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Unwilful ignorance: attitudes to trade unions among Deliveroo riders in Belgium

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Key points

- Only a small minority of Deliveroo riders in Belgium, who are predominantly male, young and students, hold negative views about trade unions. Lack of exposure to and knowledge about unions was instead cited as the biggest reason why many of the riders are not members, with many of them undecided or ambivalent about the idea.
- The low unionisation rate among riders seems to be partly due to a lack of organising initiatives and strategies on the part of trade unions (at least at the time of our survey).

As the riders are predominantly students, targeting them offers an opportunity for unions to show how valuable they can be to young people leaving education and entering the world of work.

- Organising the riders, fostering solidarity between student, migrant and self-employed riders, and building a collective identity will require tailored organising strategies which take into consideration the riders' individual situations as well as the labour market context.
- A 'critical mass' of 'rider activists' could act as a bridge between the riders and the trade unions.
- Trade unions could offer stability, experience and knowledge in the fast-changing platform-based food delivery industry.

Introduction

Founded in 2013, Deliveroo is probably one of the most visible and well-known place-based digital labour platforms in major cities across western Europe. This policy brief provides an explorative case study of Deliveroo riders in Belgium based on a survey conducted in December 2017 and January 2018 among riders who had been employed by the labour market intermediary the Société Mutuelle pour artistes (SMart).¹ We put the workers' perspective centre stage by examining the riders' appetite for unionisation. The argument will be made that in Belgium, where the riders are predominantly young students, their attitudes towards trade unions do not, in the main, differ from those of their peers outside the platform economy or from what we know of those of young people in general. Their views on unions are characterised by what can be called an 'unwilful ignorance', suggesting that a lack of exposure to or knowledge about trade unions helps to explain the low unionisation rate among young people.

The context at the time of the survey: the end of the SMart arrangement

Deliveroo entered the Belgian labour market in September 2015. It had a strong incentive to provide work to students (Drahokoupil and Piasna 2019): according to local regulations, employed students in formal education, irrespective of their nationality, can work for up to 475 hours per year while paying only 2.71% of social insurance contributions and no tax. Employer's social insurance costs were also substantially lower for students (5.42% in contrast to 30% for standard workers) and thus the overheads charged by SMart to Deliveroo to cover the costs of employing riders were much lower for students. However, following its general policy of avoiding being classified and perceived as an

¹ This policy brief is largely based on Vandaele K., Piasna A. and Drahokoupil J. (2019) 'Algorithm breakers' are not a different 'species': attitudes towards trade unions of Deliveroo riders in Belgium, Working paper 2019.06, Brussels, ETUI.

employer (despite having full control of hiring and shift allocation), Deliveroo did not opt for employing riders directly. Instead, from May 2016, Deliveroo riders could either work on a self-employed basis and invoice the platform directly, or bill for their services through SMart, a labour market intermediary providing support to artists and other project-based workers in coping with their discontinuous careers (Charles *et al.* 2018). The riders opted to work through SMart and thus benefit from the employment status and the tax advantages available for students. This put SMart into a position to negotiate a joint protocol with Deliveroo and Take Eat Easy, another food delivery platform. Thus, by providing the riders with an employment status, SMart acted partly as an employer but also, by voicing the riders' concerns vis-à-vis the platforms, as a 'quasi-trade union' (Vandaele 2018).

As a formal employer for the riders, SMart was obliged to comply with the legal minimum standards in Belgium (although it is to their credit that they successfully concluded a joint protocol with the platforms that comprised the legal minima). Thus, according to the protocol between SMart and Deliveroo, the riders employed through SMart had access to social security, were guaranteed a minimum wage, and got a partial reimbursement for the use of their mobile phones. They were also guaranteed minimum three-hour shifts, which were paid fully even if a technical problem or accident prevented a rider from finishing a shift. SMart employees also received safety training and were covered by work-related accident insurance and third-party liability insurance. SMart needed, as a formal employer, to administer a salary fund that provided insurance against bankruptcy of the platform or late payment. The fund was soon put to use, as Take Eat Easy could not compete with Deliveroo and went bankrupt in July 2016. SMart disbursed €400,000 from its salary fund to pay affected riders, gaining considerable legitimacy among them for its model, and crossing boundaries between traditional labour market actors.

