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Organizing the digital working-class in Portugal during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract: Since the Covid-19 pandemic that digital and platform workers have been facing labour deregulation, extenuating working hours, erosion of labour and social rights, as well as a major loss of referential regarding unions. In a scenario of uberization of work, this article seeks to analyze how the class-that-lives-from-work has been claiming its true power, adopting strategies and tactics of organization and resistance through cyberactivism. Between 2020 and 2022, semi-structured interviews, netnography and non-participant observation in social media were conducted in Portugal. The key findings reveal that the working-class is in a process of reorganization through digital platforms, social media and apps, used not only to regulate and control the pace of work but to claim for labour and human rights as a labour campaigning tool.

Keywords: Digital platform work. Cyberactivism. Organizing; Unionism; Covid-19.

Organização da classe trabalhadora digital em Portugal durante a pandemia de Covid-19

Resumo: Desde a pandemia Covid-19 que os trabalhadores digitais e plataformizados têm enfrentado desregulamentação laboral, jornadas de trabalho extenuantes, erosão dos direitos laborais e sociais, assim como uma enorme perda de referencial relativamente aos sindicatos. Num cenário de uberização do trabalho, este artigo procura analisar como a classe-que-vive-do-trabalho tem reivindicado o seu verdadeiro poder, adotando estratégias de organização e resistência através do ciberativismo. Entre 2020 e 2022, foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas, netnografia e observação não participante em redes sociais e plenários virtuais. Os principais resultados revelam que a classe trabalhadora se encontra num processo de reorganização, utilizando plataformas digitais, redes sociais e aplicativos, usadas não apenas para regular e controlar o ritmo do trabalho, mas para reivindicar os seus direitos laborais e humanos como uma ferramenta de campanha laboral.

Palavras-chave: Trabalho em plataformas digitais. Ciberativismo. Organização. Sindicalismo. Covid-19.

Introduction

From the 1970s, under the post-Fordist model, flexible accumulation emerged (Harvey, 1990), configuring a new labour ideal, in which undetermined working hours, absence of a fixed working place, variable remuner-

ation and on-demand work predominate, without the guarantee of basic labour rights and union representation (Moraes, Oliveira, & Accorsi, 2019). Neoliberalism has dramatically reconfigured jobs away from the security of decent work and full employment, recasting them as malleable and flexible, while obscuring the increasingly precarious nature of work. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the concept of decent work summarizes, above all, the aspirations of men and women for accessing a decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity and dignity. However, the vulnerability and precariousness of contractual labour regimes leads to a greater individualization and weakening of workers[1], far away from the conception of formal work based on human rights and dignity which has been eroded through the uberization process (CUT & Instituto Observatório Social, 2021).

1. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm>.

The expansion of global supply chains is inseparable from the development of information and communication technologies (ICT's). These have long been deployed to facilitate the acceleration of capital accumulation and precipitate a spatial reorganization of work on a global scale (Castells, 2000; Tsing, 2009), leading to the expansion of the service sector, whose peaks in demand can be more frequent and less predictable compared to the industrial sector. The former is characterized by organizational flexibility and increased informal, unstable and precarious working conditions, especially in carrying out low paid operating activities (Antunes, 2018). Despite concomitant trends reshaping the labour market, through globalization, outsourcing and flexibilization, the digital transformation led to crowdsourced, decentralized, freelance and on-demand labour relations, absent from a fixed contract and a salary, raising also issues related to the legal status of the worker.

The emergence of the gig economy or economy on-demand was one of the most important new transformations in the world of work, mediating and organizing work through internet-based platforms. This business model is based on contracting out tasks or jobs through the use of platforms, connecting demand and supply of labour. Gig work can be either tied to a physical location, as in the case of transport and delivery services, or be fully performed on-line (De Stefano, 2016). It comprises non-standard forms of employment, the intensification of flexible and entrepreneurial ideology, driven by a variety of forces, including demographic shifts, labour market regulations, macroeconomic fluctuations, and technological changes (Abílio, 2017, 2022; Antunes, 2018, 2020; Doellgast, Lillie & Pulignano, 2018; Gandini, 2018; Kalleberg, 2018; Keune & Pedacci, 2020; Slee, 2017).

According to Rodrigo Carelli and Murilo Oliveira (2021) the entrepreneurial platform model is not an economic activity but a technique of labour organization,

a marketplace, and when it makes use of the computer technology it becomes a digital platform. These authors also state that platforms can be observed and recognized according to pure or mixed/hybrid strategies (call centers), agreement with the branch or sector of service provision (couriers, drivers), and delivery location (Airbnb, digital freelancers).

This new form of labour organization (Eurofound, 2015; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2017; Valenduc & Vendramin, 2016;) includes on-line web-based platforms, where work is outsourced to a geographically dispersed crowd (crowdwork) for working activities that imply performing a series of on-line microtasks, and location-based applications (apps), which allocate work to individuals to a specific geographical area, typically to perform local and on-demand service-oriented tasks, such as driving, running errands or cleaning houses. The management is performed by firms that also intervene in setting up the minimum quality standards regarding the service and selection of the workforce (Cardon & Casilli, 2015; ILO, 2021; Rogers, 2015).

