* reading of labour conflicts, how can we account for the struggles emerging in the gig economy? More specifically, is it possible to conceptualise a new 'technical' and 'political' composition of this workforce? Following this analytical perspective, recent studies have begun to explore the nexus between the precarious working classes of the urban gig and service sectors and their forms of conflict expression (Alberti & Joyce 2023; Englert et al. 2020). Among these, the theoretical insights developed by the 'neo-operaista' collective *Notes from Below* in the United Kingdom are particularly relevant. This political group of Marxist militants seeks to promote the self-emancipation of the working class from contemporary capitalist exploitation by reviving the classical *operaista* method of workers' inquiry.¹ For *Notes from Below*, the traditional *operaista* view that class formation begins in the technical division of labour and then moves through struggles to a political composition is reductive, as it underestimates the social and cultural factors that mediate and shape how class and political dynamics intersect (Notes from Below 2018). Consequently, these authors have proposed amending the theory of class composition by adding the concept of social composition. This concept provides a way of understanding how consumption and reproduction form part of the material basis of political class composition. It involves factors such as 'where workers live and in what kind of housing, the gendered division of labour, patterns of migration, racism, community infrastructure, and so on' (Notes from Below 2018: 4). Unlike the classical *operaismo* approach delimiting its focus to the 'politics of production' (Thompson et al. 2022), the adoption of the social composition lens 'enables the analysis of the whole . . . working class, including the unemployed and unwaged work' (Pitts 2024: 31). This represents an innovation that seems, for instance, particularly useful to understand the contemporary politics of precarious work(ers) (Pulignano & Domecka 2025).

Unsurprisingly, *Notes from Below* militants have paid special attention to a specific segment of the new workforce, gig economy workers (Woodcock 2021a), who have been able to mobilise in a workplace apparently hostile to the emergence of collective action, as characterised by spatial decentralisation and work individualisation (Gall 2020; Marà et al. 2023; Stewart et al. 2020). Whereas the term 'gig economy' covers a wide range of activities, from onsite to online, from high-end to lower-end services, they are all digitally intermediated by platforms, a virtual market operating *de facto* 'as the milieu within which the capital–labour relation is enacted upon workers' (Gandini 2019: 1045).

Digital platforms are particularly effective at maintaining a high degree of worker control because they use algorithmic software systems to manage their workforce. Notably, such systems provide platforms with two advantages that were not available to traditional firms in the past: (1) vertical control of the workforce and (2) an absence of social obligations as stipulated by employment law towards it (Wood et al. 2019). In other words, algorithms allow control from a distance and, simultaneously, mask the existence of an employment relationship, which often exists in practice, presenting it instead as a relationship of 'collaboration' or self-employment (Joyce 2020).

By examining the technical composition of gig working, one can draw attention to the key dynamics inherent in platform-based production. Platforms have, indeed, introduced a series of changes to the technical composition of different activities to both

intensify work and immiserate workers. Drawing on the economic imperatives of outsourcing and the reduction of labour costs, these companies provide a way to circumvent existing labour regulations and strip away payment for any unproductive moments (Cini 2023a; Pulignano & Morgan 2023). A significant part of this gambit is the attempt to shift both costs and responsibilities from capital onto labour by creating poor and/or under-un-paid labour (Cini 2023a; Pulignano & Domecka 2025; Pulignano et al. 2023a). One success of this model is the posing of these changes as offering 'freedom' to workers about when and where to work (Pulignano et al. 2023b) – something sought by labour flexibility through increasing numbers of workers (Woodcock 2023) and/or intensifying work (Pulignano & Domecka 2025). Furthermore, the decentralisation of the labour process and the individualisation of work activity represent two features of this technical composition that appear especially critical in hampering gig workers' forms of collective action. This seems even more so for remote workers, experiencing higher atomisation and geographical dispersion (Anwar & Graham 2020; Wood et al. 2019).

