

Dynamics of Platform Architecture and Labor Unrest: Mobilizing and Contesting Solidarity in the 2021–2022 Foodpanda Delivery Rider Strikes in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Weaving together relational approaches to collective action as well as the concepts of platform architecture and social media affordances, this qualitative study examines the manifestation and contestation of worker solidarity in the platform-mediated gig economy. Based on semi-structured interviews with 30 participants—including riders and labor rights group members involved in the 2021–2022 Foodpanda delivery rider strikes—this article offers a relational and processual view of how worker solidarity was formed, consolidated, and contested throughout the strikes in Hong Kong’s post-union era. The analysis reveals that riders’ grievances against Foodpanda emerged in response to the evolving platform architecture, while non-workplace factors such as the sociopolitical context further shaped riders’ repertoires of action. Riders strategically utilized interpersonal communication networks and various social media affordances to mobilize and strengthen solidarity. Worker solidarity, however, was contested due to internal conflicts among riders and the fear of police. Algorithmic control also serves as a repressive tool to demobilize workers. Thus, solidarity was fragmented and transient. This study theorizes the platform architecture as part of the dynamic process through which worker solidarity is mobilized and contested. It contributes to understanding the varieties of platform labor unrest by examining the relational dynamics of worker solidarity in the changing political context where labor power is likely to be weakened. As such, platform labor unrest is deeply embedded within a wider platform ecology and socio-political context, where workers mobilize among themselves and interact with their opponents, alliances, and other social actors.

Keywords

solidarity, platform architecture, algorithmic control, gig economy, social media affordances

Platform labor unrest has proliferated globally (Umney et al., 2024), often involving some form of collective organizing through social media (Grohmann et al., 2023). Food delivery is one of the sectors with the most documented instances of labor unrest (Umney et al., 2024).¹ Although research has documented how the contradictions of the labor process create room for worker solidarity (e.g., Lei, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021), scholars of industrial relations and social movement studies have emphasized how non-workplace factors—such as supportive communities and political activism traditions—shape workers’ agency (Atzeni & Cini, 2024) and the dynamics of mobilization (della Porta et al., 2022). This raises questions about how worker solidarity evolves and intersects with other social actors within the broader political opportunity structure.

This article examines the dynamics of platform labor unrest through a qualitative case study of the 2021–2022

Foodpanda delivery rider strikes² in Hong Kong (HK) (hereafter, Foodpanda strikes).³ Weaving together the concept of platform architecture (Lei, 2021) and the framework of solidarity in action (della Porta et al., 2022), I consider how both workplace and non-workplace factors shape worker solidarity. Platform architecture highlights how the “technological, legal, and organizational dimensions of control and management” in the labor process shape solidarity (Lei, 2021, p. 284), while the latter offers a relational and processual approach to analyzing the unfolding of worker mobilization

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and action repertoires through protest events (della Porta et al., 2022). In this study, riders in HK utilized social media and interpersonal networks to organize a series of strikes against Foodpanda's continuous pay cuts and algorithmic labor control in 2021 and 2022. I analyze how worker solidarity—conceptualized as “a set of bridging and bonding processes which are embedded in moral discourses, political coalitions, and social performances” (Morgan & Pulignano, 2020, p. 20)—was mobilized, strengthened, and contested during and following the strikes. Building on theorizations of digital affordances for solidarity (e.g., Bonini et al., 2024; Zhou & Pun, 2024), I examine how riders strategically appropriated various digital platforms (e.g., Telegram and WhatsApp) for practical purposes (Poon & Tse, 2024).

I address the following research questions: How did Foodpanda's platform architecture facilitate and constrain the emergence, consolidation, and contestation of worker solidarity during and after the 2021–2022 strikes in HK? How did delivery riders enact the affordances of various digital platforms to mobilize solidarity and make collective claims? How did the interactions between riders, the evolving platform architecture, and the socio-political context shape the mobilization dynamics of platform labor unrest?

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, including riders and labor rights group members involved in the 2021–2022 strikes, I offer a relational and processual view of worker solidarity at various stages of the strikes. The analysis reveals that riders' grievances against Foodpanda emerged in the face of evolving platform architecture within the labor process, whereas non-workplace factors such as the tightening of political control further shaped riders' repertoires of action. Active solidarity (Atzeni, 2010; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020) emerged in the 2021 strike as riders strategically utilized interpersonal communication networks and various social media affordances to cultivate mutual bonds among riders, collectively articulate and share injustice frames, collaborate with labor rights organizations, and mobilize collective action. Despite the relative success in mobilizing associational power—“the various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organizations of workers” (Wright, 2000, p. 962)—solidarity was contested due to internal conflicts during the negotiation process with Foodpanda and the fear of police. These factors, coupled with Foodpanda's modification of the platform architecture, subsequently demobilized workers and constrained the mobilization of the 2022 strike, resulting in fragmented and short-lived solidarity.

