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Riding to survive food couriers in three African cities.

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There has been little research on how platform workers in Africa are responding to the digital economy. Although it is ostensibly based on freedom and self-employment, our research amongst food-courier riders in South Africa, Ghana, and Kenya found that this new work order is deepening worker insecurity, undermining worker rights, and dramatically increasing inequality between a core group of extremely wealthy senior manager/owners and a growing pool of precarious workers.

Food courier motorbike riders at Campus Square, Auckland Park, Johannesburg, South Africa (March 2020).



Through our research, we identified union-like hybrid collectives offering mutual aid.
Photograph: Fikile Masikane

Introduction

Drawing from a study we conducted with food-courier riders in Accra, Johannesburg, and Nairobi, **“I just want to survive”**: **A comparative study of food courier riders in three African cities**¹, we argue that a new worker has emerged in the digital economy. This

¹ Webster, E and Masikane, F: **“I just want to survive”**: **A comparative study of food courier riders in three African cities** (Southern Centre for Inequality Studies and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2022)

https://southafrica.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/I_just_want_to_Survive.pdf . See also Webster, E: **Recasting workers' power: work and inequality in shadow of the digital age** (forthcoming, Bristol University Press)

new worker is subject to a new business model based on authoritarian algorithmic management. Promising freedom, flexibility, self-employment, and shared business ownership (SBO), multinational tech conglomerates claim to be creating new economic opportunities in Africa. However, our study shows a different picture.

This platform business model has transformed the employment relationship and undermined worker rights. It is predicated on precarious work and increasing inequality between extremely wealthy senior managers and a growing reserve of precarious workers. On the one hand, the core workers enjoy enhanced salaries, pensions, and other benefits. On the other, the workers at the peripheral or outsourced outlets have to make do with inferior and often irregular pay and dangerous working conditions. We refer to this as the 'Uberisation' of work.

The labour process or the structure of the work is such that instead of traditional clocking-in with a timecard, 'gig' workers log in to an App, and in so doing become subject to an external authority: the algorithm. This algorithm translates consumer demand into orders that riders need to execute. It determines what tasks workers have to perform, where and when, and directly or indirectly determines how much money workers will be paid for such tasks, regardless of the distance between the restaurant and the customer's home. It also directly or indirectly controls the execution of the work and the worker's performance. Essentially there is no worker autonomy.

The research findings speak to three fundamental issues: Who are the riders? What is the nature of their working conditions, and what power do they have to challenge the unequal work relationship?

Who are the riders?

The riders across the cities are overwhelmingly male, black, young, and relatively well educated. Only 2% of the survey were female food courier riders. The small number of female riders in this sector is because this line of work is relatively unsafe. Female riders speak of carrying pepper sprays at work, sharing their locations with friends, not taking orders in certain areas, and not working at certain times in order to avoid robberies, sexual harassment etc. This makes the work experience unpleasant in most instances for female riders, who are also just as desperate for work as their male counterparts.

Unlike Nairobi and Accra where the food-courier riders are all local citizens, 90% of the riders in Johannesburg are cross-border migrants, predominantly from Uganda and Zimbabwe. Surprisingly, the workforce is relatively stable; riders stay in the job for relatively long periods of time. In Nairobi for example, 12% of riders have been in the job for more than five years: it may well be a career for them. The most likely explanation for staying on is that it is the only job available. As many respondents remarked: "I just want to survive".

The nature of the work

It's a Tuesday morning. I've finally decided to take an off day. I wake up at 11am. I do my usual routine of going onto WhatsApp. I notice a familiar face on many

statuses. It's Abdul. We call him 'Ntshebe' because of his long beard. His photo accompanied by the captions 'RIP' or 'gone too soon'. I'm totally shocked. I just saw him yesterday. I call one of my friends to confirm. Indeed 'Ntshebe' is gone. He's Muslim, meaning he's going to be buried on the same day of his death. I gather more information and I'm told his burial time. I make arrangements to get there. There's more than 100 motorbikes. We accompany the hearse to Albertville Cemetery where 'Ntshebe' is laid to rest. Abdul was one of many hit-and-run victims in our line of work." – Brian Chibwe²

This is a diary entry from one of the riders. It is one example of the many fatalities that have been reported in this line of work, pointing to the fact that this is a dangerous job, with no medical or health insurance provided for the riders. The dangers that the riders face on the road, from what we have seen, could be fueled by the long working hours, since on average, the riders work ten hours or more a day, usually six days a week. Other common problems riders faced in all three cities were:

- Police harassment (22%)
- Unfair clients (20%)
- Stress (19%)
- Accidents (15%)
- Illnesses caused by work (12%), and
- Crime (11%)

In ranking riders' responses by the most significant by city, crime topped the list in Johannesburg (57%). In Accra, 45% of riders cited police harassment, as did 41% in Nairobi. This may be because of the perception in those cities that most criminal activities are undertaken by people riding motorbikes. The surprisingly low figure of 12% of Johannesburg riders citing police harassment may be related to allegedly corrupt Metro Police soliciting bribes or "cold drinks", as claimed by some of the riders.

It is working conditions such as these that provide riders with an opportunity to develop collective solidarity and even conduct strike action. Through our research, we identified union-like hybrid collectives offering mutual aid.

What power do the riders have to challenge their working conditions?

By technologically linking riders, companies have increased workers' bargaining power. The technology opens the possibility for riders to exercise associational power through common WhatsApp groups, which allowed them to begin to organize strike action in 2020. This manifested in riders collectively logging off the App in March 2022, when they again went on strike. We have also identified the emergence of union-like hybrid collectives that offer mutual aid, thus opening up new forms of worker organisation emerging in the platform economy.

² Chibwe is a food-courier rider from Zimbabwe. He works in Johannesburg and has been a rider for more than five years. He participated in the study and wrote a daily diary entry over a period of two weeks. He later joined the Food Courier Forum that we initiated as one of the research outputs.

Work is constantly being transformed through digitalisation, and these new lines of work are not regulated. Thus it is difficult to manage conflict by allowing people to organize and challenge their working conditions and by recognizing them as workers. It is through regulation that disputes can be resolved. The unsuccessful outcome of the 2022 strike indicate there is no proper organized voice of the workers.

Way forward

The disruption caused by the digital age and platform businesses has created a regulatory vacuum. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity to the governments of African countries, the companies, and the people who work in these platforms. There has been an important initiative to rate platform companies by an organisation called FairWork. Its goal is to show that better and fairer jobs are possible in the platform economy.

This further poses a challenge to trade unions to think of ways of organizing this new line of work. For example, in Kenya, the Transport and Allied Workers Union (TAWU-K) has come up with an innovative organising strategy. The goal is to develop its own software product. The product will enable them to send automatic message confirmation notifications every time they receive payment from union members, as well as to dispatch general communications to members. In developing its strategy TAWU-K is guided by Recommendation 204 (2013) of the ILO on transitioning from the informal to the formal economy.

As a way forward, policy makers should strongly consider regulating digital labour platforms as a whole, with a specific focus on the extension of labour and social protections to workers on location-based platforms (both the e-hailing and-courier/delivery sectors) in South Africa. Given the demographic make-up of location-based platform workers, policy considerations must be sensitive to power relations along the lines of gender, race, and citizenship.