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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Platform worker organizing for power: relational dynamics of platform unionism in Taiwan's food delivery sector

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While many industrial relations and sociological studies have examined platform worker organizing, two puzzles remain. First, their empirical focus on the Global North may obscure the challenges of organizing in non-Western settings characterized by institutional fragmentation and weak union power. Second, understanding worker power requires a relational and processual analysis of how labour actors' strategies evolve in interaction with platforms' adaptive responses and shifting political opportunities. This article combines the power resources approach with a relational perspective in social movement studies to examine courier unions' emergence, dynamics, and power-building strategies in Taiwan's platform-mediated food delivery sector from 2019 to 2026. Using a qualitative case study – with data comprizing interviews with union and non-union couriers, union officials, and a legislator, supplemented by observation and document analysis – it reveals workplace-level and institutional barriers to building collective power. It shows how unions with different interests built and activated multiple power resources – particularly institutional, coalitional, and ideational resources – to fight platforms and push for labour-policy reform. By contrast, platforms mobilized structural economic power and ideational power to contest workers' power-building strategies. These struggles nonetheless generated new opportunities for diverse unions to collaborate and amplify their voice in institutional and public arenas, culminating in a special law protecting couriers in 2026. This study contributes to the literature on the power resources approach, precarious worker organising, and platform labour activism by advancing a relational and processual perspective on worker and platform power, and by mapping the interactions between different types of power resources under multi-unionism.

Keywords power resources • platform unionism • gig economy • platform power • trade unions

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Introduction

Industrial relations and sociological studies have documented the diverse organizational forms of platform labour unrest globally, from self-organized collectives and grassroots unions to hybrid organizations (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020; Schmalz et al, 2023). Such organizing practices are shaped by not only the labour process, but also context-specific factors such as political activism traditions and industrial relations (IR) institutions (Cini et al, 2022; Della Porta et al, 2022; Atzeni and Cini, 2024). However, two puzzles remain. First, studies focus primarily on the relationship between emerging labour actors and established unions in the Global North (Marà et al, 2023; Maccarrone et al, 2025). This may obscure the distinct challenges of organizing in non-Western IR settings characterized by institutional fragmentation and weak union power. Second, although the literature examines platform worker mobilizations (Umney et al, 2024), a fuller understanding of worker power requires analyzing how labour actors' strategies evolve in interaction with platforms' adaptive responses and shifting political opportunities.

This article addresses these puzzles by examining the emergence and power-building strategies of Taiwan's platform-mediated food delivery courier unions. Taiwan provides a critical case for understanding how platform unions build power in a non-Western IR context. The legacy of state corporatism has entrenched a multi-union landscape (Pan, 2020; Ho, 2024), comprising at least 21 courier occupational and industrial unions[1] (Ministry of Labour, 2024). Rather than treating these unions as a uniform category, I analyze how occupational and industrial unions with divergent resources and interests develop power resources under conditions of institutional fragmentation and historically weak unionism. What makes Taiwan especially pertinent is that, despite these constraints, a coalition of courier unions successfully mobilized against the 2024 Uber Eats-Foodpanda merger and secured the passage of a comprehensive special law in 2026 (that is, the Delivery Workers' Rights Protection and Delivery Platform Management Act; hereafter, the Act), which institutionalizes minimum pay and dispute resolution mechanisms. Accordingly, this study asks: what are the barriers and opportunities for courier unions to build collective power in Taiwan's fragmented multi-union landscape? How do heterogeneous courier unions coordinate to develop and activate multiple power resources over time? In what ways are unions' power-building strategies conditioned by their assessment of platform power and political opportunities?

Theoretically, I combine the power resources approach (PRA; Wright, 2000; Schmalz et al, 2018; Arnholtz and Refslund, 2024) with a relational perspective in social movement studies (McAdam et al, 2001; Della Porta et al, 2022). Following Arnholtz and Refslund (2024: 15), I conceptualize power as 'the capacity of social actors to make, receive, or resist change in accordance with their interests', and power resources as 'resources actors can mobilize to amplify this capacity'. A PRA approach provides a valuable lens to understand how courier unions develop and mobilize a combination of power resources to defend their interests. The relational perspective complements this by emphasizing how collective action generates power resources and opportunities for future organizing (Della Porta and Antonelli, 2026).

Using a qualitative case-study approach, I draw on semi-structured interviews with couriers, union officials, and a legislator in Taiwan conducted between 2023 and 2026, supplemented by non-participant observation and document analysis. The analysis

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reveals workplace-level and institutional barriers to building collective power. It shows how unions strategically built and activated multiple power resources, particularly institutional, coalitional, and ideational resources, to fight platforms and push for labour policy reform. By contrast, platforms mobilized their structural economic and ideational power to contest workers' power-building strategies over time. This study contributes to the literature on the power resources approach, precarious worker organizing, and platform labour activism by advancing a relational and processual perspective on worker and platform power, and by mapping the interactions between different types of power resources under multi-unionism.

In what follows, I review the literature on platform labour fragmentation and conflicts. Then I introduce the relational and processual lens used to analyze worker and platform power. After describing the methodological approach, I present the findings. The article concludes by reflecting on the study's implications and limitations.

Literature review

Labour fragmentation and conflicts in platform-mediated gig work

Platform-mediated gig work, particularly in the location-based delivery sector, has emerged as an important arena of labour-capital struggle. Sociologists theorize how the platform model enables capital to capture value through digital intermediation and the externalization of asset ownership (Vallas and Schor, 2020). Platforms deploy algorithmic management as a 'technological fix' to address profitability crises and intensify labour control while bypassing traditional employment obligations (Vandaele, 2021; Schmalz et al, 2023). Technological fixes exert contradictory impacts on worker power (Silver, 2003). On one hand, algorithmic management undermines the collective capacity of workers to organize through fragmentation processes (Della Porta et al, 2022; Heiland, 2022). By atomizing the labour process and spatially dispersing the workforce, platforms sever the social ties necessary for constructing a collective identity (Della Porta et al, 2022). Furthermore, performance-based task allocation fosters competition among couriers and weakens solidarity (Heiland, 2022). Importantly, platforms can leverage frequent, opaque algorithmic changes to disrupt the consolidation of worker power (Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2023). Mendonça and Kougiannou demonstrate how, in the UK, the shift to a free login system and algorithmic prioritization of moped couriers engineered a labour oversupply, fracturing the workforce into divergent interest groups. The resulting intensified competition compelled couriers to extend their working hours, reducing the time available for collective organizing.

On the other hand, technological fixes contribute to the remaking of workers and the emergence of new modes of struggle (Silver, 2003; Schmalz et al, 2023). Algorithmic management becomes 'a source of frustration for workers as unilateral modifications of the algorithmic process affect employment terms and conditions and the "cash nexus" (that is, workers' pay)' (Vandaele, 2021: 226). Studies highlight how platform workers organize among themselves, often through self-organized networks and grassroots unions (Umney et al, 2024). Two notable points emerge from this literature. First, workers' grievances are rooted in the inherent contradictions of the labour process, with common waiting points and social media serving as 'free spaces' to overcome fragmentation (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020; Lei, 2021).