However, claiming that the riders would benefit from greater flexibility, Deliveroo announced plans, in October 2017, to alter its algorithms allocating work, to change its remuneration system to a per-delivery pay scheme, and to end its co-operation with SMart. This sparked a political debate about the employment categorisation of app-based platform workers in Belgium. Deliveroo's unilateral move also caused resentment among riders, giving further impetus to their self-organisation and creating opportunities for trade unions to support the riders' protest. Neither the political debate nor the protests, however, prevented Deliveroo from changing its policies. The transition towards a self-employment model lasted until January 2018, and it happened to coincide with the expansion of policies promoting platform work in Belgium (Vandaele 2017). The so-called De Croo Law basically offered tax relief to self-employed platform workers, and Deliveroo considered this deregulation to be as financially attractive as relying on employed student status. Categorising their workers as 'self-employed' gave Deliveroo the flexibility to change the pay system and working conditions without having to negotiate with SMart or worry about any other 'constraints' of a genuine employment relationship. Deliveroo thus avoided the prospect of being covered by a collective agreement, which was being negotiated at the time.

The profile of the riders

A maximum of 289 usable questionnaires could be analysed for this policy brief, yielding a response rate of 8.8%.² Table 1 summarises some of the demographic and other characteristics of the surveyed riders. Most of them were in formal education and hence worked on fiscally more favourable student contracts; the rest are referred to as salaried workers in this policy brief. The age structure is very skewed: the riders' median age stood at 22 years, with a median age of 21 for students and 28 for salaried riders. More than one third of the riders were not Belgian, with 11% from outside the European Union. The non-Belgians were older than the Belgians, and their educational attainment was higher than that of the Belgian riders. Most riders still lived with their parent(s). Finally, there is quite a bit of geographical concentration in the survey sample, as more than half of the riders were working in Brussels.

Table 1 **Demographic and other characteristics of Deliveroo riders in Belgium**

Characteristics	Percentage
Gender	
Female	13%
Male	87%
Age groups	
<=24 years	70%
>=25 years	30%
Education	
Non-tertiary or lower education	61%
Bachelor	25%
Master	14%
Nationality	
Belgian	65%
Non-Belgian	35%
Employment contract	
Salaried workers	16%
Students	84%
Household status	
Lives with one or both parents	67%
Lives with spouse or partner	18%
Lives with house- or roommates	11%
Other	3%
City	
Brussels	52%
Other Belgian cities	48%
Trade union membership	
Member	6%
Non-member	94%

Source: survey results.

2 The answered questionnaires are representative in terms of gender and the riders' type of employment.

Only seventeen Deliveroo riders were trade union members at the time of the survey, 6% of the survey sample.³ The overall majority of the Deliveroo riders were thus not unionised. The cost of membership could hardly have been an issue, however, as the major unions offer free membership for students, which would mean for most of the riders. Moreover, membership of the Riders Collective (Koerierscollectief/Collectif des coursier.e.s) is free for all riders, irrespective of their employment type. The Riders Collective, informally set up in 2015, can be considered a self-organised, network-based, on- and offline community of 'rider activists' which enables these activists to mobilise and organise other riders. Being a member of the Riders Collective is complementary with membership of the bigger, long-established unions, and vice versa; overlapping membership is therefore entirely possible.

It is not known whether the seventeen riders were members of the long-established trade unions in Belgium or of the Riders Collective, or both, since no distinction was made between those two types of unionism in the survey questionnaire. However, of note is that union membership was higher among salaried riders. Considering their relatively more precarious position, associated with higher unemployment risks, as well as the long-established unions' involvement in the provision of unemployment benefits, this is likely to mean that most of them were (at least) members of one of the major unions in Belgium.