However, while these features can point to a process of 'technical decomposition' weakening worker power, they also provide the baseline for some kind of political re-composition to arise (Alberti & Joyce 2023). This appears particularly the case of on-site-based workers, such as those working in food delivery or on-demand taxi services, who have been able to act collectively by leveraging some specificities of their workplace, such as peculiar political and social characteristics of the context of their decentralised work activity and some tools of their digital equipment (Tassinari & Maccarrone 2020). Especially the (counter)use of digital communication technologies has played an important role in their mobilisation dynamics (Bonini & Treré 2024; Cant 2020; Cini & Goldmann 2021; Woodcock 2021a, 2021b). For instance, the widespread use of smartphones – given the requirement of having one to work on many platforms – has put these workers into forms of instantaneous communication with each other, whose unintended outcome has been to favour their process of collective organisation (Woodcock 2023).

We employ the concept of class composition as an analytical tool to assess how specific features of the technical and social composition of these workers have been (counter)used to spur processes of collective organisation. In doing so, we compare the gig workers' mobilisations and those of the Fordist mass worker and analytically highlight their differences and similarities.

The 'mass worker' struggles in the 1960s in Western Europe

The 1960s had been years of economic boom in Western Europe, witnessed by the relentless development of the industrial sector, a generalised growth of wage levels and low rates of unemployment (Pulignano 2019). This favourable conjuncture of socio-economic factors positively impacted the lives of many (Western) Europeans, and especially of those people employed in the industry sector as factory workers, who were perceived to have an increasing negotiation power vis-a-vis their employers to demand better working (and social) conditions (Hyman 1975). Not surprisingly, one of the main

effects of such conjuncture was the massive resurgence of labour conflicts across Europe, and specifically among the new low-skilled segments of the industrial working class employed in the factory assembly line, whose mobilisations have come to the fore as those of the 'mass worker' (Alquati 1975).

Our review of the classical studies on the 1960s mobilisations in Western Europe (i.e. Crouch and Pizzorno 1978a, 1978b) shows how specific features of these workers' technical composition have been central to their political re-composition dynamics. Despite some national particularities, these mobilisations featured a similar series of interdependent phenomena: massive waves of strikes at all levels, a relative increase in the length of conflicts, increasing control exercised by the mass of workers, proliferation of innovative forms of action and increasing recourse to direct action. Most of these episodes involved factory-level strikes in which large numbers of non-unionised workers played a significant role (Pizzorno 1978). In line with the study's objectives, our analysis focuses on the actors, forms of action and demands of these mobilisations.

Actors

The strikes of 1968–1970 appeared as a wave of plant-level disputes, over which trade unions had little or no control, given no formal authority inside the plant. In the United Kingdom, the role of the worker base was key. Unofficial strikes were no new phenomenon, but, in that period, they constituted most of the strikes. Sometimes these strikes were controlled by shop stewards, but frequently they were initiated and conducted by the workers themselves (Crouch 1978). After 1969, conflictual action spread to sectors of the workforce that were not particularly strike prone. New protagonists emerged: white-collar workers, public service employees and civil servants. At least in the first years (1969–1971), established unions were seen as 'external' organisations, as they were judged to be either bureaucratic or too political. Hence, the intensity and the harshness of the conflict appeared in an inverse relationship to the existence of a union organisation able both to satisfy the workers' demands and control their behaviour (Regalia et al. 1978). Unsurprisingly, the main group involved was that of semi-skilled workers, especially those working on assembly lines, where there was little union organisation. In Italy, unions showed a serious inability either to understand the needs of these workers, or to integrate them into trade-union activity, at least in the first years (Alquati 1975).

Overall, a range of analyses converged on the view that semi-skilled, and mostly non-unionised, workers were central to the 1960s protests (Alquati 1975; Baudouin et al. 1978; Crouch 1978; Dubois 1978). This renewed militancy, often backed by the radicalism of groups of workers placed outside the established processes of collective bargaining, was the bearer of demands that were not easily negotiable, such as those associated with hierarchy, authority and the work organisation (Regalia et al. 1978). As recounted by Alquati (2013) in his description of the struggles at Fiat, their political breadth encompassed three aspects: (1) the existence of an 'invisible organisation' (of workers) that did not aim to institutionalise itself within the capitalist production process; (2) the capacity of this 'organisation' to stage a continuous and unpredictable rotation of tactics, methods, times and places of the strike; (3) the expression of no specific or concrete

demands. Hence, at least initially, it was not the use of preexisting institutional resources channelling the conflict, but rather the creation in action of new organisational resources by the new groups of workers (*the mass worker*), giving impulse to the struggle (della Porta 2023). This antagonistic attitude provoked a certain tension with the union confederations.