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Second, despite commonalities in the platform-mediated labour process, organizational forms and practices vary across contexts (Cini et al, 2022). Researchers explain this variation by highlighting the interplay between agential and contextual factors. Contextual factors like supportive communities and political activism traditions shape workers' ideological orientations, resources, and action repertoires (Cini et al, 2022; Della Porta et al, 2022; Atzeni and Cini, 2024). Much of this research, however, is grounded in the Global North, where entrenched IR institutions provide relatively clear organizational boundaries. Schmalz and colleagues (2023) offer a vital exception by mapping the varieties of platform unionism in and through the Global South. They argue that platform unionism is shaped by the evolving relationship between grassroots and established labour actors embedded in specific institutional, organizational, and structural contexts.

This research contributes to understanding the dynamics of platform unionism by analyzing the trajectory of courier organizing in Taiwan's fragmented multi-union structure. With Taiwan's delivery sector dominated by Uber Eats and Foodpanda, its platform-mediated labour process mirrors that discussed in existing research (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020). What distinguishes the Taiwan case is the proliferation of emerging courier occupational and industrial unions amid persistently weak union power (Chiu, 2026). Self-employed couriers can join and organisz both types, but they can obtain labour and health insurance only through occupational union membership. Industrial unions traditionally focus on labour advocacy, and occupational unions are viewed as service-oriented 'insurance agents' (Pan, 2020; Ho, 2024). These unions do not fit neatly with the distinction between established and grassroots unions. Although formally registered and likely shaped by existing union traditions, many were self organized by couriers in a sector with no prior union presence, making them new forms of organizational experimentation. Fragmentation may hinder coordination and dilute resources, but the plurality of union forms opens space for diverse organizational strategies. Accordingly, I examine how these unions navigate inter-union differences to develop and activate power resources.

A relational and processual perspective on worker and platform power

IR scholarship has traditionally researched trade unions (Atzeni, 2021). Classical accounts, such as Kelly's (1998) mobilization theory and the classical PRA (Korpi, 1985), have been criticized for their narrow interest in unions and their leaders as primary agents of resource mobilization (Nowak, 2018; Atzeni, 2021). These approaches overlook emerging labour actors in precarious workplaces like self-organized precarious workers (Cini et al, 2022) and hybrid worker organizations (Schmalz et al, 2023). Here, I consider Taiwan's courier unions as emerging labour actors akin to Però and Downey's (2024) discussion of grassroots-led 'indie unions'.

Following Atzeni's (2021: 1351) call to 'adopt a more processual view of workers' collective organisation', I merge a PRA approach with the relational approach in social movement studies. The PRA provides a valuable analytical prism for theorizing how the unequal distribution of power resources in and outside of the workplace shapes the outcomes of labour conflicts (Korpi, 1985; Arnholtz and Refslund, 2024), whereas the latter stresses that power resources are generated through the dynamic interactions between courier unions and their opponents (that is, platforms) during labour conflicts (Della Porta and Antonelli, 2026).

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I start by drawing upon Arnholtz and Refslund's (2024) framework to conceptualize five types of power resources and their interactions. They situate power resources within the wider political economy where workers' capacity to act is contingent upon the countervailing resources deployed by capital. First, structural power emphasizes the replaceability of workers (marketplace bargaining power) and workers' capacity to disrupt production (workplace bargaining power) (Silver, 2003). For couriers, workplace bargaining power is particularly potent due to their ability to disrupt the meal distribution process (Chan, 2025; Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2025). Conversely, platforms derive structural economic power from their control over the labour process through technological fixes, fragmentation, and labour oversupply (Schmalz et al, 2023; Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2025).

Second, associational power arises from the organizational capacity to 'create and express unity of action', including member recruitment, internal structures, and material resources (Arnholtz and Refslund, 2024: 15; see also Wright, 2000). Conventionally equated with trade unions, associational power has been reassessed in recent IR scholarship through examination of emerging workers' associations and protests in precarious work (Atzeni, 2021). Capital, by contrast, defends its interests by organizing anti-union employer associations and campaigns (Pérez Ahumada, 2023; Kallas, 2025).

Third, institutional power denotes 'the capacity to use formal rules to enable one's own ability to influence labour politics and limit one's opponents' ability to do so' (Arnholtz and Refslund, 2024: 20). Formal rules like workplace representation rights and labour insurance systems delimit the field of action, shaping which strategies are viable for labour and which are enforceable by capital (Kallas, 2025). Platform workers often face a deficit of institutional resources due to their self-employed status, which shapes their repertoires of contention (Lei, 2021). Furthermore, institutional power involves the capacity of unions and platforms to influence labour policies (Pérez Ahumada, 2023). While unions strive to codify labour rights, platforms can leverage their financial and political resources to shape regulation in their favour. In California, for instance, platforms campaigned for Proposition 22 in 2020 to overturn union-backed legislation that had reclassified gig workers as employees.

Instead of grouping coalitional and ideational power as 'societal power' (Schmalz et al, 2018), I follow Arnholtz and Refslund (2024) in distinguishing between the two to capture the distinctive roles of alliance-building (coalitional) and collective frames (ideational). Culpepper and Thelen (2020) contend that platform power differs from traditional corporate power – which relies on lobbying and disinvestment threats – in that platforms can mobilize their consumers as a political constituency to resist or reshape regulation. Such consumer-platform alliances constitute coalitional resources for capital, yet consumers can also become allies of workers if their awareness of worker entitlements is high (Goods et al, 2024). Activists and civil-society actors might further provide resources that help workers amplify their voices (Chun, 2009).

Ideational power plays a decisive role in 'activating' potential coalitional alignments. It entails outward-facing communicative strategies that project a shared normative agenda to win public recognition (Chun, 2009; Però and Downey, 2024). Platforms like Uber and Airbnb not only frame themselves as disruptive innovators but also strategically curate users' stories to shape public opinion (Chan and Kwok, 2021; Yates, 2024). By contrast, indie unions can appeal to the public by articulating moral frames that resonate with widely accepted social values (for example, fairness)

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(Però and Downey, 2024). In short, ideational battles emerge as workers and platforms compete to mobilize broader social values in support of their claims.

At issue is how courier unions strategically develop and activate multiple power resources based on their assessment of platform power and political opportunities. Power resources can amplify or undermine one another. For example, strong institutional resources may deter workers from deploying structural resources, whereas strong ideational resources may help cultivate coalitional power (Arnholtz and Refslund, 2024). The relational perspective in social movement studies offers two insights. First, workers generate power resources during and because of collective action (Della Porta and Antonelli, 2026). Second, action repertoires and their underlying resources are transformed by dynamic interactions among activists, opponents, and authorities (McAdam et al, 2001). As Jasper (2021: 246) notes, a structural barrier persists not simply because opponents reinforce it, but also because 'a player believes it is'. Capturing these dynamics requires tracing labour actors' interpretative practices and strategies over an extended period of organizing.

This combined approach offers a relational and processual understanding of (a) how and why courier unions activate certain power resources over others; (b) how diverse unions coordinate among themselves and network with non-labour actors; and (c) how worker power can be generated and contested by platform power.

Case selection and methodology

I employed a qualitative single-case study approach to examine the unfolding dynamics and contestation surrounding courier unions' organizing strategies in Taiwan. This approach enables a thick description of the studied phenomenon, including the sequence of events, involved actors, and resulting changes (Yin, 2018).