This study makes three contributions. First, it offers a relational understanding of how worker solidarity emerged and was contested through the interplay between riders, platform architecture, police, and labor organizations. Industrial relations scholarship has theorized the relationship between labor unrest and the labor process (e.g., Atzeni, 2010), while social movement studies have problematized the relational dynamics and contexts of mobilization (e.g., McAdam et al.,

2001). Communication studies can build on these insights to offer a complementary perspective, focusing on how workplace- and non-workplace-related dynamics are conditioned by workers' social media and communication practices during the strikes. It is concerned with the embeddedness of worker solidarity within a complex platform ecology (Poon & Tse, 2024) where riders enact various digital affordances (e.g., Zhou & Pun, 2024) for mobilizing collective action. Second, it deepens our understanding of the opportunities for worker mobilization and the threats posed by the evolving platform architecture between a series of episodes of contention. Specifically, algorithmic control can serve as a repressive tool to demobilize workers. Third, the 2021–2022 strikes occurred in the “post-union” context (Lin, 2022) following the disbandment of the major independent unions after the enactment of the National Security Law (NSL) in June 2020 (A. Chan & Lau, 2023). This case presents a fertile ground to explore the formation of worker solidarity in the changing political context where institutional and associational power are likely to be weakened. It thus contributes to understanding the varieties of platform labor unrest (Raféls de Broves et al., 2024; Schmalz et al., 2023).

Literature Review

Platform Architecture and Worker Solidarity in the Gig Economy

Critical scholarship has demonstrated how labor platforms exercise techno-normative control over gig workers through algorithmic task allocation, evaluation, and surveillance (e.g., Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Veen et al., 2020). At the heart of algorithmic management are “design-based” techniques of control that reshape workers' choice architecture (Gritsenko & Wood, 2022) and govern the possibilities of interactions (Srnicke, 2017). Platforms act as architects (Vallas & Schor, 2020) who make technical choices regarding what options are available to workers and how such options are presented (Maffie, 2024; Tiwana et al., 2010). Platforms restrict workers' decision-making capabilities through information asymmetries in worker-facing app interfaces (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016) and nudge workers to continuously accept new tasks through gamification techniques (Vasudevan & Chan, 2022).

Platform architecture structures the work process into a series of “moments of choices,” where workers appear to gain a sense of mastery in navigating and even manipulating algorithmic management, albeit within a highly constrained choice environment (Cameron, 2024, p. 473). Labor consent is produced through this continuous process of interpreting the rules of algorithmic management (Vasudevan & Chan, 2022) and exercising choices (Cameron, 2024). Nevertheless, workers are aware of how the platform architecture is designed to create “the illusion of agency” (Dubal, 2023, p. 1964) and thus attempt to subvert and disrupt algorithmic

management, often through everyday work practices (e.g., Bonini & Treré, 2024; N. K. Chan, 2022; Chen, 2018).

Early research often framed collective resistance as a “theoretical puzzle” (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021), attributing this to the individualization of work tasks facilitated by algorithmic management and the fragmentation of distributed gig workforces (della Porta et al., 2022). Yet, Umney et al. (2024) documented 1,271 instances of labor unrest related to geographically tethered work from January 2017 to May 2020, with over half occurring in Europe (29.76%) and Asia (27.27%). One notable regional variation is that informal groups of workers have the strongest presence in Asia. Scholars have called attention to the formation of worker solidarity (Cant, 2020; della Porta et al., 2022; Lei, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020) and varieties of organizing practices (Schmalz et al., 2023; Rafélis de Broves et al., 2024).

Of particular relevance is Lei’s (2021) conceptualization of platform architecture, which extends beyond the technological dimension of labor management to include its intersections with legal and organizational dimensions in shaping the dynamics of worker mobilization. Workers’ expression of solidarity is motivated by shared grievances over poor working conditions rooted in the capitalist labor process (Lei, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). Maffie (2024), for instance, found that Instacart workers’ grievances are attached to “the culmination of design decisions within a platform (i.e., its *architecture*)” (p. 348) such as the platform’s unfair performance evaluation system and pay structure. Lei (2021) adds that organizational control (e.g., supervisory relationships between the platform and workers) shapes the availability of free space, whereas the legal design of platforms shapes the repertoires of action. This is far from a static process because intraplatform algorithmic changes can influence workers’ capability to mobilize among themselves (Mendonça & Kougiannou, 2023).

Worker solidarity emerges in and through work experiences and as a result of collective action (Atzeni, 2010; della Porta et al., 2022; Fantasia, 1988). Kelly (1998) questions “how individuals are transformed into collective actors willing and able to create and sustain collective organization and engage in collective action against their employers” (p. 38). Central to his mobilization theory is how (union) leaders can frame and attribute workers’ senses of injustice or grievances—that are, “the conviction that an event, action or situation is ‘wrong’ or illegitimate” (p. 27)—to an employer. Atzeni (2010) has introduced the concepts of *embryonic* and *active* solidarity. Embryonic solidarity occurs at work as workers develop mutual associations and recognize the power of the employer. Workers activate such preexisting forms of solidarity through collective action. Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020) found that riders in the United Kingdom and Italy expressed solidarity through day-to-day mutual support and consolidated it through strikes.

Following recent scholarly calls, I consider how non-workplace factors shape platform labor unrest in relational contexts (Atzeni & Cini, 2024; della Porta et al., 2022). Studies have shown that political activism traditions, supportive communities, and political alliances might shape workers’ organizing practices (Atzeni & Cini, 2024). In addition, worker solidarity is a relational process “as it partly depends on external structural conditions, but it is also partly a social construction of the actors” (della Porta et al., p. 92). Platforms, like employers in industrial workplaces (Fantasia, 1988), would employ repressive strategies to demobilize worker solidarity. The evolving platform architecture can thus be considered part of the dynamic process through which platforms attempt to ward off threats and oppose innovative collective action. Accordingly, I examine how solidarity was formed, consolidated, and contested as riders interpreted the evolving platform architecture and formed alliances with other social actors throughout HK’s Foodpanda strikes.