Forms of action

The most innovative feature of the 1960s strike wave was the invention of new forms of action as well as the creative reutilisation of the old ones. Inside the factories, specific tactics were invented to upset the balance between the cost of the strike to the firm and to the workers through the articulation of wildcat strikes over time and across space. Regalia et al. (1978) emphasised the presence of two concomitant conditions as relevant to the new repertoire of action: (1) the mobilisation of the young, semi-skilled, mostly migrant southern workers and (2) the presence of dissident union leaders.

The plant level assumed a highly important role in the 1960s mobilisations: the factory, the shop, even the individual workplace, became the physical location in which workers staged their struggle, using very radical tactics. In this sense, the rationalisation of production prompted by the introduction of the assembly line not only triggered more grievances but also made the factory plant more vulnerable to some forms of articulated strikes: as production became more complex and the job tasks increasingly fragmented, new forms of action developed with the aim of a concerted disorganisation of production activity (Dubois 1978).

In Italy, for instance, novel forms of (organised) sabotage, such as the *'salto della scocca'* (the omission of certain tasks during work on the assembly line) or *'scioperi a scacchiera'* (chessboard strikes, called upon in different territories on different days) brought about a decentralisation of conflict, eroding the managerial control and simultaneously increasing the responsibility of the shop stewards. Some actions aimed to 'put the aims into practice' or 'forestall the goal' – a kind of go-slow action allowing workers to reduce the work rhythms up to the level they want to have recognised as normal (Regalia et al. 1978). Other forms of radical action were blocking the factory gates to prevent commodities from entering and leaving the plant; marching through the production shops and carrying along any undecided workers; absenteeism; industrial sabotage; taking a hard line against non-strikers and the physical intimidation of work supervisors (Wright 2002).

In France, like Italy and the United Kingdom, the vast and radical repertoire of actions ranged from sit-ins, evicting top management from the plant, strikers taking over plant security duties, industrial sabotage and sequestration of management. Rather than being the result of individual workers' episodic spontaneity, these actions were closely related to rank-and-file groups (with plant-level trade union militants also being considered part of the rank-and-file) as well as informal groups of militant workers. Thereby, they were anything but the outcome of disorganisation, rather the expression of what Dubois (1978) called 'planned radicalism' (p. 11). This radicalism required a certain amount of preparation, aimed at bringing together a whole series of direct actions to put permanent pressure on every dispute at the firm level. Moreover, its political goal was not

only to convey a specific grievance but to attain a more lasting change in employer/employee relations within the factory system. Put otherwise, the expression of planned radicalism was about changing the power relations in the Fordist factory. From this angle, it also had a symbolic connotation, as by rejecting the accepted rules, this radicalism aimed to symbolise a different set of social relationships and another model of society. Hence, the enactment of planned radicalism was above all else an offensive strategy.

To sum up, the resurgence of labour mobilisations in the 1960s brought about the proliferation of innovative forms of action and the creative reappropriation of the old ones. As seen, militancy was particularly high among the groups not represented in the collective bargaining processes (Crouch 1978). New and radical actions were adopted by workers with recent socialisation to the factory system, such as unskilled workers, young workers and immigrants, all mostly without a tradition of unionisation (Dubois 1978). Therefore, the analysis of the 1960s workers' action repertoire tells us that novel forms of action and tactics are created and adopted in the making by rank-and-file workers, often drawing on their own cultural and social experiences prior to their work socialisation.

Demands

The action radicalisation process also had a significant impact on the formation of new and antagonistic demands that workers put forward in their mobilisations across Western Europe. Two main demands emerged clearly through the strike wave across the factories: the demands for greater equality and for greater control of work organisation (Regalia et al. 1978). These types of demands were particularly widespread among unskilled mass workers, especially women and migrants (Kirchlechner 1978). In addition, there was also a contestation of job hierarchy, calls for the end of wage discrimination between male and female workers, for more paid leave, and for better living and lodging conditions (Baudouin et al. 1978).