Case contextualization

Despite political liberalization in the late 1980s and 1990s, the legacy of state corporatism has shaped a multi-union environment where occupational and industrial unions exhibit divergent organizing cultures (Pan, 2020; Ho, 2024). This fragmentation is compounded by a low union-density rate (7.6% in 2020; Lee, 2024a). Furthermore, workers and unions have a limited voice in corporate decision making because 'the terms and conditions of employment are primarily shaped by employer-unilaterally formulated working rules without worker participation' (Chiu, 2026: 16).

Taiwan's platform-mediated food delivery sector has expanded rapidly. Uber Eats and Foodpanda were the dominant platforms at the time of this study. Regulatory and public interest surged in October 2019 following two fatal courier accidents. Since then, couriers have been classified as 'quasi-employees', a status under which platforms provide limited insurance coverage while workers remain responsible for their labour and health insurance (Lee, 2024a). Unionization began in 2019 with the founding of the Taipei City Platform Delivery Workers' Occupational Union (TCPDWOU), followed by a cascade of organizing across Taiwan, including the National Delivery Industrial Union (NDIU) and Taichung Platform Delivery Service Industrial Union (TPDSIU) in 2021. Facing pay reductions and tightening algorithmic control (Tsai, 2023), some unions sought to influence policy making.

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Their efforts to pass comprehensive central-level legislation stalled in the Legislative Yuan in 2023. This impasse was followed by a successful union-led mobilization against the proposed 2024 Uber Eats-Foodpanda merger. In January 2026, the Legislative Yuan passed the Act – which will come into effect in July 2026 – requiring platforms to provide a minimum fee per order (at least 1.25 times the hourly minimum wage, or TWD45; USD1.44), increase their transparency, and establish a fair dispute-resolution mechanism.

This longitudinal case study (Yin, 2018) covers an extended trajectory of struggle, tracing how unions deployed power resources and contested platform power to institutionalize labour protections between 2019 and 2026.

Data collection and analysis

This research drew on semi-structured interviews, supplemented and triangulated by non-participant observation and analyses of relevant documents and media materials. Table 1 summarizes the data sources and their use in the analysis.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 union officials and volunteers, one legislator, and 22 couriers from July 2023 to February 2026. I used purposive and snowball sampling (Patton, 2014) to recruit information-rich participants uniquely positioned to detail how unions interpreted power resources and developed power-building strategies. Although this sample provides in-depth insights of those directly involved in collective organizing, it is not representative of the whole workforce. I used different recruitment strategies and data sources to capture variation within this subgroup while seeking disconfirming evidence to ensure analytical rigour.

First, the initial sampling strategy of unions was intended to follow a complete target-population approach (Patton, 2014). My research assistant and I compiled a list of courier unions and traditional unions advocating platform labour rights (n=21) based on desk research in 2023. We subsequently contacted these unions to schedule interviews. We also asked the interviewed union officials to introduce other active officials and members within and beyond their respective unions to participate in this research. Nonetheless, not all unions could be reached or consented to participate. Consequently, the sample included union officials from seven courier unions and one traditional industrial union monitoring the development of delivery platforms. It reflects organizational diversity and analytical depth, as it captured the most active core of organizing. Notably, one or two union officials often assumed both leadership and administrative responsibilities, making them the sole relevant interviewees. Additionally, I conducted follow-up interviews with two key informants from NDIU and TCPDWOU. These interviews helped understand the processes of unionization, evolution of union power-building strategies, and interactions between unions and other actors. Second, an interview with a *legislator* who actively advocated for couriers' labour rights provided additional nuance into opportunities for and barriers to mobilizing institutional power.

Third, interviews with *couriers* constituted the materials for interpreting their work experiences and understanding of unions. I conducted semi-structured interviews with union and non-union members. Initially, I asked unions to help share information about my research with their members and social media networks. There are two sampling issues with this method. First, non-response bias may occur (Kozinets, 2020), as couriers active on social media are often more opinionated. Second, though the

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Table 1: Data sources and use

Source	Type of data	Use in the analysis
Interviews	38 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 11 union officials and volunteers from seven courier unions and one traditional industrial union monitoring the development of delivery platforms (including follow-up interviews with two key informants), one legislator, and 22 couriers (including 10 union members and 12 non-union members at the time of the interview). All audio-recorded and transcribed. Note 1. Interviews lasted from 29 to 125 minutes (mean = 70 minutes and median = 71 minutes).	1. Gather data about (a) couriers' and courier unions' power-building strategies as well as their interactions with other actors; and (b) institutional opportunities for and barriers to mobilizing worker power. 2. Gather data about how couriers from different backgrounds (that is, union and non-union members as well as self-identified full-time and part-time status) understood work power differently. 3. Gather data about unions' responses to shifting platforms' strategies and social issues (from follow-up interviews).
Non-participant observation	One public demonstration in Taipei City on October 11, 2023. Researcher's note. It was not audio-recorded.	1. Gather data regarding the operation of the demonstration. 2. Contextualize and triangulate with follow-up interview narratives.
Documents	1. Public hearing documents (from interview participants) and the minutes of ten social dialogue meetings coordinated by the Ministry of Labour between July 2023 and March 2025 (from the Ministry of Labour's website). 2. Platforms' and their affiliated association's public-facing documents (from the websites of Uber Newsroom and the Digital Economy Association of Taiwan). 3. News coverage related to delivery platforms from 2019 to January 2026 (n = 412) (from a keyword search conducted on WiserOne database). Note 3. I used the following keyword search – 'delivery platform' AND ('union' OR 'local ordinances' OR 'special law') on WiserOne database to identify local newspaper articles published in Taiwan.	Gather data about how the government, platforms, unions, couriers, and other actors who participated in public hearings and social dialogue meetings articulated their concerns and responded to others. Gather data about how platforms and their affiliated association (that is, DEAT) mobilized power resources and publicly responded to couriers' and unions' demands. Particular attention was given to the extent to which the voices of courier unions were mentioned and quoted by local newspapers. These documents were also used to triangulate information.

research was shared in union-related and non-union-related social media groups, unions acted as unofficial gatekeepers (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Recruitment via union-linked groups likely attracted participants who supported unions' advocacy. Hence, I used snowball sampling to ask courier interviewees to help recruit others from their networks. I also sought to recruit participants across different localities and with varying self-identified employment statuses (full-time or part-time). Table 2 summarizes the interviewees' characteristics. Given the research objectives, I placed more weight on interviews from union officials and members. As I conducted

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multiple rounds of interviews with the two key informants, my analysis was likely influenced by their accounts. However, I compared the interviews with union officials and members against those with non-members to consider the barriers to and opportunities for building worker power, and to explore potential counter-narratives that might challenge the findings (Patton, 2014).

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or over video conferencing in the participants' native language. Participants received a small monetary incentive (TWD600; USD19.02) as compensation for their time and insights.[2] Informed consent was obtained from participants. Interviews were held at times and locations (for example, cafes or union offices) chosen by interviewees to ensure their comfort and convenience. The interview length ranged from 29 to 125 minutes (mean=70; median=71 minutes).[3] Topics included participants' work experiences, the labour process, interactions with the government, platforms, unions, and their power-building strategies. During the follow-up interviews, I asked how unions had pushed for policy reforms and how they interpreted platforms' evolving responses. Interviews were transcribed for thematic analysis.