Having not fully recovered from the 2008 crisis, workers are facing a pandemic crisis which has been exposing and aggravating forms of exploitation, vulnerability and social exclusion, leading to intermittent, informal and precarious life trajectories. More than ever, the characteristics of late modernity are being demarcated (Bauman, 2008). Ursula Huws, Werner Korte & Simon Robinson (1990) predicted the precariousness that we are currently experiencing with new labour modalities, especially through fixed-term or short-term contracts and bogus self-employed and temporary workers, ensuring companies with a qualified workforce without having to bear the expenses and rigidity of salaried and permanent staff. According to Ricardo Antunes (2020), we are living in a pandemic, financial and predatory capitalism, where Industry 4.0, through the internet of things, induces workers into a state of digital slavery. The Covid-19 pandemic, especially through the platformization of work, exposed and accelerated the process of informalization, precariousness and flexibilization of the labour market, exacerbating social vulnerabilities and inequalities, individualism, and leading to poor welfare state intervention and insecure working conditions (Huws et al., 2019). Adding to this, there are also the impacts of climate change endangering the extinction of human life and leading to a post-modern risk society (Beck, 1999; Roque, 2020b). This whole scenario led to the segmentation of the labour market, differentiation in employment situations, and invisibilization of work(ers) (Bourdieu, 1998).

This article seeks to analyze how the digitalization and platformization of work have been affecting the morphology of the working-class, breaking down tradi-

tional gender, race, and class divisions, considering its complexity and lived experiences. According to Metzgar (2021) there is an attempt of installing a culture of achieving and becoming an entrepreneur, in detriment of a sense of being and belonging to a working class, that is, a sense of community. In this process of class dynamics at work there is also an attempt of (re)organizing within and in parallel to trade unions, that is, organizing in cooperatives and/or business, civic and workers' associations through workplace solidarity. This brings new synergies at a (inter)national level, reinventing the sense of traditional unionism, and engagement with other social struggles for labour and human rights through the (re) building of a class-consciousness movement that unites all segments of the working-class (Abílio Amorim & Grohmann, 2021; Brophy & Grayer, 2021; CUT & Instituto Observatório Social, 2021; Roque, 2018b; 2020a). In this sense, this article analyzes the call center workers' case who was the first service to implement digital and platform work, and where workers are finding new forms of solidarity and organizing through cyberactivism using social media and digital platforms, that is, using the tools that oppress and control them during their daily labour tasks. It is crucial to analyze the transformations that took place during the pandemic in the Portuguese society, especially in the labour market, where companies had to reinvent and adapt their services, but also with the transition to telework, accelerating the trend of uberization of work, hindering traditional forms of workers' organizing and endangering their jobs.

Between January 2020 and January 2022, the author conducted a qualitative analysis, including desk research and interviews with workers, activists, and unionists, mainly from call centers in Portugal, as well as netnography or digital ethnography (Kozinets, 2014) with participant observation in social media groups, on-line meetings, plenaries and strikes.

This article is divided into six sections. After the introduction, the second section will present the context for the rising of digital and platform work in Portugal; the third will describe the effects of the covid-19 pandemic on the Portuguese labour market; the fourth will analyze logics of resistance and organizing through cyberactivism during the pandemic; the fifth will bring the discussion; and the final section will present the remarks. It was concluded that digital platform work is not a trend, but a process which has been growing, especially after the pandemic, and that social and digital media apps can help renewing and strengthening union-led movements. This analysis highlights the importance of going beyond trade unions if we are to contribute to the rebuilding of the labour movement in a context of precariousness. This article aims to drawing attention to the ways in which precarious digital and platform workers are attempting to organize within and in parallel

to trade unions, that is, organizing in cooperatives, business, civic and workers' associations through workplace solidarity, using new skills, tactics, and strategies devised in their struggles against digital capitalism (Abílio, Amorim & Grohmann, 2021; Roque, 2018; 2020a). It was concluded that social and digital media apps can help renewing and strengthening union-led movements. This analysis highlights the importance of going beyond trade unions if we are to contribute to rebuilding the labour movement under precarious conditions.

The rise of digital and platform work in Portugal

In the 1990s, Portugal witnessed a process of globalization and a digitization trend in the service industry through the callcenterization of work, allowing companies to offer their products as a service, rather than selling them as physical objects (Batt,Holman & Holtgrewe, 2009; Huws, 2003). This represented a new form of work organization, characterized by a mix between mechanized office/clerical work and interactive services in the "emotional" Taylorist assembly lines (Boreham et al., 2007; Taylor & Bain, 1999; Taylor, 2010). Operators provide information to customers, connecting them to third parties, through the sale of goods, products and services, using computer-based technologies, such as telephone and video calls, emails, and chat (Paul & Huws, 2002). It is an articulation of ICT's of the 21st century with the flexible working conditions of the 20th century (Toyotism) (Antunes & Braga, 2009). Call center operators are emblematic of digital capitalism, better known in the literature as the cybertariat, infoproletariat and cyberproletariat, that is, the new service proletariat in the digital era who is expropriated from his working and personal life by global companies, suffering the consequences from the expansion of intermittent and informal work (Antunes & Braga, 2009; Dyer-Whiteford, 2015; Huws, 2003). Nowadays, there is a trend towards the digital management of work, which extends well beyond work carried out under the control of on-line platforms, that is, the platformization and uberization of work, which became more evident with the pandemic across the global labour markets (Huws et al., 2019).