Egalitarian demands were a sign of workers' rejection of a hierarchical system of qualifications based on criteria of skills that modern forms of productive organisation never permitted them to attain. In the demands for greater control of work organisation, the distinction between conflict and demand tended to disappear. Indeed, from the autumn of 1968, direct actions were carried out in many plant and shop disputes, which anticipated the satisfaction of the demands without waiting for the agreement, what labour activists and rank-and-file workers used to call 'put the aims into practice'. The go-slow was one of these actions/demands: workers reduced the rhythms of work to the level they would like the management to recognise as normal. In staging these actions, the main demand was 'the refusal to direct positive demands to the boss' (Alquati 2013: 8). In brief, workers demanded 'nothing' (Alquati 1975). The demand became, in fact, identified with the way in which the conflict was conducted. In refusing to express particular and tangible demands, workers aimed to contest the factory power system itself. In many factories, workers, for instance, succeeded in reducing their own number of working hours. In doing so, they aimed to control their own wage and working conditions through conflict (Hyman 1975).

Furthermore, with the spreading of conflicts to various social areas, a connection was made between experience at work and experience elsewhere in several conflict situations,

among which were the feminist struggles that often developed within the workplaces, including factories, targeting the double exploitation of women at work and in the family (della Porta 2023). Overall, although arising from various and disparate sectors and spheres, the key message of the 1960s workers' demands appeared to be its politically 'generic' character ('no demands'), aiming to challenge the Fordist relations of production and their underlying power dynamics to foster a libertarian communist society (Wright 2002).

Worker resistance in the gig economy

After the restructuring of the global economy following the 2008 Great Recession, leading to the rise of platform-based production (Srnicsek 2017), new labour conflicts have emerged and spread all over the world (Alberti & Joyce 2023; Atzeni & Cini 2024; Gall 2020). These conflicts, which occurred in various sectors of the gig economy, have exhibited a great deal of heterogeneity in terms of organisational forms (Vandaele 2021). Gig workers have not only mobilised through established trade unions (Marà et al. 2023), but also through grassroots and community unions, as well as through self-organised collectives (Umney et al. 2024).

Our analysis highlights the importance of certain features of these workers' technical and social compositions in shaping their resistance. Notably, gig workers striking against various platforms have mobilised by drawing on 'supportive communities' both within and beyond their workplaces (Alberti & Joyce 2023; Atzeni & Cini 2024), and by (re) appropriating elements of their digital work equipment (Bonini & Treré 2024; Cini & Goldmann 2021). Consistent with the study's goals, our analysis examines the key actors, modes of action and core demands shaping these mobilisations.

Actors

As the Leeds Index of Platform Labour Protest's dataset highlights, food delivery couriers have been at the forefront of gig economy protests worldwide (Umney et al. 2024). The data indicate that social movements and community organisations have played a particularly important role in their collective organisation. Specifically, couriers' social webs embedded locally have become the principal source for their mobilisation. For instance, in several South American countries, such as Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Chile, combative segments of the workforce have been able to carry out disruptive actions and resist platforms, especially Glovo and Deliveroo, with the help of their local communities, including friends and families (Bessa et al. 2022). These communities have operated as a key organisational infrastructure for couriers in terms of both material supplies (food, legal assistance) and political support (strategies, tactics for action). Similar mobilisation dynamics have occurred in various Asian countries. In Indonesia, for instance, the existence of grassroots community organisations of app-based transport drivers and neighbourhood members provided these workers with political support for both work-related problems and broader social issues (Ford & Honan 2019). Combining online tactics, such as brand-shaming, with onsite tactics, such as street demonstrations, in a kind of

proto-strike, these organisations have been prominent in these mobilisations against transport platforms, at the expense of traditional union organising (Atzeni & Cini 2024).

These mobilisation dynamics within these contexts point to the relevance of specific non-institutional socio-political features as a trigger. A tentative list of these features may include ethnic and communal bonds, cooperative neighbourhood contacts, a supportive web of civil society organisations, the presence of a militant political tradition and so on (Alberti & Joyce 2023). As contemporary *operaista* analyses theorise (Notes from Below 2018), such features highlight the importance of gig workers' social composition for their practices of political re-composition.