Communication and Gig Workers’ Organizing

Fundamental to worker solidarity is the recognition of shared bonds, mutual dependence, and injustice frames (Atzeni, 2010; Fantasia, 1988; Morgan & Pulignano, 2020). Communication plays a critical role in articulating and circulating workers’ struggles (Grohmann et al., 2023) or what Atzeni (2010) calls embryonic solidarity. In the geographically tethered gig economy, workers often communicate with others at physical meeting points (e.g., Grohmann et al., 2023). In addition, workers utilize social media to share work-related knowledge and stories (Grohmann et al., 2023; Vilasís-Pamos et al., 2024), cultivate expertise (N. K. Chan, 2019; Soriano & Cabañes, 2020), and develop collective identities (Cant, 2020; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). Thus, physical places and social media can be considered free spaces where workers can develop supportive communities and solidarity without strong oversight by platforms (Atzeni & Cini, 2024; Lei, 2021).

Scholars have highlighted the potential of social media affordances to cultivate worker solidarity (Bonini et al., 2024; Grohmann et al., 2023; Zhou & Pun, 2024). There are two notable insights. First, according to Bonini et al. (2024), “food delivery apps are designed to prevent workers from talking to, learning from and supporting each other” (p. 565). Nevertheless, workers can supplement such “missing affordances” by enacting cooperative affordances of online private chat groups to form communities of practices, resist platforms, and cultivate mutualistic bonds. While affordances are made possible by the technical components of platform architecture, they are shaped by users’ practices. Pinpointing the affordances of association, discourses, and mobilization, Zhou and Pun (2024) showed how DiDi drivers in China utilized WeChat to form mass self-communication networks

and strengthen solidarity. Second, workers strategically used platform-specific affordances to advance their interest. Grohmann et al. (2023), for instance, found that Brazilian riders once organized a strike on Facebook but soon changed to use WhatsApp for communication due to the lack of anonymity on Facebook. While riders primarily used WhatsApp for daily communication, the affordances of YouTube and Instagram facilitated the rise of “influencers” in workers’ communities.

These insights align with research on cross-platform affordances (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Poon & Tse, 2024), where expressions of solidarity are conditioned by delivery platforms and social media with distinct forms of affordances. In this study, Foodpanda’s platform architecture might appear deliberately designed to constrain worker solidarity. However, riders strategically used social media platforms to frame their collective action and mobilize for strikes while adapting to evolving platform architecture and socio-political context. As such, labor and social media platforms co-constitute relational spaces where worker solidarity is constructed and contested. This article helps us understand how cross-platform affordances foster and constrain worker solidarity within a broader platform ecosystem.

Situating Worker Solidarity in Context

Food delivery work is one of the main types of gig work in HK (Au-Yeung & Qiu, 2022). At the time of the strikes, Foodpanda and Deliveroo were the two main delivery platforms. Before 2019, Foodpanda employed riders under standard employment contracts but later restructured its platform-worker relationship, “re-hiring” them as independent contractors (N. K. Chan & Ou, forthcoming). Institutional power (Schmalz et al., 2023) is relatively weak due to the absence of legal protection for collective bargaining (Au-Yeung & Qiu, 2022). Furthermore, the introduction of NSL and the disbandment of major independent trade unions have arguably weakened the associational power that is traditionally related to trade unions. Nevertheless, two labor rights groups, the Catering and Hotel Industries Employees General Union and the Riders’ Rights Concern Group (the Concern Group hereafter), helped coordinate the strikes.

Despite the lack of official statistics, a sizable number of ethnic minorities (i.e., South Asians) work as riders due to employment difficulties (Leung, 2022). South Asian riders arguably played a more important role in mobilizing the 2021–2022 strikes than their Chinese counterparts (C. P. Chan & Ho, 2021), thereby participating in what Leung (2022) terms “organized visibilisation.” In early November 2021, Waqas Fida, a Pakistani rider, started to spread messages about organizing a strike with other riders through Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram after his Foodpanda account was unfairly suspended (C. P. Chan & Ho, 2021). Several active riders subsequently coordinated to mobilize

the 2-day strike on November 13 and 14. This strike pushed Foodpanda to negotiate with worker representatives, whereas the 2022 strike saw no response from Foodpanda.

Method

This study draws on semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, 28 of whom were riders who were the key organizers or participants of the 2021–2022 strikes. Participants undertook leadership work and various roles in the strikes, including core members who came up with strategies to negotiate with Foodpanda in the 2021 strike and organizers of the 2021 and 2022 strikes. The remaining participants were labor activists who helped coordinate the strikes. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. 18 of them were Chinese, and the rest were Indians ($n=6$) and Pakistanis ($n=6$). Men were overrepresented in the sample ($n=27$) because delivery is a male-dominated industry.

Interviews were conducted in person by the author or the research assistant between April 2023 and January 2024. They were conducted in either Cantonese or English, depending on participants’ preferences. They lasted 51–108 min. Pseudonyms were used to protect interviewees’ identities. Participants were compensated through a small cash incentive (HKD150; approximately USD19.18). Interview topics included participants’ background, daily work, worker-to-worker social media, participation in the 2021 and/or 2022 strikes, and their understanding of algorithms and platform work. We occasionally asked participants to show Foodpanda’s app interface and related screenshots for elicitation purposes, especially when discussing their frustrations with Foodpanda. Participants often could not maintain extensive records due to the opacity of the platform. One interviewee, for instance, was unable to locate the independent contractor agreement because it was signed on an iPad at Foodpanda’s office, and the email record was lost.