The riders' appetite for unionisation

The findings detailed in the previous section indicate that Deliveroo riders in Belgium were (at the time of the survey) predominantly male and young, typically students, and about one third did not have the Belgian nationality. This profile is not necessarily a drawback for trade unions, who can still generally rely upon a relatively high level of legitimacy among social groups exposed to economic vulnerability like migrants and young workers (Frangi *et al.* 2017; Gorodzeisky and Richards 2019). Indeed, research on the attitudes and beliefs that young people hold about unions has commonly demonstrated that the disconnect is largely due to a lack of awareness and knowledge of unions rather than anti-unionism per se, at least in western Europe and in English-speaking countries in the Global North (for an overview, see Vandaele 2019). Moreover, there are also hints of (critical) support for unions pointing to an unmet demand for unionisation among young people. Only a small minority of young people seems to have clear feelings of antipathy towards unions. So, unless Deliveroo riders in Belgium substantially differ from their peers outside the platform-based food delivery industry, there is little reason to believe that their attitudes towards collective representation would differ greatly either. In addition, Belgium is still a country where the social custom of unionisation is relatively strong, with a net union density of about 55%, although union membership has been recently declining (Vandaele 2017).

Table 2 What is the main reason you are currently not a union member?

Reasons	Percentage
Lack of exposure and knowledge	56%
'I don't know much about unions and what they do'	30%
'I haven't been asked by a union to join'	18%
'There is no union active within Deliveroo'	8%
Ambivalence	34%
'I never felt the need to join a union'	28%
'I prefer talking directly to management'	2%
'Unions are too weak to make a difference'	3%
'I don't feel unions understand my needs'	1%
Antipathy	10%
'I don't like unions in general'	7%
'I don't think unions are relevant'	3%

Source: survey results.

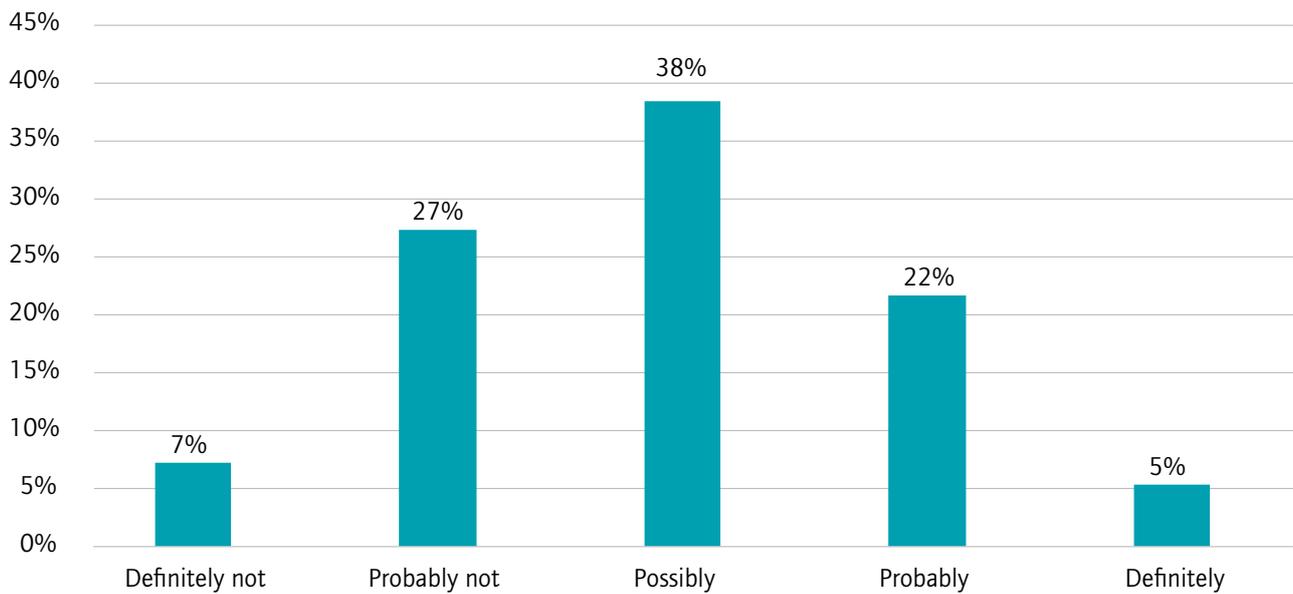
The answers given by the riders to the question 'what is the main reason you are currently not a union member?' allows us to gauge what lies behind their attitudes to trade unions. Table 2 demonstrates that there were three main reason for not joining a union. The first, given by 30% of riders, was that they did not know much about unions, closely followed (28% of riders) by the answer that they had never felt the need to join (the latter is understandable as many of the riders are students with a weaker labour market attachment).⁴ A third reason (18%) was because Deliveroo riders had simply not been asked to join. This finding is closely related to Deliveroo having no union representation. Only a small minority of the riders had outright negative feelings about unions, while a few others considered them no longer relevant. Some of the riders preferred to talk directly to management, or they had doubts about the performance of unions either because of their weakness or due to a perceived lack of understanding of the interests and needs of the riders. Grouping the motives into three major groups, a lack of exposure to and knowledge about unions reveals itself to be the main reason for not being a member, followed by feelings of ambivalence or antipathy towards unions. Students referred to motives that fall into the 'ambivalent' category far more often, whereas the attitudes of salaried riders reflected rather a lack of exposure to or knowledge of unions, although this group was also rather marked by feelings of antipathy. There were no significant differences between attitudes in terms of gender, age, educational attainment, nationality or household composition.