The algorithmic management and control process was already present in call centers, namely through the console, the Interactive Voice Response and the digital panopticon, to which operators are subject, fostering the gradual replacement of the human aspect by the digital one. The algorithm controls and dictates the pace of work, through the metrics with which it was programmed, using an omnipresent and omniscient surveillance that acts on the worker. As such, all the tasks of a call center operator are dictated by the machine (algorithm), personified in a computer and a console, managing incoming and outgoing calls, and depriving

operators from any autonomy, creativity and socialization (Roque, 2010). This logic refers to the Taylorist and Fordist modes of production, governed by the scientific organization of capital, where the working-class is rigidly controlled by its times and movements, under the command of a layer of managers, administrators and engineers who elaborate, conceive and carry out production.

In countries such as Portugal, digital platform work has grown considerably in the aftermath of the financial crisis, as many people have started looking for alternative sources of income due to high unemployment rates (Chicci et al., 2020). Around 2015, Airbnb, Tuk-Tuks and Uber services gained strength among the new digital precariat. Every form of platform work activity is increasingly associated with different shapes and shades of precarity (Eurofound, 2018), where work is performed on the job, or on-demand (gig), being managed by the algorithm or through the mediation of temporary work agencies, especially in the tourism sector and in the deliveries service (Huws et al., 2019). In the aftermath of the Great Recession, platform economy (Kenney & Zysman, 2016) became an alternative to overcome the accumulation crisis, especially in the service and tourism sectors. The Great Recession resulted from Troika's intervention, followed by austerity measures and a major restructuring of the labour market. It also led to the commodification of public services, and restructuring of capital with automation and the substitution of goods for services, resulting in mass unemployment and precarious work (Carmo et al., 2021). In Portugal the number of independent workers has been growing, especially regarding the service sector and platformized work. According to the Employment Survey from the National Institute of Statistics (INE), the number of people who find themselves in that situation has increased 16%, especially during the third quarter of 2021, representing an absolute record for self-employed workers in Portugal[2].

2. Available at: <https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_destaques&DESTAQUESdest_boui= 472918585&DESTAQUEStema=55574&DESTAQUESmodo=2>.

Portugal suffered an intense wave of "touristification" within a process of transnational gentrification (Cócola-Gant, 2016, 2018; Füller & Michel, 2014), with an increase on tourism activity which has reshaped the personal transportation business regarding goods and people, mainly Uber drivers and couriers. Uber has become a prime example of the gig economy at work, and the Airbnb service also suffered a tremendous growth since 2014, when the majority of its entrepreneurs and freelancers decided to apply their investments and indemnities resulting from dismissals during the Troika crisis (Roque, 2023).

In that sense, there was also the proliferation of multiple atypical and precarious forms of work to the detriment of waged labour associated with modern industrial capitalism, based on effective contracts and social protection. In fact, in certain contexts, there has been a progressive dismantling of institutional and normative

labour protection (Carmo et al., 2021). This is revealing of the serious structural effects of the temporary nature of contracts and the precarious working conditions, presenting high levels of informality and the predominance of bad or bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018). These do not guarantee access to the most basic labour and human rights, and present gaps in protection coverage by the social security system (Kalleberg, 2011).

Digital platforms have been mediating work, either through the introduction of new economic activities or the reinvention of existing ones, with the return to ancient labour models. That can be seen not only in the case of the couriers, who can be considered as the new "paperboys", who used to deliver the newspapers riding their bicycles absent from a labour contract, but also in the case of telework, carried out in the 1980's, mainly by female telephonists, who used to work from their homes and later on became call center operators who perform administrative work on a digital basis (Carmo et al., 2021; Paul & Huws, 2002; Srnicek, 2017).

In fact, call centers were the first service where this process of machine and algorithmic management was implemented, through the outsourcing and crowdsourcing of services, with access to a periphery of atypical workers who could be requested by companies to overcome the seasonality of production, leading to work fragmentation. Like couriers, drivers, and other services that comprise digital platforms, call center workers also use platforms and are controlled by the algorithm (Artificial Intelligence). Call centers emerged not as an industry, but as a business function that crosses several industries and/or sectors in a post-industrial service economy (Roque, 2018b), being one of the fastest developing forms of digital work, where services are available all around the clock, being delivered from almost any spot (Paul & Huws, 2002). As in the case of local accommodation (Airbnb) call centers foster an entire local economy and involvement with the neighbourhood, creating bonds of interdependence and job opportunities, especially in cities where job scarcity predominates (Roque, 2023).