I followed an inductive approach to analyzing the interview data through open, axial, and selective coding (LaRossa, 2005). Data collection and analysis were iterative. For example, after a participant mentioned Foodpanda’s response after the 2021 strike, we began asking related questions in later interviews. The analysis attended to how participants interpreted the strikes’ emergence, rationalized their tactics, and discussed their relationship with other riders and social actors during and after the strikes.

Findings

Sources of Grievances Within Foodpanda’s Platform Architecture

Echoing previous research (e.g., Atzeni, 2010; Lei, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020), I found that Foodpanda’s platform architecture, particularly its technological dimension, resulted in riders’ shared grievances, contributing to

embryonic solidarity. Besides unfair suspension which motivated Fida to organize the 2021 strike, participants expressed major concerns about continuous pay cuts, opaque pay structure, and the in-app aerial map used for fee calculations (C. P. Chan & Ho, 2021). Gordon, a Pakistani rider, explained, “The company started to drop the [basic service] fees like HKD1 every two weeks.” It set the stage for heated discussions among riders about Foodpanda’s poor working conditions before the 2021 strike.

Riders’ grievances might have been inadvertently escalated by the evolving organizational dimension of Foodpanda’s platform architecture, particularly after the elimination of effective communication and grievance resolution mechanisms. Foodpanda’s platform architecture initially enabled immediate communication between riders and Foodpanda, although these functions were not integrated into the worker-facing app. Riders could communicate directly with Foodpanda’s operations team via phone calls or Telegram. Recalling his experience as a former full-time employed rider, Simon noted there were “fewer problems” because it was “easy to call [Foodpanda] when you’re wrong in your direction.” However, the shift to an in-app “self-service tool” in 2019 drastically limited platform-riders communication, which frustrated riders and led to critiques of the platform’s ineffective support. Ken shared, “We all feel powerless and believe that even opening a ticket won’t help. Sometimes we wait three or four days for a response.” Hence, one of the 2021 strike demands was to have “at least one physical enquiry center in HK for receiving riders’ complaints.”

Before 2021, riders could express their grievances through the “captain” system. Specifically, Foodpanda appointed a few experienced riders as captains with higher salaries to communicate with and train other riders within specific delivery zones using WhatsApp and Telegram groups. Captains had direct communication channels with Foodpanda. Kevin, a former captain, noted, “I feel that [the] captain’s role should be a good bridge between riders and the company.” While acknowledging “the company used that bridge only for its benefits,” he stressed captains always “keep fighting for the riders’ rights,” and that [w]hen we were not captains . . . problems started again [and] we have [the] strikes.” Echoing Kevin’s sentiments, Joseph added, “Previously, whenever people tried to strike, we calmed them in our areas.” Nevertheless, the capabilities of captains should be interpreted with caution. Evan, shared, “We merely reflect the problems that riders raised . . . They might misunderstand and think we have authority, but we don’t.” Moreover, the strength of the captain–worker relationship varied across delivery zones and ethnic groups. Among the participants we interviewed, Pakistani and Indian riders tended to maintain closer relationships with their captains than their Chinese counterparts, possibly because of the “brotherly bond” among South Asian riders (Leung, 2022).

The captain system, a key organizational aspect of platform architecture, shaped the dynamics of strikes in three

ways. First, rather than preventing workers from communicating with one another (Bonini et al., 2024), this platform–captain–rider arrangement may have inadvertently created free spaces for developing social networks. Second, the formal dismissal of this system does not necessarily mean the disappearance of mutualistic associations between riders. Instead, these social networks persisted (N. K. Chan & Ou, forthcoming), and facilitated the mobilization of the 2021 strike, as illustrated below. Third, as Lei (2021) highlights, workers theoretically have a wide range of options to respond to perceived injustice. The dismissal of the captain system, coupled with Foodpanda’s ineffective in-app support, likely increased the appeal of strikes because riders could no longer rely upon formalized or interpersonal communication channels to voice their concerns.

The legal dimension of Foodpanda’s platform architecture, together with HK’s evolving socio-political context, limited the institutional mechanisms for riders to voice their grievances. Classified as independent contractors, riders lack the legal standing to challenge Foodpanda’s labor control and suspension decisions, even when perceived as unfair. Kevin shared, “It can terminate me now. I cannot challenge it in any way lawful,” although he considered the freelancing contract a “false contract” because the acceptance rate constrained riders’ ability to choose preferred orders. In addition, Mason shared that some Chinese riders had initially attempted to contact a pro-democracy Legislative Council member to complain about Foodpanda’s massive pay cuts almost a year before the 2021 strike, but this institutional mechanism was no longer available due to the tightening of political control. This instance highlights the importance of considering how non-workplace factors incited riders to join the 2021 strike and shaped worker solidarity.

Mobilizing and Enacting Solidarity Through Communication in the 2021 Strike

I now analyze how worker solidarity was mobilized in the 2021 strike through communication at work and via social media. Crucially, none of the riders I interviewed had organized strikes in the past. For them, the strike was a learning process. As Joseph recalled about the internal discussions among the organizers, “If you choose the wrong day and time, then it could be trouble. It could be useless, and then you got nothing.” Solidarity development involves creating bonds that tie riders together and extending their networks to collaborate with other social actors.

Physical spaces where riders communicated at work and social media supportive communities acted as free spaces for riders to overcome individualization. Although riders lacked a shared workspace, they connected while waiting for orders at restaurants and other physical meeting points. Mason shared, “We all know each other in this area.” As riders become familiar with others, they might invite others to join location-specific WhatsApp or Telegram groups.