Even in Western Europe, where labour relations are more institutionalised, we observe that non-traditional labour actors, especially grassroots organisations, have often initially taken the lead of these mobilisations. The case of food delivery couriers is again emblematic. For example, in the United Kingdom, rank-and-file unions, such as the Industrial Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) and the International Workers of the World (IWW), have been at the forefront of couriers' struggles (Cini et al. 2022). In Germany, couriers in Berlin have been organised by the grassroots union, Freie Arbeiterinnen und Arbeiter Union (FAU) (Vandaele 2021). In Sweden, the anarcho-syndicalist Örestad LS-IWA has been active in organising gig workers. Likewise, in Italy, worker self-organisation has characterised the first instances of courier mobilisations in Turin, Bologna and Milan (Cini et al. 2022). Similarly, in Paris (France), couriers have organised under the banner of Collectif Livreurs Autonomes de Paris (CLAP) (Borghi et al. 2021), while in Spain, with the network Riders X Derechos (Atzeni & Cini 2024). Yet, trade unions have also begun to 'catch-up'. In Italy, for example, established unions have managed to both recruit and organise couriers in some cities and to forge alliances with workers' collectives (Marà et al. 2023).

These examples show how, aside from institutional factors, workers' social composition plays an equally important role in shaping collective resistance. Therefore, our analysis features a similarity between the mass worker and the gig worker struggles. In essence, we emphasise that gig workers, particularly those in the food delivery and ride-hailing sectors, engage with various socio-political sources and actors in their efforts to engage in political re-composition. Likewise, and different from the mass worker, we point to the different structural conditions underpinning the distinctive forms of gig workers' mobilisation. This is where we turn now.

Forms of action

Several studies have stressed the importance of digital technologies in facilitating collective action among gig workers (Bonini & Treré 2024; Cant 2020; Cini & Goldmann 2021; Woodcock 2021a, 2021b). The technological device is central to how work is organised in digital workplaces. Gig workers use their smartphones and various applications (apps) during and in between work to engage with delivery, transport, or other on-demand work like cleaning or care (Woodcock 2021b). For instance, the app WhatsApp, a proprietary instant messaging system owned by Facebook, is utilised as a tool by some of these platforms, aside from their official apps, to coordinate shifts and ensure the service delivery (Cant 2020).

However, WhatsApp group chats have also been (re)appropriated by workers as a tool for collective organisation and mobilisation (Bonini & Treré 2024; Cini & Goldmann 2021). The affordances of the app, namely the availability of the contact information of all employees present in the group, allow workers to create alternative chat groups, which are used to coordinate political activities, such as organising assemblies, protest events and digital strikes. Notably, large WhatsApp groups contain two important functions: first, they provide an audience to which messages can be directed, including information or calls to action. Second, the list of members is accessible to all, meaning that it is possible for smaller groups to be started, whether around a particular issue or for parallel discussions (Englert et al. 2020).

When workers meet at algorithmically determined meeting points, they share numbers and start groups, with these organically spreading throughout the workforce. More importantly, this dissemination provides the opportunity to use WhatsApp as a forum of discussion and sharing of information to organise workers' struggles on the platform. This app has, for instance, played a key role in the Deliveroo couriers' organisation of various digital strikes demanding better working conditions and higher pay in the United Kingdom (Cant 2020). The strikes began in London in 2016, spread into a transnational strike wave from 2017, and have now become part of a global movement of food delivery workers (Woodcock 2021a). Albeit these actions started with conversations on the side of the road outside restaurants, their execution was coordinated by WhatsApp chats, which became the organisational backbone of their collective resistance.