I contextualized and triangulated the interview findings with other data sources, including non-participant observation of a public demonstration against pay cuts in October 2023 as well as analyses of relevant public hearings, government documents, platforms' public-facing materials, and media reports. The observation allowed me to triangulate participants' words with observed collective action. I collected relevant documents from (a) interviewees who participated in public hearings; (b) the Ministry of Labour's website; (c) the websites of platforms and their affiliated association; and (d) a keyword search on the WiserOne database (a database comprising local newspapers published in Taiwan) (Table 1). The public hearing and government documents clarified how other actors, including the government and platforms, interpreted and utilized power resources in response to couriers' demands. Platforms' documents illuminated their public-facing narratives. The media materials published from 2019 to January 2026 (n=412) offered insights into how unions' and platforms' collective frames gained media traction (Però and Downey, 2024). Together, this case study enhanced credibility through prolonged engagement with key informants and the research field, a varied interview sample that enabled negative case analysis, and triangulation across data sources (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Data analysis was conducted using an abductive approach, moving recursively between theory and data (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). I used thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes across qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). All materials were organized using MAXQDA. Except for the news materials, I used the following iterative analysis process. Through open coding, I identified the key terms and expressions that different actors (for example, interviewees and public-hearing participants) used to describe their concerns, work experiences, and organizing practices. Guided by the conceptualizations of power resources, I revisited the materials and developed second-order themes concerning which resources different actors prioritized and mobilized. I paid particular attention to how union and non-union couriers understood their power resources. I also attended to how the same events (for example, unionization) were discussed across various types of materials. Regarding media materials, following Però and Downey (2024), I conducted a content analysis to assess the extent to which courier unions' voices were mentioned and quoted by mainstream media in Taiwan. These descriptive statistics supplemented

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Table 2: Interview participants' characteristics

ID	Role of interviewees	Gender	Year began to work as a courier	Location	Interview length (minutes)
P1	Courier union official (National Delivery Industrial Union – NDIU)	M	2020	Taipei	79 (first interview), 29 (second interview), 107 (third interview), and 68 (fourth interview)
P2	Courier union volunteer (NDIU)	F	2019	Taipei	60
P3	Courier occupational union official (Taipei City Platform Delivery Workers' Occupational Union)	M	NA	Taipei	78 (first interview) and 54 (second interview)
P4	Part-time# courier and union member	M	2019	Kaohsiung	76
P5	Full-time courier and participant of a public hearing about delivery platforms	M	2023	Kaohsiung	99
P6	Legislator	F	Did not work as a courier	Taipei	46
P7	Courier union official (Taoyuan City Platform Delivery Workers' Occupational Union)	M	2019	Taoyuan	87
P8	Full-time courier and attendant of a public hearing about delivery platforms	M	2020	Taoyuan	72
P9	Full-time courier and union member	M	2019	Taichung	59
P10	Courier union official (Taichung City Platform Delivery Service Industrial Union)	M	Before 2021	Taichung	75
P11	Full-time courier and former union member	M	2019	Kaohsiung	79
P12	Full-time courier and union member	M	2019	Kaohsiung	79
P13	Full-time courier and union member	M	2020	Hsinchu	81
P14*	Courier union official (Yilan County Platform Delivery Workers' Occupational Union – YCPDWOU)	F	NA	Yilan and Taipei	80
P15*	Courier union official (YCPDWOU)	M	NA	Yilan and Taipei	80
P16	Full-time courier and union member	F	2020	New Taipei and Taoyuan	74
P17	Courier union official (Taipei City Food Delivery Industrial Union)	M	Before 2020	Taipei	35

(*Continued*)

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Table 2: Continued

ID	Role of interviewees	Gender	Year began to work as a courier	Location	Interview length (minutes)
P18	Courier union official (Hsinchu City Platform Delivery Workers' Occupational Union)	F	2019	Hsinchu	70
P19	Part-time courier and union member	F	2019	New Taipei	47
P20*	Industrial unionist observing the development of delivery platform labour unrest	F	Did not work as a courier	Taipei	54
P21*	Industrial unionist observing the development of delivery platform labour unrest	M	Did not work as a courier	Taipei	54
P22	Part-time courier and union member who supported the initial unionization process	M	2020	Taipei and Chiayi	100
P23	Full-time courier and union member	M	2019	Taipei	125
P24	Part-time courier and union member	M	2020	Taipei	61
P25	Full-time courier who lodged a government complaint regarding delivery platforms and did not join a courier union	M	2019	Taipei	79
P26	Full-time courier who did not join a courier union	M	2021	Taipei	63
P27	Full-time courier who did not join a courier union	M	2019	Taipei	67
P28	Full-time courier who did not join a courier union	M	2020	Taipei	91
P29	Full-time courier who did not join a courier union	M	2020	Taipei	60
P30	Part-time courier who did not join a courier union	M	2022	Taipei	53
P31	Part-time courier who did not join a courier union	F	2022	Taipei	85
P32	Part-time courier who did not join a courier union	F	2021	New Taipei	42
P33	Part-time courier who did not join a courier union	M	2023	Taipei	56
P34	Part-time courier who did not join a courier union	M	2023	Taichung	60

Note: I conducted interviews with P1 four times (July 2023, October 2023, June 2025, and February 2026) and with P3 twice (July 2023 and July 2024).

NA indicates that the interviewee did not specify the year began to work as a courier during the interview. * indicates that the interviews were conducted at the same time due to the request of participants. #Full-time/part-time classifications were self-identified by interviewees.

the analysis of ideational power. Given the emphasis on power-building strategies, the themes were primarily developed from interview materials, observational notes, and other documents.

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Findings

To provide a relational and processual account of courier unions' power-building strategies, I first discuss how couriers' structural and associational power were constrained by platforms' strategies and workforce fragmentation. I illustrate how these workplace-level barriers were compounded by institutional legacies before demonstrating the ways that unions mobilized institutional, coalitional, and ideational resources to overcome them.

Barriers to building worker power

Interviewees identified pay cuts (for example, Foodpanda's basic fee per order dropped from TWD120 (USD3.82) in 2016 to TWD70 (USD2.29) in 2019; Tsai, 2023), unfair suspension policies, and lack of labour insurance as drivers of unionization. Unionization attempts in 2018 and early 2019 were thwarted by institutional barriers. Under the Labour Union Act, at the discretion of local governments, only one occupational union may be formed per occupation or professional field in each city or county. P7 recounted, around July 2019, the government informally rejected his application to establish a courier occupational union, citing 'the existence of similar unions', such as those for 'motorcycle cargo delivery, drink delivery, grocery delivery'. Nevertheless, two fatal courier accidents in October 2019 opened a crucial political window, prompting the Minister of Labour to support unionization (Lee, 2024a) and resulting in the establishment of unions like TCPDWOU and P7's union.