Portugal is among the European countries that least guarantee the rights of workers on digital platforms, influencing the subcontracting process and contaminating labour relations. In this sense, the contribution of this article is to provide a wider and deep context of how platforms and digital working-class have been dealing with labour precariousness. The uberization of work is a trend in the labour markets towards digital management mediating industrial relations, incorporating a variety of non-standardized, invisible and atypical forms of work, deployed of an employment relationship between the employee and the employer, enabled by ICT's. Flexibility allows workers to offer their activities on apps and platforms whenever and

wherever they want to (Hall & Krueger, 2018), creating the conditions for platforms to bypass a vast series of duties connected to employment laws and labour protection. Gig workers have few employment rights and experience atomization and pervasive monitoring, minimum wage and inaccessibility to social security contributions, sick leaves, work accident insurances, vacation and meal allowances, and paid holidays (Rogers, 2015). In this sense, the gig economy can be characterised as the last frontier of precariousness (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020).

The platform economy comprises companies that use on-line digital technologies, resulting from the outsourcing of services, allowing companies to adjust their workforce, bringing dramatic changes to the labour market, with regard to precarious, intermittent and informal work, dictated by the algorithm to meet demands of production. Digital platforms, digital platforms brought a new form of work outsourced to an indetermined and depersonalized mass of geographically dispersed and available workers, a digital reserve army, creating production and service networks and working according to just-in-time (on-demand) and just in place logics (Abílio, 2020; Wells, Attoh & Declan, 2021). In fact, some of these activities are not even recognized as work, being often designated as "gigs", "tasks", "favours", "services" and "rides".

Gamification is strongly encouraged by companies, through competition between workers to increase production, leading them to work for longer periods, in order to, illusively, obtain higher scores or performance bonuses (Woodcock & Johnson, 2017). At the end of each task (gig) the operators' service is evaluated, either by the company or by the customer through assessment systems. However, this situation can lead to abrupt dismissals, and, in some cases, to lack of access to social benefits, as in the case of delivery workers and the sales service regarding call centers. Payment is only received for the working hours, in a "pay-as-you-go" basis, not comprehending idle moments when the worker is looking for a task/gig, being treated as human-as-a-service (De Stefano, 2016; Irani & Silberman, 2013).

In the ride-hailing service, the platform acts as a facilitator of the relationship between clients and workers (Risak & Warter, 2015). When connecting to an application, workers are subject to a virtual foreman who organizes and redirects consumer orders, and controls the mode, time, and value, directly or indirectly, of task execution (Gandini, 2018). Management is processed through algorithmic control, which is central to the functioning of on-line work, enabled by digital practices and tasks, such as recommending, restricting, recording, classifying, replacing and rewarding, with the imminent risk of disconnection from platforms or dismissal of workers (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020). These transformations are associated

with a process of restructuring the forms of organization and control of work along production chains, where capital seeks to break with the political-institutional structure of regulation and deregulate the labour market through informality, outsourcing and flexibility, namely with subcontracting and false self-entrepreneurship (Antunes, 2018; Gaulejac, 2007). Nevertheless, the gig economy also allows workers to benefit from job opportunities that they might not be able to access otherwise, on a flexible-schedule basis, allowing to match work with the performance of other activities. Although these modes of production are relatively regularized and endowed with social rights, the situation is beginning to comprehend informal and independent work, without the access to the basic labour rights (Antunes, 2011).

The covid-19 pandemic effects on the Portuguese labour market

On the 18th of March 2020[3], the first lockdown instilled serious disruptions in the labour market, manifested in asymmetric effects, whether in the business fabric, in the labour market or in the income structure (Silva et al., 2020). The path of socioeconomic recovery from the 2008 financial crisis was interrupted with a rapid and unparalleled increase in the unemployment levels, especially regarding the activities related to the tourism and hospitality sectors which have played a very significant role in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Almost 1/5 of the ones had non-permanent or temporary contracts and informal workers accounted for about 1/8 of total employment (ILO, 2018). The State responded with the reposition of public policies and labour rights, aiming at bringing immediate effects on the labour market, through the guarantee of business liquidity or simplified layoff to maintain employment levels. Nevertheless, most workers had to survive from their savings, with the help of their families or of solidarity from their living and working communities, for they were not eligible for social benefits[4].

3. Available at: <https://dre.pt/dre/LinkELI?search=decpresrep/14-A/2020/03/18/p/dre>.

4. Available at: <https://www.wort.lu/pt/portugal/tuk-tuk-a-espera-de-turistas-para-recuperar-a-vida-6092bf4dde135b923612affe>.

With the striking of the pandemic, the process of uberization was accelerated, promoting significant changes in the world of work, unveiling a series of trends of exploitation and domination, through the ability to organize and control (Moraes, Oliveira & Accorsi, 2019), affecting not only the value chains but also the dynamics of the labour market in a heterogeneous way, exposing and aggravating situations of informalization, precariousness, and vulnerability.