The (counter)use of technology has not only involved onsite-based workers. Even specific categories of remote gig workers (i.e. Amazon Mechanical Turk and Clickworker) have been able to reappropriate some of their digital work equipment. Lacking the physical proximity of colleagues with whom to share grievances or a union to ask for support, some of these workers turned to their closest or most familiar communities to find help: the universe of social networks and online forums (Wood et al. 2019). One of these worker-run web forums was Turkopticon, a browser plugin created by Amazon Mechanical Turk workers to share advice with one another, negotiate work norms and strive to establish more interactive and participatory relationships with employers. Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online platform provided by Amazon, operates as an online marketplace connecting workers to clients to perform several types of online microtasks, such as identifying specific content in an image or video, writing product descriptions or answering questions. One peculiarity of this platform is that MTurk clients can refuse to pay workers if they are not satisfied with the performance of a task. Consequently, MTurk workers often perform these tasks for free. By creating Turkopticon, MTurk workers aimed to counter this process by coordinating work-refusal campaigns (Irani 2015). Whereas the MTurk platform only allows clients to evaluate workers, Turkopticon offers a counter-review system, enabling workers to rate requesters and, more importantly, to orchestrate shaming campaigns against Amazon with some success. In brief, the platform itself, with its opaque form of algorithmic control, has become a specific target of workers' actions (Atzeni & Cini 2024).

Overall, communication via digital technologies seems to have partly replaced traditional organising forms, leading this spatially and temporally fragmented workforce to develop peculiar forms of networked solidarity. We argue that the (partial)

reappropriation of the digital infrastructure has played a distinctive role in the expression of gig workers' collective actions. Arguably, the technical composition continues, thus, to be central to the emergence of political (re)composition dynamics. However, the forms it takes can vary.

Demands

Pay is the most significant motivator of protest events in the sector, triggering more than 60% of cases, as the Leeds Index of Platform Labour Protest's dataset indicates (Umney et al. 2024). A first trigger arises from platforms' business model, which aims at minimising costs (Joyce 2020). The first objective of such a model is to pursue workers' pay reduction (Cini 2023a). This is generally accomplished using piecework rather than hourly pay, whose main effect is to shift the enterprise risk onto the workers (Pulignano et al. 2023a; Pulignano & Morgan 2023). But if companies may use pay as a worker control device, for instance, through the adoption of surge prices ensuring an adequate supply of labour in certain areas at a certain time, pay issues can also trigger worker resistance (Joyce 2020). Indeed, some of the first mobilisations of gig workers in Europe involving food delivery couriers and ride-hailing drivers have been driven by unilateral changes in the companies' pay strategy, leading to a reduced wage for these workers (Tassinari & Maccarrone 2020).

In the case of remote gig workers, resistance has often arisen from the issue of pay as well. As seen, Amazon Mechanical Turk workers increasingly made use of the client reputation system 'TurkoPicon' to rate employers in terms of fairness, responsiveness and generosity of pay (Irani 2015). The creation of these 'communities of coping' (Korczynski 2003) has also become increasingly popular among higher-end service workers, using forums and social media to share their experiences and expertise to try maintaining informal (higher) price norms with their clients (Wood et al. 2019). Whereas these forms of solidarity are more economic and less visible than overt collective action – and, thus, also harder to capture by protest data (Bessa et al. 2022) – they remain, nonetheless, an example of the fact that bottom-up dynamics of grievance expression can even emerge among workers of a geographically very dispersed profession.

Platforms' business model tends to have a downward impact on working conditions (Pulignano & Domecka 2025), causing another area of contention and resistance. Understandably, working conditions and employment status figure respectively as the second and third causes for disputes in the Leeds Index of Platform Labour Protest (Umney et al. 2024). In various episodes, hazardous working conditions and concerns over personal safety have been prime triggers for the first mobilisations of gig workers. The first strike of food couriers in November 2017 in Bologna (Italy) took place when snowy weather made completing deliveries a dangerous task (Marà et al. 2023). Couriers all over the world are also exposed to other risks to their personal safety, such as theft and attacks. In Dublin (Ireland), they started to collectively organise after many of them were subject to attacks and harassment while doing their job (Maccarrone et al. 2025). In Indonesia, app-based transport workers organised through community associations to defend themselves 'from the threat of physical violence by conventional transport providers' (Ford & Honan 2019: 538). Concerns over personal safety were also a highly