Couriers' structural and associational power remained limited after unionization for four reasons. First, couriers' marketplace bargaining power was restricted by platforms' independent contractor model and algorithmic management. Uber Eats operates a free login system that has helped recruit a large pool of transient couriers. Foodpanda, which initially hired riders as employees with fixed schedules and exclusivity clauses, shifted to an independent contractor model in 2018 and permitted multi-homing in 2019 (Chiu, 2026). Both platforms capitalized on COVID-19 pandemic-induced economic disruptions to expand their workforce, surging from 45,000 in 2019 to 145,000 in 2022 (Lee, 2024b). Most interviewees entered the sector during the pandemic, driven by job displacement, increased caregiving obligations, and the prospect of higher earnings relative to their prior jobs (for example, construction workers). This labour oversupply heightened couriers' perceived replaceability. Interviewees' self-descriptions as 'disposable tableware' captured a shared sense that platforms could easily discard and replace those unwilling to work under poor conditions. P27 explained his reluctance to participate in collective action: 'I think we're just like disposable tableware: used, then thrown away.… They [platforms] constantly try to lure in people who've never run deliveries' through on-demand recruitment bonuses. This testifies to how platforms' structural advantages affect couriers' power resources.

Second, interviewees doubted the feasibility of collective work stoppages (see Chan, 2025; Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2025). Union officials and members (P1, P18, and P24) highlighted how algorithmic pricing might weaken solidarity. P24 reasoned, 'As some couriers engaged in mass logoffs, others might continue working because they could receive a higher rate' due to platforms' dynamic pricing. Couriers echoed this, citing immediate financial needs. P28, a full-time courier, explained, 'if

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they're [platforms] giving me a lot of bonuses/top-ups, then I'll come out and do a few deliveries'. P32, a part-time courier, noted 'even if I don't do delivery today, it doesn't mean other people won't do so'.

This difficulty in mobilization hampered the building of associational power. During early unionization, preparatory committees struggled to secure the legal threshold of 30 courier signatures required for registration. As P18 explained, 'couriers mainly focus on making money' and 'asking them to take time out to do something else isn't easy'. P7 and P22 recalled their initial meetings fell short of the required signatures. This challenge was especially acute for couriers treating delivery as a side gig because union participation might be viewed 'unfavourably by employers at their primary full-time jobs' (P2). Even post-unionization, active participation remained limited.[4] For instance, NDIU gained growing public attention during my research, yet P1 remained almost the only official handling public advocacy and outreach to members and non-member couriers. Similar internal structures were observed in other unions. Union officials also acknowledged weak interactions with their members; for example, P14 and P15 only saw members when they came to pay insurance fees.

Third, workforce heterogeneity undermined associational power. Most part-time, non-unionized interviewees (5 of 9) lacked incentives to join unions because they maintained insurance coverage through their full-time employment and saw platform work as supplementary income. Similarly, full-time couriers sometimes retained insurance coverage from previous employment. This may explain why even occupational unions, despite offering insurance benefits, often had only a few hundred members. Although the interview sample is not generalizable, it points to a representational challenge for unions. P8 criticized occupational unions for 'car[ing] only about insurance' instead of actively 'speaking up for couriers'. Furthermore, most full-time and part-time courier interviewees (n=14) opposed being classified as employees. They feared employee status would reduce flexibility and impose rigid working hours. A few (n=3) worried that increased labour costs would drive platforms out of the market. These dynamics led unions to avoid the contentious issue of employment classification.

Fourth, building associational power was hindered by multi-unionism. Unionization was undertaken by two types of organizers: individuals with prior occupational union experience (for example, P3, P14, and P15) and those with limited backgrounds in labour organizing (for example, P1, P17, and P18). The former often established occupational unions to secure a first-mover advantage. P3 reasoned: 'The biggest advantage is that it can help couriers enrol in labour and health insurance … and this gives us a natural advantage when it comes to recruiting members'. P15 established an occupational union because he knew only one could be officially registered per locality. By contrast, first-time organizers like P17 opted to establish an industrial union but subsequently discovered it could not offer insurance benefits and thus limited its appeal to potential members.

This divide generated inter-union frictions, especially during the early phases of my research. When asked about the distinction between the NDIU and other unions, P1 recounted: 'All our union officials, including myself, come from a background of being couriers or working at restaurants…. We have a better understanding of the issues faced by couriers'. He contrasted the NDIU with what he called 'family-run unions' (often occupational unions), led by individuals with longstanding union experience in different sectors but without direct involvement in delivery work.

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These 'family-run unions' possessed greater financial and institutional resources, owing to their ability to provide insurance services. Despite being an occupational union official, P18 shared that many occupational unions 'have never been involved and don't know anything about delivery platforms'. The resulting fragmented landscape posed hurdles to building collective power. Couriers lacked knowledge about union types, leading them to question unions' legitimacy. Industrial unions also lacked a stable membership base and the material resources to support sustained organizing.

Caution is warranted in generalizing the divide between occupational and industrial unions. P1, P7, P10, and P18 came from different types of unions but occasionally exchanged information, because they 'shared a common agenda of pushing for labour policy reforms' (P10) and 'cared about couriers' labour rights' (P18). This commitment motivated nine occupational and industrial unions (for example, NDIU, TCPDWOU, TPDSIU, and Hsinchu City Platform Delivery Workers' Occupational Union) to form the Taiwan Delivery Industry Rights Promotion Alliance (hereafter, the Alliance) in December 2023. This was a step toward consolidating associational power, yet the Alliance remained a loosely-organized informal network. According to P1 and P3, it served as a hub for information sharing and coordination. Each member union retained control of its own resources and made independent decisions.

Relational dynamics of building power to shape labour policies

I now discuss how unions strategically developed institutional, coalitional, and ideational power resources to influence the policy-making process. Unions' organizing efforts, including their legislative advocacy and fight against the 2024 Uber Eats-Foodpanda merger, created new resources and opportunities to drive institutional changes.

Codifying the baseline: institutional power

Action repertoires are rooted in historical and institutional legacies (McAdam et al, 2001). In Taiwan, workers and unions have traditionally preferred to 'voice their demand to the state' instead of engaging in collective action (Pan, 2020: 253). Similarly, courier unions framed unionization as a pathway to cultivate institutional resources, seeking state mandates to improve working conditions. P1 stated, 'Individuals and unions alone lack coercive power over platforms … but once the government mandates it, platforms must play by the rules'. P10 emphasized the importance of having institutional mechanisms for courier participation. He referenced a parallel example of the 2021 Foodpanda strike in Hong Kong:

> Although the action [in Hong Kong] appeared quite successful at first, its long-term outcome was actually a failure.The platform could make promises, but it could also unilaterally withdraw or nullify them …. If we can form an organization, we might have a chance to engage in long-term dialogue with platforms and the government.

Although P10 was unique in drawing this comparison, his profound distrust of platforms reflected a broader consensus among the interviewees who had repeatedly witnessed platforms unilaterally lower order fees and change policies.

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Establishing unions granted these labour actors the formal status required for the government to recognize them as legitimate spokespersons. Yet, unions lacked substantial coercive power over platforms. During the ten social dialogue meetings coordinated by the Ministry of Labour between July 2023 and March 2025, unions urged platforms to increase transparency regarding pay calculation and account suspensions. Because platforms were not legally obligated to disclose operational data or alter their policies, the same demands repeatedly appeared in meeting minutes.