During the first lockdown, class inequality became even more pronounced with a division in the workforce, between non-essential and essential frontline workers. There was a segmentation between first- and second-class workers, demarcating those who risked their lives on a daily basis, dealing face to face with the health cri-

sis, subjecting themselves to the virus in unhealthy workplaces and public transportation. These are the ones who are often made invisible and remain in precarious and penalizing working conditions. They are mainly women, racialized and migrant workers (Antunes, 2020; Roque, 2020a), in contrast with those who were able to find themselves protected from the risks inherent to contagion, through the transition to the telework regime, or having access to state protection policies and social support, such as the layoff (Roque, 2020b).

Since there was the demand for social distancing and some workers were on the telework regime, most services were available on-line leading to a high rise in demands, affecting call center operators, who had to provide customer support service for essential and non-essential services, and for ride-hailing workers (couriers, vehicle drivers and Tuk-Tuk drivers), who had to adapt to these constraints and started delivering goods and meals. The hotel, restaurant and accommodation services (Airbnb) were tremendously hit by precarity, having also seen all of their reservations being cancelled by the platforms (Roque, 23; Carmo et al., 2021). In fact, the majority of these workers were not considered eligible for benefiting from social rights or governmental support, for those who were self-employed, were mainly engaged in digital platform work as a means for obtaining additional income, even though with the passing of time what is considered to be a temporary project becomes a permanent reality, as in the case of call center workers (Roque, 2010). Among these uberized workers, there are situations of migrant individuals who live in situations of human trafficking and undeclared work, leading to vulnerable and fragile people whose only way to survive and get inserted into the labour market is through informality, illegality and precarious work relationships, often abdicating the claim for their rights.

While the majority of services were transitioned to the teleworking regime, call center operators, even from the non-essential services, had to keep up working and guaranteeing the continuity of those services. In early March 2020, when the first cases emerged, call centers became places of contagion where workers felt threatened in their workplaces, as companies did not take adequate prophylactic measures in terms of safety and health. Those who were found sick were allowed to enter their workplaces without informing colleagues about their condition. This situation proved to be quite worrying, as testing was not performed, social distancing was not respected, nor materials were properly cleaned with disinfectants. In fact, alcohol gel, toilet paper and masks were scarce. There was even a case in a call center in the north of Portugal where cleaning professionals had only access to water[5]. On March 12, 2020, the Sindicato dos Trabalhadores de Call Center (STCC)[6] issued a statement, with the support of other unions and activists, proposing a set

5. More information at:< https://www.publico.pt/2020/05/25/opiniao/noticia/vulnerabilidade-reivindicacao-laboural-call-centers-portugueses-pandemica-covid19-1917656>.

6. Available at: <http://www.stcc.pt/>.

of measures to stop all non-essential sectors, maintaining wages and guaranteeing rights in the defense of public health, instead of placing millions of workers at risk for the sake of profit.

However, the transition to the telework regime was not applied to all the companies, being only available to the human resources department, the board of directors and supervisors. According to Decree-Law 10-A/202[7], working in call centers encompasses all possibilities of transition to teleworking and, once the state of emergency was decreed, this situation should have been immediately implemented (Roque, 2020a). As a result, all these situations were denounced by the workers to the unions, namely to STCC and Sinttav (Sindicato Nacional dos Trabalhadores das Telecomunicações e Audiovisuais), which, in turn, disclosed it to the national and international media, such as Reuters, and to the various parliamentary groups, demanding to the Ministry of Health and to the Authority for Working Conditions to carry out inspections. The next section will provide a description of the struggles that were engaged through cyberativism in Portugal.

7. More information at: <https://dre.pt/home/-/dre/130243053/details/maximized>.

Resistance and organizing through cyberactivism

Platform work increased during the pandemic and has been transforming the Portuguese labour market, affecting labour relations, especially in the way workers are being subjected to greater levels of precarity, control, and suffering. Although, we are living in a digital and interconnected world of work, which is increasingly intense and widespread, workers find themselves in a process of setback in relation to the loss of their labour, human and collective voice rights. Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been an increase in the struggles and demands from unions and workers related with digital and platform work, whose action has become more aggressive and frequent, finding new strategies, especially through cyberactivism, a form of web-based civic engagement or digital activism, focusing on the use of technology to participate in political activism (Dyer-Witheford, 2015; Huws, 2003; Estanque & Costa, 2012; Roque, 2008; 2018a). Social and digital media apps (Facebook, Tik Tok, WhatsApp, Zoom and Skype) can be relevant tools to effectively mobilize, to face internal opposition in traditional unions (Woodcock & Cant, 2022), helping workers claiming for their labour rights, organizing labour campaigns, building synergies at an international level, recruiting and exchanging information. The first instances of gig workers' mobilization have been mostly driven by other actors, such as grassroots unions and self-organized groups of workers, rather than traditional unions (Stuart et al., 2020).