topical issue for delivery workers worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic, as logistics was considered among those ‘key’ activities which continued to take place, even under dangerous conditions in terms of both health risks and personal security from theft, robbery and violence (Rizzo & Atzeni 2020). Some of these workers also mobilised to obtain access to proper personal protective equipment and guarantees of sick pay. Contestation over the employment status has been a driver of workers’ mobilisation, especially across the global North, where existing legal institutions still provide significant gains in terms of employment protections for employees rather than the self-employed (Bessa et al. 2022). Indeed, in terms of employment status, platforms generally seek to hire workers as independent contractors. This allows companies to reduce expenses, as contractors have no right to sick or holiday pay, nor to the payment of a minimum wage. Combining strategic mobilisation and legal challenges against various platforms, some of these workers in the transport sector have been able to obtain significant gains in terms of employment rights across several European countries, pushing the issue high on the political agenda both at the national and the European Union (EU) level (Umney et al. 2024).

Discussion and conclusion

This article has explored the continuities and discontinuities between the mobilisation dynamics of the Fordist mass worker and gig workers, focusing on key dimensions such as the actors involved, forms of action adopted and demands raised. We began by asking whether gig worker mobilisations represent a genuinely new phenomenon or merely a case of ‘old wine in a new bottle’.

To address this issue, we adopted the *operaista* framework of class composition (Alquati 1962) in order to examine how the technical and social compositions of workers influence their mobilisation dynamics across different phases of industrial Fordism and platform capitalism. While analysing their political re-composition through an *operaista* lens (Tronti 2019 [1966]), we observed that both mobilisation cycles have followed similar trajectories, revealing the importance of workers’ struggles as central in capitalist transformations. However, key differences emerge regarding the actors involved, the forms of action adopted and the demands raised, revealing the distinctiveness of these transformations in the digital age (see Table 1 for a summary).

As for the *actors*, the main difference between the two mobilisation cycles seems to derive from the diverse organisation of the labour process. While the centrality of the factory system has favoured the prominence of this arena and of its actors in the 1960s struggles, especially workers’ collectives and shop-floor activists, the decentralisation and individualisation of the platform-based labour process have encouraged the entry of other groups and actors embedded in the wide socio-political context, such as families, friends, social movements and political activists. In the absence of a spatially delimited workplace with established actors and rules, various labour and non-labour actors have been able to play a crucial role in these mobilisations (Alberti & Joyce 2023; Atzeni & Cini 2024). Hence, the difference between the two struggle cycles in relation to the type of actors points to the relevance of workers’ diverse technical and social compositions.

Table 1. Comparing the mass and gig worker mobilisations.

	Mass worker	Gig worker
<i>Actors</i>	Worker collectives, shop-floor activists and labour unions	Social movements, rank-and-file organisations and political activists
<i>Forms of action</i>	Assembly line-based actions	Digital platform-based actions
<i>Demands</i>	Work refusal and workplace power relations	Pay and recognition of employment status

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

We point to the critical role played by workers’ technical composition in making sense of the different *forms of action* adopted in the two mobilisation waves. Here we particularly refer to the workers’ ability to (re)appropriate part of the work equipment to innovate and broaden their action repertoire. If assembly line production was central to the invention and adoption of direct-action tactics by mass workers, then the (partial) reappropriation of digital infrastructure, characteristic of the platform-based labour process, has been key to the development and proliferation of new forms of action among gig workers. Essentially, digital platforms, social media and their forum have offered novel and unexpected opportunities and resources for gig workers to exert their agency by creating forms of bonding in comparison to the relatively more favourable conditions (the concentration of the ‘mass worker’ class within a unique geographical space) typical of the factory regime. Hence, algorithm-based digital tools not only bring about a more pervasive form of control (Gandini 2019), but they can also be transformed into a new source of workers’ collective action (Bonini & Treré 2024; Cini & Goldmann 2021; Woodcock 2021a).