Another institutional arena of power building emerged through legislative processes. The first courier-related ordinances were introduced by the Taipei City government in January 2020 in response to the fatal accidents. The consultation process became a contested terrain where unions and platforms could lobby for their interests. During initial consultations, P3 prioritized insurance over pay, noting 'the pay was acceptable back then' and 'traffic accidents were the most important occupational issue'. He viewed insurance as a safer avenue for institutional support and explained:

> When you try to frame pay as a public issue, will the public, elected officials, and government officials accept it? I could say things just to please couriers, but this approach won't succeed.The general public would think you're only fighting for money rather than rights.

This focus aligned with occupational unions' material interests by reinforcing their longstanding institutional role as administrative vehicles for labour insurance.

Platforms mobilized their structural economic power to lobby for the regulatory status quo, warning that first-of-its-kind municipal ordinances might create a fragmented regulatory environment for platform growth. As P6, a policy maker, recalled, platforms 'kept emphasizing that the industry is still developing …. They also said, "If you make the regulation all about employment relationships, no one will want to do the job and there won't be any employment opportunities"'. Ultimately, the city government opted for 'a middle path' to extend insurance protections without classifying couriers as employees. This echoes Lee's (2024a) argument that techno-developmentalism prioritizes platform-mediated economic growth over labour protection.

Unions cultivated institutional power by leveraging Taipei's precedent to ensure all six special municipalities enacted comparable ordinances by August 2024. Nonetheless, these regulations had limited jurisdictional scope (Chiu and Cheng, 2023). P7 and P13 suggested that local ordinances were largely 'useless' because they lacked enforcement mechanisms and carried limited penalties for noncompliance. Additionally, P1, P5, and P9 described those ordinances as 'regulating couriers rather than platforms'.

Given these limited improvements, in 2023, some unions started pushing for a more enforceable special law. They proposed to establish a minimum-pay structure that would operate outside traditional labour laws, thereby circumventing the protracted debate over employment classification. Unions lobbied legislators across major parties to introduce a bill in the Legislative Yuan; however, only legislators from the Taiwan People's Party and New Power Party, who held just eight of the 112 seats, put forward draft bills. While the initial framework aimed to advocate for the rights of restaurants and consumers – a point I will explicate in the discussion on coalitional power resources – the 2023 draft bills focused primarily on couriers' rights. Interviewees believed it would be more 'politically feasible' to limit the scope

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of legislative change to a narrow issue, thereby increasing the likelihood of gaining institutional support. P10 emphasized the difficulty of finding legislators with the expertise and willingness to engage with the complexities of platform governance. He said, 'If we raise all issues now, the focus will scatter, and even those who want to help us won't be able to'. P6 explained that once the proposed bill involved too many aspects (for example, labour rights, food safety, and transportation), 'each ministry would push the responsibility onto the others'. Platforms did not openly oppose central-level regulation. At a 2023 public hearing, Marvin Ma, Uber's Head of Public Policy and Government Affairs in Taiwan, stated, 'In principle, we support having a central regulation', provided it did not classify couriers as employees. The proposed bills stalled before the legislative session ended due to lack of support from the two major parties, the Democratic Progressive Party and the Kuomintang.

Understanding how unions could successfully lobby for the 2026 Act requires examining how they concurrently cultivated coalitional and ideational resources.

Forging alliances: coalitional power

Unions can harness coalitional resources by embedding the interests of non-labour actors into their policy demands and forging concrete alliances with external organizations (Arnholtz and Refslund, 2024). Interview findings show that some unions, particularly the NDIU, TPDSIU, and occupational unions in Taoyuan and Hsinchu, sought an alliance with consumers and restaurants. They drafted a 'four points and six lines' policy framework, targeting platforms' value extraction across the delivery labour process. The 'four points' represented the key actors – couriers, consumers, restaurants, and platforms – and the 'six lines' mapped their mutual relationships. As P10 explained:

> If you only regulate this relationship [that is, platform-courier relationship], it won't solve problems on the restaurant and consumer sides. Once you define the platform-courier relationship in legal terms, platforms may shift the profit losses to the other two parties….We're not just demanding rights. We're also willing to take on responsibilities.

Beyond protecting couriers' earnings, safety, and rights to work, the framework proposed limiting commissions for restaurants and ensuring service quality for consumers. Not all unions supported this direction; for example, P14 and P15 stressed regulations should focus on couriers' labour insurance. Nevertheless, this early strategy merits attention because its proponents constituted the most vocal labour actors, and this initial coalitional vision was eventually embedded in the 2026 Act.

Platforms countered this potential alignment in two ways. First, they leveraged the Digital Economy Association of Taiwan (DEAT) as a coalitional resource. The DEAT comprised over 40 delivery and non-delivery-related platforms. In 2021, it published industry self-regulatory standards covering provisions for partner restaurants, protections for consumer rights, and safety measures for couriers. Second, Uber Eats attempted to weaken worker resistance through institutional cooptation, announcing a partnership with the Alliance in December 2023. However, the Alliance did not simply become platform-controlled. One interviewee from the Alliance framed the partnership as a 'pragmatic' move to gain a formal voice channel. In practice,

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this partnership yielded no substantive gains, amounting to little more than a few irregular meetings.

A turning point occurred on 14 May 2024, when Uber Eats announced a USD950 million cash deal to acquire Foodpanda's Taiwan operations from Delivery Hero. Hours later, Taiwan's Fair Trade Commission (FTC) stated it would closely monitor the deal because of potential market domination. This threat dissolved inter-union conflicts and created new opportunities for the Alliance to build a coalition with politicians and civil-society actors. On May 28, the Alliance, led by the NDIU and joined by former legislator Hsiang-Ling Lai, held a joint press conference outside the FTC. They laid out seven demands before any merger approval, strategically connecting the merger with labour rights (for example, standard-form courier contracts and guaranteed pay) and consumer and restaurant interests (for example, live customer support and a cap on restaurant commissions).

The Alliance coordinated a series of public talks and conferences featuring politicians, union leaders, academics, and civil-society actors. These events provided a forum for sympathetic stakeholders to discuss the merger's potential threats to market competition, labour rights, and consumer welfare. The Alliance had cultivated these relationships through its prior policy advocacy and existing interpersonal networks. Furthermore, coalition building provided the Alliance with ideational resources crucial for influencing legislators and public opinion. According to P1, these stakeholders' expertise lent the Alliance's critique of the merger greater credibility and urgency. Mounting public concern prompted government action, with the Ministry of Labour publicly opposing the merger by October 2024.

Moreover, the NDIU mobilized its international solidarity network, which it had built through its participation in the 2023 International Congress of Gig Workers. As P1 explained: 'We reached out to international activist groups and enlisted their help in speaking up for couriers in Taiwan abroad.... We wondered: if this merger succeeds in Taiwan, could similar consolidations occur elsewhere in the world?' Grassroots unions and labour rights groups from 16 countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Thailand, and Spain, expressed solidarity by holding signs such as 'No to the Uber-Foodpanda Merger, Down with Monopoly' at their local events.

Ideational power as the terrain of contestation

The interplay between unions' and platforms' public-facing communicative strategies also shaped which claims gained public recognition (Chun, 2009; Però and Downey, 2024). Ideational power became evident during and after the 2024 anti-merger campaign, where unions employed a public-interest frame. In a public statement issued on Facebook hours after the merger announcement, the Alliance warned:

> The merger could create a single-market monopoly, undermining couriers' labour rights, triggering higher delivery prices, increasing commission fees for restaurants, and causing damage to consumer interests. It ultimately gives the platform the power to impose unfavourable decisions unilaterally....The assessment should incorporate the perspectives of all stakeholders, and before any FTC approval, specific regulations should be put in place to balance all parties' demands and labour rights.