These interpersonal communication networks were enabled by Foodpanda's labor process (e.g., waiting for orders) but occurred outside the platform architecture, leaving riders largely free from control. While these interactions did not necessarily foster close connections, the acts of sharing potentially created a sense of bonding (see Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020) because riders could discuss their daily work and complain about the platform and customers in these private chat groups (N. K. Chan & Ou, forthcoming).

Although large Facebook groups about delivery work existed, riders preferred WhatsApp and Telegram groups for mobilization. This was partly because Facebook groups included both riders and customers and partly due to platform-specific affordances. Sam reflected on this when describing his experience organizing several WhatsApp groups for riders and mobilizing the strike:

We realized that Facebook's functionalities were too extensive, and the group management was too complicated . . . Those who rarely use Facebook can still receive the updates via WhatsApp . . . We post the [WhatsApp group] link on Facebook group, so other riders could join and chat together.

Riders enacted the affordances of social and digital media to collectively frame the strike and mobilize resistance (Bonini et al., 2024; Zhou & Pun, 2024). Fida started by sharing posters about the strike that articulated the injustice frames, such as labor exploitation (e.g., pay cuts) and workplace safety, via a WhatsApp group predominantly composed of South Asian riders. The WhatsApp group soon reached the maximum number of participants (i.e., the architectural design of the platform), leading Fida to create a Telegram group on November 9, four days before the strike. As Gordon recalled, "within 3–4 days, we had more than 1,000 members in the [Telegram] group . . . because they sent the link to their local groups" on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram.

The majority of the interviewees, including the riders and members of the labor rights groups, first learned about the 2021 strike via WhatsApp or Telegram groups. Khan stated, "In the [Telegram and WhatsApp] groups, I saw people from various districts expressing a desire to strike together." He added, "They said that if Foodpanda keeps cutting the fees, Deliveroo could also start cutting pays because no one is standing up against it." This resonates with Maffie's (2024) point about relational grievances. While Maffie highlights how "gig workers develop grievances against companies with comparably worse work systems" (p. 358), Khan's account illustrates how riders' grievances extended beyond Foodpanda's platform architecture to the imagined impacts of its pay cuts on the overall gig work environment.

The networks of mobilization went beyond the circulation of information through the public Telegram group. First, riders used interpersonal networks to spread strike information and persuade riders to refuse Foodpanda's orders. Second,

preexisting, smaller WhatsApp and Telegram groups, including the aforementioned captain networks, allowed riders to discuss strike tactics in private. Joseph shared that in the former captains' WhatsApp group, "they were just discussing and planning about the strike . . . and how to gather more riders and [the] time of the strike." However, *not* all former captains supported the 2021 strike. Kevin and other riders in the same delivery zone did not join the strike. He explained, "Nobody came to us to discuss the strike issue . . . We also want to strike . . . but I never met that guy [i.e., the strike organizer] . . . Some of my colleagues have reservations."

Third, active riders organized press conferences to express their grievances during the strike. The labor rights groups helped contact the media after riders mentioned the idea of organizing a press conference in the Telegram group, which contributed to the bridging process in solidarity development. Sam reasoned:

By making more people in Hong Kong aware of this, we can get help in solving our problems. We contacted various newspapers and media outlets . . . So, we spread our messages to the public and let them know that our lives are completely different from what the company said.

Sam's narrative might reveal what Chun (2009) terms "symbolic leverage," a tactic adopted by precarious workers to build associational power "by winning public recognition and legitimacy for their struggle" (p. 17). Indeed, there was high media visibility of the strike, partly because South Asian riders initiated the protest (Leung, 2022) in the post-union era.

Fourth, participants collectively framed the strike demands via discussions in the public Telegram group and collaborative editing on shared Google Docs (N. K. Chan & Ou, forthcoming). While these tools were not designed for strike mobilization, their cooperative affordances (Bonini et al., 2024) were activated by riders, as anyone with access to the Telegram group and documents could contribute to their demands. The key organizers and labor rights group members subsequently consolidated them in a private Telegram group. Stephan explained, "we consolidated the opinions from the Telegram group and adjusted the range to a reasonable level. For example, some asked for HKD60 per order, while some asked for HKD90 per order. We ultimately discussed and came up with a reasonable demand." He added, "Every rider played an important role in this process . . . because everything that we [i.e., the organizers] said was based on everyone's discussion. We just passed on the opinions." Eventually, they listed 15 demands, with the primary one being "a minimum order fee of HKD50 (approximately USD6.39) for riders and HKD30 (approximately USD3.84) for walkers and cyclists."

Besides the collective withdrawal of labor on November 13 and 14, hundreds of riders joined public demonstrations outside Pandamart—Foodpanda's grocery stores where riders are frequently assigned orders—in different areas. As

Pandamart is a key node in Foodpanda's grocery delivery process, this tactic not only symbolized resistance against the company but also enabled riders to persuade others to join the strike while disrupting the logistics of taking grocery orders. The organizers came up with such tactics through internal discussions and the use of Telegram's polling features for collective decision-making. Alice shared two examples of using the polling feature:

Some riders said we should go to Foodpanda's headquarters office. Some told us to protest outside the office in Tsim Sha Shui. Some told us to gather at Pandamart. Some others said we could just go on strike at home. Then, people voted on the tactics. Another poll was taken on the second night of the strike, asking whether riders would continue to strike.