Regarding call centers in Portugal, STCC is the only independent and grassroots

union, specific in this service. Since the pandemic it has been actively engaged in cyberactivism, organizing press conferences, strikes, on-line plenary sessions and meetings with companies, affiliated and non-affiliated workers, for gaining trust among them and discussing the implementation of telework and labour rights. It also provides workers with tools for struggling and coping strategies on the battlefield (Roque, 2020a). The main claims concern the performance bonuses, which have been withdrawn since the beginning of the pandemic, but also high levels of moral harassment, salary progression, legislation on telework and the payment of costs related with it.

One of STCC's main victories was during the first lockdown, when the union called for a nationwide strike, which took place between March 24 and April 5, 2020, demanding that all non-essential workers should be transferred to the telework regime without loss of remuneration. Through its website and Facebook page, this union created and disseminated a model for denouncing bad labour practices carried out during the pandemic. This context of unhealthy working conditions created a generalized revolt among workers, raising high levels of class consciousness, manifested through strikes, absences from work, sick leaves, and requests for vacations. Through these rebellious actions called by STCC, with protests, strikes and campaigns triggered via social networks (Facebook, Tik Tok, YouTube and Instagram) and organized through on-line plenary sessions (Zoom, Meets and WhatsApp), operators were able to transition to the telework regime to obtain salary increases, and even to readmit union delegates who got suspended for exercising their union activity. Also, solidarity between workers increased significantly, with several strikes that have been taking place. In fact, STCC's on-line plenary sessions were open to any worker, becoming catharsis chambers where workers reported their feelings of suffering, but also a sense of revolt to strike against their companies. As one female call center worker stated:

> Hence this movement I think is even different from what we usually see, taking into account the amount of people who organized it was very significant [...] After the plenary sessions we held, we carried out the strike on March 10th, which was even before Covid-19, but it was even before we went home and we had 90% of the people joining. During Covid it was more difficult to stay organized but we still managed to hold some virtual plenary sessions and we kept going. I think we never bowed to the pressure we could have had. With the situation it could have been more comfortable for us to stop claiming and some people moved away because [...] if there is some pressure, they also stop being on the side of those who are eventually claiming.

In September 2021, a strike and a street demonstration, also organized by STCC,

were scheduled for Braga and Porto (North of Portugal) against the company Concentrix, in order to claim for performance bonuses and salary progression. The role of STCC was preponderant during this negotiation period with the threat of a massive strike, involving 300 workers, which led the company and the temporary work agency to accept the workers' demands of a salary increase of 135 euros. This was an historic milestone for the call center service in Portugal, especially during the pandemic, where negotiations and plenary sessions were conducted on-line.

Even though this is a "profession" whose flexible employment relationship can lead to frequent situations of precariousness, call centers comprehend a high number of jobs offers on the labour market regarding platform and uberized work. As a male trade union delegate stated:

> I have been unemployed for the past year, having been laid off by Randstad. Fortunately, I went to court and managed to get readmitted, but things are not easy. For skilled or unskilled, and not just those over 35, the only job offers I saw in the papers were from Uber, Uber Eats, and call centers.

He also mentioned that the transition to telework is the future trend regarding the labour market. To escape moral harassment and to avoid the stresses related with dislocations, operators prefer working from home and lose labour rights and bargaining power. This also implies the fact that flexibility and mobility contribute to the myth of the false entrepreneur which is also very present in the telecommuting regime.

> There was a time when it was felt by the crowd that there were people who were capable of fighting harder to avoid returning to the workplace. People don't want to go back to the companies. If people are so willing to lose rights to stay at home, it opens the door for very dangerous models to be adopted. My nightmare is waking up in the morning and going to an app to see what it offers me that day in terms of work, then I choose and go. It's the modern version of the 1920s where people would go to the front door of factories asking for work, and then they would choose some and send the rest to go the next factory, like it was in the Great Depression. Now this is done in a modern digital way, if needed it can be well advertised to let you know that this is the future and that it is cool. This is also an advertisement for flexibility and mobility, there is a romanticism regarding entrepreneurship andtelecommuting. I think that, in the long term, the consequences will be more visible, especially for getting organized, for understanding the value of the work itself.

A female operator highlighted the precarious life trajectory, full of restrictions,

without any alternatives to which a call center worker is subject, with little or no expectations regarding the future and leading to a permanent feeling of suffering:

> The offers that exist are basically for call centers. I can't afford a 600 euros unemployment benefit! I cannot afford it, so I must keep working all the time. However, I think we're all going to end up in a call center again.

When job offers are scarce (Bourdieu, 1998) the employer instils in the worker the constant fear of imminent unemployment due to failure to meet the goals set by the organization (Dejours, 1999), resulting from the manifestation of a mode of domination based on the institution of a generalized and permanent state of insecurity that aims to coerce workers into accepting their condition of exploitation. As one female call center worker stated:

> The precariousness is increasing, even in the call centers. When I started, I didn't feel that it was precarious and however it increased in the post-Troika period. What will happen now, and during this period, is that they pay even less or even offer less conditions and put more pressure on you stating, "if you don't want to come another one will". The high levels of unemployment will allow those who are employing to do it with less conditions because there will always be candidates to occupy that position and there will always be people available.