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The Alliance amplified this frame through coalitional resources and media outreach. Besides traditional news interviews, it collaborated with sympathetic YouTubers to produce videos covering couriers' working conditions and the merger's threats. These videos translated regulatory concerns into accessible narratives for couriers and the public.

Uber Eats was not a passive actor. Its Taiwan General Manager Chai Lee published a video on Uber Newsroom (Uber Eats, 2024a), claiming 'the merger would give consumers greater choice across food types and lower prices, and bring more orders to partner merchants, thereby creating more order opportunities for Uber Eats delivery partners'. In May, Uber dispatched its Chief Legal Officer, Tony West, to Taiwan. He reassured the public in a media interview that Uber had a 'special responsibility' to Taiwan, stressing its delivery business had contributed over TWD80 billion (USD2.54 billion) to the economy in 2023 (The Liberty Times, 2024). In October, Uber Eats (2024b) published an 'Economic Impact Report', claiming it created 'TWD15.5 billion in additional revenue for restaurants and merchants that would not have been realized through other channels'. The report also cited testimonials from restaurant owners who credited the platform for their business growth.

The Alliance countered this corporate narrative through its own public opinion survey. The NDIU informally collaborated with scholars to conduct the survey from late October to early November 2024. The survey found that over 70% of restaurants and couriers opposed the merger, believing the government should reject it. To ensure this widespread opposition was visible to regulators, the Alliance staged a public demonstration outside the FTC's office on 4 December – a tactic unions had seldom employed – to mobilize associational power and build momentum ahead of the FTC's ruling. Over 200 couriers participated in the demonstration. In response, Uber Eats sought to reactivate its partnership with the Alliance by offering to meet some of the unions' demands. However, according to one attendee, the platform's proposed solutions were perceived as 'totally unacceptable' and failed to address the Alliance's core concerns.

The FTC rejected the merger application in December 2024, citing concerns that the deal 'would increase the combined market share to 90% on the island and could incentivize Uber to raise prices' (Reuters, 2025). The Alliance's success in the ideational battle translated into a tangible institutional victory, creating new opportunities for unions to lobby legislators across parities to reintroduce draft bills related to the Act.

Similar dynamics of ideational battles emerged during the public debates concerning the proposed Act in 2025. Platforms, particularly Uber Eats, attempted to steer the debates by publishing research on couriers' earnings in May. Uber Eats claimed that couriers could make an average of TWD270 (USD8.56) per hour based on active delivery time. This was followed by a courier survey hinting that the special law would force employment classification and restrict working hours (Chiu, 2026). Given the absence of such clauses in the bills, this strategy appeared to conflate labour protection with a loss of work flexibility. Moreover, DEAT (2025), alongside Uber Eats and Foodpanda, urged the government to hold more public hearings to account for 'the rights and interests of other important participants in the industry (merchants and consumers)'. By appealing to consumer welfare, platforms argued enhanced labour protections would inevitably increase operational costs. This culminated in a

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high-profile visit by Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi in December, who warned that the proposed law could force an increase in delivery fees.

Unions neutralized these narratives in four ways. First, the draft bills included protections for consumers and restaurants alongside courier-related rights, broadening the alignment of interests across the delivery ecosystem. Second, when negotiating the proposed minimum hourly rate with legislators and the Ministry of Labour, unions referenced the platforms' self-reported earnings (TWD270 for Uber Eats and TWD290 for Foodpanda). As P1 shared, 'Because it [the initial proposal of TWD240] was much lower than the platforms' self-reported earnings, platforms should have no grounds to negotiate'. Third, NDIU applied lessons from the anti-merger campaign, collaborating with social media content creators to disseminate accessible versions of the bills. Fourth, the Alliance mobilized couriers to post supportive messages on the social media pages of legislators who backed the bills. In P1's view, this gave those legislators the legitimacy needed to withstand platform lobbying.

While the passage of the Act may suggest a clear union victory, relying solely on the outcome to evaluate the effectiveness of ideational power risks a teleological fallacy. Following Però and Downey (2024), I analyzed media coverage of delivery platforms from 2019 to January 2026 (n=412) to understand whose collective framing found media resonance, though resonance does not necessarily indicate media endorsement of a given framing. The number of platform-related news articles explicitly mentioning courier unions was higher in 2019, 2024, and 2025 than in other years, corresponding to critical junctures: early unionization, the anti-merger campaign, and the legislative push for the Act (Table 3.1). Table 3.2 identifies the most visible unions, with the NDIU receiving the highest share of mentions (40.19% of union-mentioned articles), followed by non-specific union reference (32.71%) – common before the NDIU's founding in 2021 – and the Alliance (10.75%). This suggests that the NDIU became the primary spokesperson for courier unions and workers.

Furthermore, I analyzed who was directly quoted in news articles to understand who could publicly frame courier-related issues (Però and Downey, 2024). I identified direct quotes when an actor's statement was introduced with attribution markers (for example, 'stated' ['biao shi' in Chinese]). As illustrated in Table 3.3, news articles most frequently quoted government authorities (67.48%), followed by courier unions and their representatives (26.94%) and legislators and political parties (26.70%). This reflects the nature of the struggle, in which both policy reform and the anti-merger campaign were oriented toward institutional power. Platforms and platform-related associations were less visible in the media, being quoted in only 16.75% of

Table 3.1: Number of news article mentioning courier unions and courier union preparatory committees from 2019 to January 2026

Year/Number of articles	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026 up to January
Courier union and courier union preparatory committees	26	19	15	23	14	69	36	12
Total number of news articles related to delivery platforms	85	43	21	48	26	92	72	25

Source: author's computation based on WisersOne search.

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Table 3.2: Frequency of named courier unions and courier union preparatory committees in news coverage from 2019 to 9 January 2026

Courier unions and union preparatory committees	Number of articles mentioning this union	Share of union-mentioned articles (% of 214)
National Delivery Industrial Union	86	40.19%
Non-specific union reference (for example, 'courier unions')	70	32.71%
Taiwan Delivery Industry Rights Promotion Alliance	23	10.75%
Taichung City Platform Delivery Service Industrial Union	19	8.88%
Taoyuan City Platform Delivery Workers' Occupational Union	16	7.48%
Taipei City Platform Delivery Workers' Occupational Union	12	5.61%
Hsinchu City Platform Delivery Workers' Occupational Union	11	5.14%
Taichung Delivery Workers' Occupational Union	10	4.67%
Taipei City Food Delivery Industrial Union	6	2.80%
New Taipei City Food Delivery Workers' Occupational Union	6	2.80%
Changhua County Platform Delivery Workers' Occupational Union	3	1.40%
Others (n < 3)	5	2.34%

Note: As articles may mention more than one union/committee; counts are not mutually exclusive.
Source: author's computation based on WisersOne search.

news articles. This supports the earlier claim that unions made more effective use of ideational resources.