Yet, Alice was skeptical about the voting mechanism because "when discussing whether you should continue to strike, it depended on Waqas, the organizer of the strike." She added, "Waqas announced to stop the strike on Sunday, though the most voted option was to continue striking until Foodpanda agreed to the key demands."

Fragmented Solidarity in Crisis

While riders enacted the affordances of Telegram and WhatsApp to forge associations among riders, frame the strike, and mobilize among themselves, solidarity consolidation was not plain sailing for three reasons. First, while the Concern Group helped facilitate mutualistic bonds among riders from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds by translating the strike information into Chinese and English within the public Telegram group, riders' private social media groups remained segregated. Many participants, regardless of their ethnicity, believed that South Asian riders exhibited stronger "unity" compared to their Chinese counterparts, possibly because of their ethnic kinship (Leung, 2022) and the close relationship between former captains and their fellow riders. Evan shared, "Chinese captains are relatively more disorganized . . . We don't have that kind of influence." John, an Indian rider and former captain, echoed this sentiment as he claimed to mobilize over 100 riders to support the strike but observed only a few Chinese riders at the demonstration. The differing mobilization capacities likely led some South Asian riders to believe that Chinese riders did not strongly support the strike.

Second, there was fear of police among riders. In 2021, the government upheld social distancing restrictions due to COVID-19. During public demonstrations, police reportedly used the blue flag—which was used "as police stepped up countermeasures through a national security law and other enforcement action"—to warn riders that their demonstration was illegal (Chau, 2021). Hence, the fear of being prosecuted not only led riders to "try their best to gather in groups of four" during public demonstrations (C. P. Chan & Ho,

2021) but also potentially limited their participation. Nick, for example, reasoned, "People would be concerned about police . . . so a lot of people were frightened to join." Simon also shared, "When local Hongkongers saw police, they ran away. We [i.e., South Asians] are not afraid. Police check me millions of times . . . I'm not doing [anything] against the government. I'm doing something for my own night." While we lack sufficient evidence to validate Simon's claims about the relationship between ethnicity and orientations toward the police, the fear of police likely increased the perceived cost of strike participation.

Third, worker solidarity was fragmented due to the participants' assessments of the strike, particularly the negotiation outcomes. On November 14, Foodpanda agreed to meet with the striking riders two days later. Subsequently, a few key organizers, including South Asian and Chinese riders, and representatives of the two labor rights groups formed a "negotiation team." There was only one day for the team to discuss their negotiation strategies. The team utilized Telegram's affordances to collect opinions from the riders and mobilize riders to gather outside Foodpanda's office to show their support. The team prioritized the minimum order fee as the most urgent demand. Only a few riders were allowed to meet with Foodpanda's representatives in the negotiation meetings on November 16 and 18. As Alice recalled, the negotiation team tried to keep in contact with other riders, but it was difficult to do so. Specifically, the team found it challenging to clearly communicate the entire negotiation process through text messages in public Telegram groups, especially given that the meeting could not be live-streamed. They also wanted to avoid potential confusion about the outcomes, as riders who had not attended the meeting might misinterpret messages and the complex dynamics of the meetings without sufficient explanation. Therefore, they decided not to send many messages about the negotiations before finalizing a deal with Foodpanda. Ultimately, the negotiation team had to rely on their understanding of "what the riders wanted to have" to make final decisions.

During the meetings, Foodpanda refused to accept the primary demand. Instead, it proposed increasing the peak hour bonus contingent on riders' acceptance rates. Nevertheless, the negotiation team reached a consensus with Foodpanda to end the strike on November 18. Foodpanda promised to freeze the basic service fee until June 2022 and agreed to some demands (e.g., rolling out a new map before February 2022). When asked why the negotiation team accepted Foodpanda's offer, a member explained, "The meeting took [a] very long time [. . .] and everybody was very tired [of] talking, and we [felt Foodpanda was] very stubborn." He added, "We [had] to finish [the strike] as soon as possible, although there was a lot of support to continue the strike, [we] understood the situation could be bad if we continue." Specifically, he referred to the divide between part-time and full-time riders. While the former could potentially strike for longer, the latter were constrained by financial burdens.

Participants expressed ambivalent sentiments toward the negotiation process. There were two main categories of responses. The first group of riders was optimistic about the strike outcome. Khan believed the outcome was “acceptable” because Foodpanda was willing to make changes and explained:

Many people said that the company wouldn’t pay attention to us and that there won’t be any results. However, we decided to try anyway . . . I think it’s not possible for us to decide everything. There is something that the company cannot do . . . But if you don’t speak up, nothing will change.

Inherent in Khan’s expression is the idea of platform dependence, as the striking riders would have returned to work. Similarly, Gordon described it as a “very successful strike” because they pushed Foodpanda to roll out a new map. During the strike, he turned on the customer-facing app and found “all the restaurants were shut down, and they [i.e., Foodpanda] don’t have riders to deliver the order.” He thus drew attention to worker solidarity by emphasizing that “nobody is working,” which led to the temporary interruption of Foodpanda’s business. This excerpt highlights two key points. First, it demonstrates how riders could gain power by disrupting delivery logistics. Second, despite the difficulty in estimating the number of striking riders due to the absence of a shared workspace, participants creatively leveraged the platform architecture to assess the effectiveness of labor unrest.