In the case of Upwork freelancers, who are highly skilled, they organize in flexible alternative movements through on-line groups, to promote their digital presence. Airbnb owners do not perceive themselves as traditional workers, nor do they feel represented by traditional unions, for, in general, they are entrepreneurs who own and manage their property. They have opted to organize in civil movements and business associations that have filled the void left by the unions. In the case of Uber drivers, they tend to join business or professional associations, while others are members of a union. Deliverers lack bargaining power, which is partially related to their low-skilled tasks and to the lack of value of their property (bicycle or motorbike), and they are prone to organize in cooperatives and workers' movements and groups on social media to struggle for their labour rights, as in the case of Estafetas em Luta. Regarding these last two, they have been engaging in several street demonstrations, especially during the pandemic, in Porto and Lisbon, and they have also been involved with the Sindicato dos Trabalhadores de Transportes Rodoviários e Urbanos de Portugal (Boavida et al., 2021). In the case of Tuk-Tuks, they are mostly organized in a workers' association, Associação Nacional de Condutores de Animação Turística, trying to fill the gap left by the unions, defending and informing about the interests

related to tourist animation vehicle drivers and tourist animators, engaging in frequent dialogue with the government, and promoting training courses related with this service. Nevertheless, most drivers were sceptical regarding the role and action of unions, since there are no trade unions that reveal a greater interest in representing them, leading to low levels in unionization (Carmo et al., 2021).

In a growing risk society (Beck, 1999) that promotes personal success and independence from the employer, the position of the call center operator continues to involve situations of extreme precariousness, promoting the uberization of call centers through situations of bogus self-employment. As one male trade union delegate mentioned:

> There are still hirings for this system in which people work as an individual worker, that is, I think the uberization process starts from that specific work of vehicle drivers, food deliveries, but it is also a model to be expanded for other sectors. It is an easy model to be created for call centers, as long as you have the software installed anyone can do the task, he/she has in the application for that day. Dismissing a person is just removing the application's registration, that is, there are no contracts involved. It is a very interesting system for companies. I think it will be a constant move towards this digital precariousness that some advocate as the most dynamic work system.

According to Antunes (2018), the worker becomes a proletarian-of-himself within a situation of transfiguration in salaried work, where the worker becomes a service provider, carrying all the risks and costs, being under the command of the algorithm, programmed to control, in a rigorously way, and to intensify the workforce movements. As STCC's president mentioned:

> With the pandemic, the various ads that are being placed concern working under the regime of teleworking, but you must have your internet, your computer, own all the equipment. We are talking about the fact that people must hold the conditions! If the computer breaks down, it's a salary that goes to life, plus all the extra expenses. Not to mention that some new hires do not even have a contract anymore, it's green receipts[8]. There are companies that are signing new contracts without access to meal allowance, in addition to green receipts, false internships and false training grants!

With the transition to teleworking and the consequent increase in costs for the worker, situations of spoliation became increasingly frequent. Workers are being deprived from health and safety conditions, mainly an accident insurance and a

8. Green receipts' consist of a contractual figure attributed to independent workers and freelancers, even if that situation might not be checked. The self-employed person has to make Social Security deductions depending on income and, in some cases, may have to pay VAT.

fixed salary, being held responsible for the purchase of their working materials, such as backpacks, motorcycles, fuel expenses, mobile phone and access to the internet. These exploitative situations, where dismissals are imminent, are perpetuated through flexible and informal precarious work regimes, such as renewable and zero-hour contracts, green receipts or even informality where there is the absence of a contract. The most important asset for platforms is workers' intellectual property, such as the company's software, algorithms and user data, which is created not only by customers, but mainly by workers in a situation of exploitation (alienation). In this sense, all workers are dependent on platforms to sell their labour, regardless of the use of their means of production (Boavida et al., 2021).

Discussion

The "old tactics" of traditional unionism have been intertwined with more recent tactics, including a broader and more struggling sense of solidarity at the international level, through cyberactivism. In fact, a "new social movement unionism", a revival on traditional unionism which embraces a struggle for common causes, comprising a greater international awareness in society for social struggle and increased union activity, involving labour and human rights, creating a global synergy with other unions and movements, through a shop floor level unionism (Englert et al., 2020; Roque, 2018a). Not just social media, but digital platforms can become relevant tools, become relevant tools, used for work, to effectively organize used for work to effectively organize and mobilize workers, face internal opposition in traditional unions claiming for labour rights, organize labour campaigns, recruit and exchange information, and renew and strengthen union-led movements (Woodcock & Cant, 2022).

Nevertheless, issues remain regarding the rate of unionization, which is mainly affected by the precariousness of employment relationships, allowing the turnover rate to be extremely high; the competitiveness among unions and their inadaptation, especially in terms of action; the lack of knowledge regarding the labour market reality and the problems and aspirations of the working-class; and the inability to deal with the atypical and precarious working conditions of workers in general, and especially related with digital platform work. In a scenario of teleworking and uberization of work the difficulties regarding unionization increase, as one female call center union delegate mentioned:

> The advantages of teleworking are all immediate, but the disadvantages can only be seen in the medium and long term. Being at home does not help to organize. Being able to do something

> physical with workers is more complicated nowadays because we are talking about people who can work and live from a chair at home, so, why shouldn't they also protest from a chair at home? But the truth is that without going out into the street nothing is achieved, it becomes more difficult to mobilize. A company with a high level of turnover will lose half of its workers and in two years who will no longer be here. So, who are the new workers? Unions will never find out who they are unless they contact the union. We don't even know how much these companies grows.