Finally, in relation to the *demands* raised, one can observe another notable difference between the two cycles, which – more than anything else – marks the diverse power imbalance between capital and labour within the Fordist and platform capitalist formations. Essentially, the struggles for the political re-composition of the Fordist mass worker were primarily offensive, conveying a message of refusal of the factory-based system of exploitation. This refusal showed these workers’ capacity to effectively fight capital back and put its middlemen managers down (Alquati 2013). By contrast, gig workers’ mobilisations are primarily on ‘bread-and-butter’ issues (Joyce 2020), such as pay increases, health and safety working conditions, pointing to a power balance very favourable to capital. In such circumstances, the main political demand seems now to be the recognition of the employment status. This looks like a very ironic outcome in retrospect, given that the most politically advanced demand in the 1960s struggles was precisely the refusal of wage labour (Alquati 1975).

To conclude, are gig workers’ mobilisations merely an instance of ‘old wine in a new bottle’? Our answer is Yes and No. Yes, if we look at their similar processes of mobilisation in relation to the ways in which old and new labour actors have clashed and competed over such processes to gain collective recognition and seize the political momentum. The adoption of the class composition framework has shown how the dialectic between the capitalist movement of the *technical decomposition* and the worker movement of the

political re-composition has occurred in similar dynamics within the two capitalist formations. From this angle, the new actors, forms of action and demands expressed in the gig workers' mobilisations in comparison to the Fordist mass worker only represent 'old wine in a new bottle'.

However, a difference occurs when we focus on the huge technological leap that occurred between the Fordist assembly line and the platform-based labour process. Essentially, digitalisation and platform work have transformed the ways in which individuals socially interact in the workplace, their expectations from their employer and their career trajectories. They have also changed when, where and how work is conducted. In other words, this leap prompts us to re-imagine the workplace of the future, especially now in a period in which the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) is about to shake our most consolidated beliefs on the subject.

Limitations and new avenues for research

This article has two significant limitations, one theoretical and one empirical. First, theoretically, while the *operaista* approach remains valuable for analysing specific processes of working class formation from a Marxist perspective, its theoretical scope is ultimately limited. The framework is particularly effective in explaining worker struggles that arise when new working classes emerge through changes in production processes and the division of labour. However, its focus on the relationship between these struggles and capitalist development – specifically Tronti's (2019 [1966]) view that class struggle is the driving force of capitalism – may cause it to overlook other equally important forms of labour protest. In this regard, Beverly Silver's (2003: 20) framework in *Forces of Labour* more accurately captures these omitted forms by distinguishing between 'Marx-type' struggles, which are those of newly emerging working classes strengthened by capitalist development ('the struggles of newly emerging working classes that are successively made and strengthened as an unintended outcome of the development of historical capitalism'), and 'Polanyi-type' struggles, which are those of working classes dismantled by global economic transformations and the erosion of established social compacts ('resistance to the spread of a global self-regulating market, particularly by working classes that are being unmade by global economic transformations'). The *operaista* approach considers only the former, disregarding the latter entirely.

Second, empirically, while research on platform work protests has provided valuable insights into the mobilisation dynamics within the gig economy, it has disproportionately focused on food delivery and transport sectors, the focus of this article. As a result, other key areas of the platform economy, such as freelancing, click-work and care work, risk remaining relatively unrepresented and unexplored, particularly in terms of their capacity for resistance (or the lack thereof). While an emerging body of literature is beginning to address these theoretical and empirical gaps (see, for example, Cini 2023b; Liang et al. 2025; Pulignano et al. 2023b, 2024), relatively little is known about the action tactics, political strategies and organisational forms employed by workers in these sectors, both individually and collectively. Hence, this article has outlined a specific pathway. However, we are encouraged to expand upon this by investigating whether the patterns of resistance identified in the food delivery and transport sectors also apply to other industries.

Looking ahead, we propose the following two questions for empirical investigation. First, to what extent do the dynamics that we describe, whereby class composition and mobilisation are tied to militancy, also appear in feminised sectors such as care and domestic work? Second, how does the predominance of female labour shape the development of resistance strategies within these sectors? Exploring these questions could reveal new forms of resistance that are specific to ‘feminised wage labour’, as opposed to the historically male-dominated composition of the Fordist workforce that was central to the *operaista* approach (Tronti 2019 [1966]). This, in turn, suggests that analysing the actors, action forms and demands of these workers’ struggles under current capitalist transformations requires serious engagement with feminist and intersectionality studies.

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Note

1. See <https://notesfrombelow.org/about>.

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