Another group of interviewees remained critical of the negotiation team in making decisions without consulting them. John shared, “Waqas needs to go down to talk to the riders and ask everyone’s opinion.” Mason also disagreed with the negotiation team’s decision: “We had nothing to do . . . How could we continue to strike when the company said that our representatives agreed to stop it?” In addition, Tom suggested Foodpanda did not keep its promise to improve riders’ pay after the strike. For him, the striking riders made a “mistake” because they “didn’t have any written promises” from Foodpanda. He added the strike “mistakenly” helped “advertise Foodpanda,” allowing the company to recruit more riders, which weakened riders’ bargaining power in the 2022 strike.

On the one hand, for optimistic participants—and some interviewees who went on strike in 2022 but did not participate in the 2021 strike—they mobilized and supported the subsequent strike because they believed that collective action could successfully push Foodpanda to make meaningful changes. As Fantasia (1988) observed in his classic study of wildcat strikes at Taylor Casting Company in the 1970s, the perceived strike success contributed to the sustained formation of worker solidarity. On the other hand, participants who were skeptical about the strike tended to be less active in organizing the 2022 strike. John initially did not participate in the 2022 strike, whereas Mason chose to participate rather

than organize it. Contrary to the culture of solidarity in industrial workplaces (Fantasia, 1988), there is a high turnover rate in delivery work. Some organizers, such as Stephan, Sam, and Simon, changed jobs after the 2021 strike.

Consolidating and Contesting Solidarities in the 2022 Strike

Worker solidarity was consolidated and contested after the 2021 strike and during the 2022 strike. Riders continued to use the public Telegram and other social media groups to discuss work-related issues and seek social support. These supportive communities subsequently became free spaces for developing embryonic solidarity. After the 2021 strike, the Concern Group built a network of riders, aiming to “transcend ethnic divisions” and educate riders to strive for labor rights.

In 2022, riders organized two 2-day strikes (i.e., October 15 & 16 and November 3 & 4) partly because of Foodpanda’s failure to fulfill the promises it had made during the negotiation meeting and partly due to the stringent labor control. For instance, Foodpanda promised to roll out a new map before February 2022, but the new map was not introduced until September 2022. Like the 2021 strike, active solidarity emerged through the coordination between riders and the Concern Group, facilitated by Telegram’s affordances. Through discussions in the Telegram group, riders came up with 11 demands, such as a fair order fee and a transparent and fair suspension process. They adopted similar tactics including mass logoffs and public demonstrations outside Pandamart. Both grievances and previous organizing efforts motivated riders, especially first-time strikers, to join the strike. Charlie denounced Foodpanda’s “tyranny,” as it failed to respect riders, restaurants, and customers. In addition, Henry was “inspired by the solidarity of South Asian riders who mobilized the strike” and “the organizing efforts of the Concern Group.”

Nevertheless, worker solidarity was contested by internal conflicts among riders, non-workplace factors, and Foodpanda’s evolving platform architecture. First, some riders expressed distrust of the strike organizers and the Concern Group. John was approached by the Concern Group to join the strike in October 2022. However, he refused to do so, and explained:

People [in my areas] don’t trust the Telegram group [i.e., the public Telegram group] due to misrepresentation in 2021. If Waqas [Fida] went down and talked to the media and the riders, the result would be different . . . I don’t think Telegram worked in the strike, because relationship only comes from real interaction . . . And trust only comes with long-term relationships.

Although Fida did not mobilize the 2022 strike, John believed the 2022 strike organizers were the same group of people who “misrepresented” riders in the 2021 strike. The feeling

of betrayal mainly existed among the former captains who were not part of the negotiation team. In addition, some participants challenged the legitimacy of the Concern Group in coordinating the strike because its members were not full-time riders. As a result, based on the Concern Group's estimate, riders from seven delivery zones took part in the October strike as compared to 11 zones in the 2021 strike. Nevertheless, John later decided to join the second strike in November, after riders expressed deep dissatisfaction with these former captains, as they felt that they did not stand for solidarity against Foodpanda's exploitation.

Second, the fear of the police came into play. Joseph and Mason shared that the police closely monitored public demonstrations in 2022. As Joseph explained, riders "were afraid that it's not really helpful; it's not really good to do a strike wherever. Because whenever you plan strike, you will be warned by the departments that you are not allowed to do this."

Third, as riders learned to strike, Foodpanda modified its platform architecture to demobilize the strike. Participants suspected that Foodpanda had hired more riders after the 2021 strike. When asked about the differences between the 2021 and 2022 strikes, Pike explained:

The 2021 strike was a success, but we failed in 2022. In 2021, there were not enough riders, and they [i.e., Foodpanda] were afraid because they didn't have many riders . . . After the 2021 strike, the management came up with better strategies. We could only threaten them when they didn't have enough riders. So they keep recruiting riders . . . New riders don't know about the old prices, so they would accept the current rates.

Kevin echoed this expression, stating that Foodpanda "played a very smart move" because "they poured money in the market, attracted people . . . to join Foodpanda."

Meanwhile, participants observed that Foodpanda revamped its technological dimension of platform architecture, which might disincentivize some riders from participating in the strike. Specifically, the pay calculation method was tailored to different delivery zones, especially after the October strike. Alice shared, "Some zones experienced sharp price reductions, while others didn't . . . After the [October] strike in Tuen Mun, Foodpanda raised prices, and therefore riders no longer participated in the November strike." However, after the strike organizers announced the date of the strikes, Foodpanda would increase the pay these days to *incentivize* riders to work rather than participate in the strike. Although riders' wages are determined by opaque algorithmic systems, they shared their earnings in social media groups, which revealed spatial wage differences. Such personalized and differentiated wages—or what Dubal (2023) terms algorithmic wage discrimination—are central to the architectural design of labor platforms. While Dubal emphasizes how platforms use opaque pricing structures to "incentivize desired behaviors" (p. 1935) and exert labor control,

this study shows how algorithmic pricing can be used to contest worker solidarity.