Discussion and conclusion

This article set out to understand (a) the barriers and opportunities that courier unions in Taiwan face in building collective power amid institutional fragmentation and weak unionism; (b) how occupational and industrial unions coordinate to develop and activate multiple power resources; and (c) how their strategies are shaped by their appraisal of platform power and political opportunities. In addressing these questions, it contributes to the literature on the dynamics of platform labour activism (Cini et al, 2022; Però and Downey, 2024; Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2025), precarious worker organizing (Chun, 2009), and the contemporary PRA (Arnholtz and Refslund, 2024).

First, the analysis shows that couriers' structural and associational power was constrained by platforms' algorithmic management and recruitment strategies, the perceived difficulty in mobilization, workforce heterogeneity, and inter-union frictions. It echoes research documenting how platforms create structural barriers to worker organizing (Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2023; 2025) and how precarious workers contend with limited structural power (Chun, 2009). This study reinforces the importance of contextual and institutional factors in shaping platform labour activism

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Table 3.3: Number of news articles quoting each source category from 2019 to 9 January 2026

Organizations/Individuals/Categories	Quoted in number of articles (% of 412)
Government (for example, the Ministry of Labour and city government authorities)	278 (67.48%)
Courier unions and their representatives	111 (26.94%)
Legislators and political parties	110 (26.70%)
Platforms and platform-related associations	69 (16.75%)
Civil society (for example, academics, lawyers, and non-courier-related labour organizations)	53 (12.86%)
Couriers (named or otherwise)	27 (6.55%)
Consumers (named or otherwise)	6 (1.46%)
Restaurants (named or otherwise)	5 (1.21%)
Other business entities (for example, insurance companies)	4 (0.97%)

(Cini et al, 2022; Schmalz et al, 2023). Shaped by the legacies of state corporatism and multi-unionism, courier unions – much like the fragmented workforce they seek to organize – are far from homogeneous in their interests and resources.

Yet this fragmentation also created opportunities for diverse organizing strategies to coexist. Despite recognizing the interplay between grassroots and established unions in the platform economy, many longitudinal studies, particularly those based in the Global North, orient their analyses around whether and how established unions might intervene to organize platform workers, especially beyond the phase of initial mobilization (Marà et al, 2023; Maccarrone et al, 2025). This literature rests on two premises: first, established unions possess entrenched institutional resources that grassroots labour actors may seek to access; and second, organizational conflict primarily unfolds between established and grassroots actors. These premises, nonetheless, do not travel to Taiwan, where platform unionism developed entirely through emerging industrial and occupational courier unions with limited collective bargaining power. Moving beyond the established-versus-grassroots dichotomy, this study adds to Schmalz et al's (2023) typology of platform unionism. Industrial unions like the NDIU operated as autonomous organizations led by self-organized couriers, whereas occupational unions exhibited a hybrid form of organization by encompassing self-organized workers and assuming traditional roles as administrative vehicles for labour insurance. Opportunities for coordination across these union forms were built incrementally through labour organizing, with the 2024 anti-merger campaign serving as a catalyst. This demonstrates that multi-unionism, far from merely weakening collective power, can itself become a resource for building it.

This brings us to the discussion of the second research question. By taking a relational and processual approach to power resources, I have demonstrated how, between 2019 and 2026, unions developed and activated institutional, coalitional, and ideational power to compensate for deficits in structural and associational power. Unionization provided labour actors with the formal standing to be recognized as legitimate spokespersons in institutional and public arenas. As unions coordinated among themselves to fight platforms, they also sought to build alliances with civil-society actors, legislators, and consumers. This coalitional reach, in turn, facilitated the

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construction of ideational power. Specifically, unions' collaboration with civil-society actors enhanced the credibility of their public-interest framing, which ultimately secured concrete institutional changes. Rather than treating power resources as fixed entities, this study advances the contemporary PRA by showing that labour struggles are generative of new opportunities and positive synergies between distinct power resources (Arnholtz and Refslund, 2024; Della Porta and Antonelli, 2026).

These findings also support Chun's (2009) contention that precarious workers leverage moral claims to compensate for limited structural power but add a crucial nuance regarding the decoupling of ideational and associational power in Taiwan's fragmented multi-union landscape. While Chun conceptualizes such public claims as a means to rebuild associational power, I argue that ideational power can amplify labour's voice in public and institutional arenas without necessarily translating into associational power. Success in mobilizing the public-interest frame – evident in sustained media visibility – did not immediately result in a significant surge in union membership or in material resources. Instead, the same small group of union officials continued to bear heavy organizational responsibilities. This may be explained by context-specific factors. Most interviewees frequently mentioned 'longstanding weak labour education' and 'low labour rights awareness' as persistent barriers to their organizing and the wider labour movement. Fundamentally, as Però and Downey (2024: 155) argue, 'the need to appeal to the mainstream for support may affect not only how unions frame their struggle but also the character of the struggle itself'. In this case, the character of the struggle shifted away from traditional rank-and-file workplace mobilization and toward broader ideational battles. Consequently, labour-policy reform was achieved through the strategic activation of aligned public interests. This suggests that ideational power can operate independently as a pathway to institutional change.

Third, the mobilization of power resources is not a one-sided process. Beyond the structural economic power that platforms are known to wield (Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2023; 2025), the analysis demonstrates how they mobilized ideational power to advance their interests. Through public-facing narratives and their affiliated association, platforms stressed their significant economic contributions and invoked consumer welfare, aiming to secure institutional and public support. This strategy appeared successful in the early stages of the conflict, allowing platforms to temporarily stall regulatory intervention. The subsequent back-and-forth ideational battles reveal that platform power is far from uncontested. Indeed, recent IR scholarship has begun to reconceptualize employer power (Pérez Ahumada, 2023; Kallas, 2025), yet it focuses predominantly on structural and institutional power resources. This is likely because 'business power is classically seen as exercised against the public interest' (Culpepper and Thelen, 2020: 295). In this case, however, both capital and labour competed to frame their interests as the public interest. Given the centrality of public opinion in shaping platform power (Culpepper and Thelen, 2020), future research might consider how to assess the effectiveness of competing ideational strategies and identify further counter-mobilization tactics deployed by platforms. Moreover, the findings extend Goods et al's (2024) theorization of consumers as potential power resources by showing how unions and platforms sought to activate alignments with consumers, restaurants, and merchants.

Overall, this research illustrates how emerging labour actors' power-building strategies are continuously shaped by their assessment of power resources, platform power, and institutional factors. As the 2026 Act moves from legislation to

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enforcement, it offers a new avenue for examining how unions and platforms continue to mobilize power resources to defend their interests. Notwithstanding the limitations of the single-case-study design, future comparative research is needed to examine how these relational dynamics unfold across diverse platform-mediated sectors and institutional frameworks.

Notes

[1] There are 96 occupational unions related to transportation and delivery work (Ministry of Labour, 2024). My count includes only those unions specifically targeting food-delivery couriers. However, couriers may join other transportation- and delivery-related occupational unions.

[2] A few interviewees opted to participate in the study without accepting the incentive.

[3] Only one interview lasted less than half an hour (Table 2). This was a follow-up interview with P1 conducted in October 2023. Because I had interviewed P1 only a few months earlier, the follow-up was shorter and more focused, aimed at understanding how organizing strategies might have changed between July and October 2023.

[4] Union officials do not get paid. Among my participants, those who worked as union officials usually had another full-time job to sustain their living.

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Research ethics statement

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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