In a post-pandemic scenario, the exploitation of work continues to affect all professional sectors, threatening human life, either by the imminent exposure to contagion, either through the imminent risk of dismissal, deregulation and lack of social protection. However, the main issue remains in the lack of recognition of the different services regarding digital platform work as professional categories, as in the case of call centers and couriers. Temporary work agencies are still a determining factor for the perpetuation of labour exploitation. An operator can work for several companies in a single day, have a precarious contract renewable daily, weekly, or monthly, or not have a contract at all, being caught in the web of informality, and be surveilled through a volatile machinery system governed by the metrics stipulated by the algorithm.

With the subordination to the algorithm and the transfer of risks from the enterprises to self-employed workers, feeding up the precariousness system itself, we are witnessing an increasing process of dehumanization of work, where workers become obsolete and disposable, being "outdated" and replaced by less demanding and flexible ones, or even by machines (Abílio, 2017; Kalleberg, 2009). However, this structural precariousness of labour relations, of maximized Taylorist exploitation, has resulted in a multiplicity of forms of resistance and even revolt, as we have analyzed (Perocco, Antunes & Basso, 2021).

However, even though the proposal for a directive, presented by the European Union, regarding regulation on digital platform work was approved in December 2021, through law 45/2018, contemplating the presumption of an employment contract, as recommended by article 12 of the labour code, platforms continue to deny workers their most basic labour rights. The existence of precarious and informal employment relationships prevents workers from making payments to the Social Security system and from accessing social and labour rights, whether in employment or unemployment; earnings are uncertain and of low value, as workers are only paid for the tasks they perform and not for the hours they wait or look for gigs; working hours extension beyond 40 hours per week; safety and hygiene

conditions at work are scarce, especially in the absence of insurance against accidents at work that protect the worker not only in these situations, but also in matters of aggression, physical violence and theft; the unbridled competition between workers, promoted by companies, in order to increase productivity (gamification) (Woodcock & Johnson, 2017) and availability to work, leading not only to situations of physical exhaustion, but, mostly, to psychological and occupational diseases and to the atomization of the worker, which constitutes an obstacle for union organization and socialization with other colleagues (CUT & Instituto Observatório Social, 2021). This inaccessibility of the most basic labour rights also leads to situations of vulnerability, exclusion and social inequality.

Even though these workers face serious precariousness regarding their working conditions, platform work is a practice mainly engaged in by people with other sources of income, as a supplement to earnings from another job, often a full-time one. This trend leads to an increase in the working hours, bringing negative implications for the work-life balance. Also the digital management practices associated with platform work have extended broadly across the labour market to other sectors. In that sense, platform workers cannot be considered as a new class or a distinct group on the labour market that experiences difficulties specific only to platform workers (Huws et al., 2019).

Conclusions

This article highlighted the fact that, in a post-pandemic scenario, digital and platform work is transforming the nature of work and what it means to be working class. The most vulnerable, women, LBTQIA+, racialized and migrant workers (Antunes, 2022; Roque, 2022), are the ones who have been experiencing the most atypical forms of increasing labour precariousness (work on-demand), employment status (bogus self-employment and informality), and management, control and surveillance (algorithm). Nevertheless, these vulnerable workers are also the ones who have been taking the leadership and organizing, reinventing themselves in new forms of class power which is being rebuilt through workplace solidarity among the working-class, using digital and cyber activism, that is, technological tools have not only served to refine the control and exploitation of workers, but are also used to boost the reorganization of the working-class in their struggles against the precarious process to which they are subjected. Besides the different challenges that have been presented, unions must seek synergies, listen, and engage with workers, as well as with other social actors, seeking to struggle against the atomization process that digital platforms are trying to implement, providing them with weapons, guidance, and voice they need to struggle for their labour and human rights.

According to Huws (2003) this is a fractured, uncommitted economy, in which the normalization of an accelerated globalization process implied the adaptation to an incessant lifestyle, that is, one that is not restricted to a temporal and spatial reference. This same logic was transposed to the labour field, in which workers were forced to adopt lifestyles and cultures from other countries in the performance of their work, being forced to a permanent and frantic pace of work. These situations have been occurring mainly in the field of digital and platform work. This fracturing of space, time, and work also leads to the fracturing of workers' identities, where there is a clear erosion of the boundaries of the workplace and working hours. Occupational trajectories are built into a downward spiral. Work is lived in the present time, without any projections regarding the future (Antunes, 2011; 2020; Doellgast, Lillie & Pulignano, 2018; Kalleberg, 2018; Keune & Pedacci, 2020; Carmo et al., 2021).

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