Despite a series of strikes in October and November 2022, Foodpanda refused to negotiate with the riders. As Alice noted, some core members of the networks organized by the Concern Group were less active and considered leaving delivery work after the 2022 strikes because they believed it was almost impossible to push for change in the future.

Conclusion

By conceptualizing the 2021–2022 Foodpanda strikes in HK as a cycle of collective contention (McAdam et al., 2001), I have examined the back-and-forth struggle between riders and Foodpanda's platform architecture in mobilizing and contesting worker solidarity. Echoing previous research on the sources of antagonism in the labor process (e.g., Lei, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021), riders' grievances emanated from Foodpanda's exploitative working conditions. The evolving platform architecture (Lei, 2021) facilitated and constrained worker solidarity. The technological (e.g., the labor process) and organizational dimensions (e.g., the captain system) of the platform architecture drove riders to build mutual bonds in online and offline free spaces. Contrary to the platform architect's intent, participants strategically appropriated Foodpanda's customer-facing apps for strike purposes. Importantly, platform architecture evolves over time. The dismissal of the grievance resolution mechanism, coupled with Foodpanda's ineffective rider support, likely increased the appeal of collective contention. While riders compelled Foodpanda to negotiate in the 2021 strike, Foodpanda subsequently altered its platform architecture, particularly its algorithmic pricing to weaken worker solidarity during the 2022 strike. The crux of the issue is not whether riders' algorithmic imaginaries align with Foodpanda's actual operations but how these imaginaries shape their willingness to participate in collective action and the repertoires of action. Future research should critically assess how platforms attempt to mitigate worker solidarity and influence the course of labor unrest.

Consistent with existing research on social media affordances and platform labor unrest (Bonini et al., 2024; Zhou & Pun, 2024), this study highlights how riders in HK strategically enacted platform-specific affordances to mobilize active solidarity during the 2021–2022 strikes. Riders compensated for Foodpanda's lack of affordances for peer-to-peer communication (Bonini et al., 2024) by utilizing more accessible instant messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram. Such worker-to-worker groups served various practical purposes, including overcoming individualization, sharing information, framing the strikes, and discussing tactics. Nevertheless, as Grohmann et al. (2023) remind us, "we should not idealize the role of social media platforms

for organizing workers as if it were a repetition of the digital activism of the early 2010s” (p. 3931). Social media, like labor platforms, are designed with distinct platform architectures, and more importantly, the former often is *not* designed for collective organizing. For instance, WhatsApp’s maximum group size initially limited riders’ ability to gather more members during the 2021 strike. While the affordances of WhatsApp and Telegram groups helped spread strike information and facilitate discussions, they might not be suited for decision-making (Grohmann et al., 2023). Although participants deployed Telegram’s polling feature to deliberate on key strike issues, voting results did not always influence the organizers’ decisions. These constraints can be exemplified by internal conflicts regarding the negotiation outcomes of the 2021 strike. By examining riders’ practices within a complex ecology of social media (Poon & Tse, 2024) and labor platforms, this study contributes to understanding the potential and limits of social media in labor activism.

Furthermore, this study contributes to understanding the role of non-workplace factors in shaping platform labor unrest. The tightening of political control in HK might ironically increase the appeal of strikes as riders lacked institutional mechanisms to challenge Foodpanda’s labor control. However, workers’ power resources have further eroded in HK’s post-union era. While labor rights groups participated in the strikes, riders primarily led and organized the strikes. The relative success of the 2021 strike might be attributed to several contextual factors in and beyond the workplace. First, riders had a relatively high level of workplace bargaining power, as their temporary stoppage of work could disrupt the logistics of Foodpanda’s operation, particularly in the 2021 strike. Second, the high media visibility of the 2021 strike (Leung, 2022) enabled riders to mobilize symbolic power (Chun, 2009). Third, ethnic bonds among South Asian riders likely contributed to mobilization during the 2021 strike (Leung, 2022), but they also shaped the subsequent contestation of worker solidarity. However, riders’ bargaining power became weakened due to their internal conflicts and (perceived) restrictions on public demonstrations. The interviewees also did not push for unionization after the strikes, largely because of the perceived political threats of collective organizing. Such contextual factors contributed to a transient and fragmented form of worker solidarity.

Overall, the study has demonstrated how the relational process of worker mobilization—largely due to the evolving platform architecture, riders’ social media practices, and the tightening of political control in the case of HK—shapes the construction and contestation of worker solidarity. It theorizes the platform architecture as part of the dynamic process of (de)mobilization of worker solidarity. Recognizing how worker mobilization is deeply embedded in the wider socio-political context, therefore, invites us to critically assess how worker solidarity varies across time and space (Raféls de Broves et al., 2024; Schmalz et al., 2023).

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Notes

1. I focus on labor unrest in the geographically-tethered gig economy due to the research purposes. For collective resistance in cloudwork, see Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021) and Wood et al. (2023).
2. I use the term “strikes” because the interviewees used it to describe their labor unrest, but riders are not entitled to the right to strike in HK due to their independent contractor status.
3. For the sake of clarity, I use “the Foodpanda strikes” to refer to the 2021–2022 strikes in a general sense. I use the 2021 strike and the 2022 strikes when such a distinction must be made.

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