Figure 1 shows that almost 40% of the riders considered unionising to be a possibility if they were to have a problem in their Deliveroo job. This result indicates that the riders' attitudes

3 Direct experience with trade unions, via, for instance, union gatherings or meetings, was also very limited at the time of the survey.

4 Compared to native-born riders, a higher percentage of migrants considered that they lacked knowledge about unions, while fewer of them questioned their utility.

Figure 1 Would you join a trade union if you had problems in your Deliveroo job?



Source: survey results.

to unions are malleable. Put another way, a large proportion of riders were undecided about whether to unionise or not, which is in accordance with their main motive for not joining a union: a lack of exposure to and knowledge about them. Furthermore, only a small percentage of the riders were strongly convinced about not unionising and a similarly small percentage were strongly convinced that they would join. About a quarter thought that they would probably not unionise, while a not dissimilar percentage believed that they would. Combining these figures with those from Table 2, riders emphasising a lack of union exposure and knowledge have a mean level of 3.1 on the probability scale on unionisation (ranging from one to five), while this level stands at 2.7 and 2.3 for riders characterised by ‘ambivalence’ or ‘antipathy’, respectively. There are no significant differences in the probability to unionise for gender, age, educational attainment, nationality, or employment contract type. However, Deliveroo riders in Brussels did demonstrate a higher likelihood to unionise than the riders in the other Belgian cities (combined), which might reflect the influence of the protests, which were concentrated in Brussels, upon union attitudes, and could point to a stronger group identification and network effects among the riders in Belgium’s capital at the time of the survey.

Conclusion

Some caveats should be made about generalising the above survey results. Grassroots action is particularly prominent in the delivery- and transport-based platform economy, despite algorithmic management and the atomisation of workers, and these findings cannot simply be transposed to other types of digital labour platforms as the workers’ power resources differ in each case (Vandaele 2018). Furthermore, the Belgian regulatory arrangements on the platform economy and the country’s particular trade union context evidently differ from those in other countries –

where, moreover, the relationship between the riders’ self-organised groups and the long-established unions could be more contentious.

Nevertheless, the Deliveroo riders, being predominantly young, are not essentially different from their peers in terms of their views on trade unions and inclination to unionise. They do not generally hold negative opinions about unions and do not consider them incompatible with platform work. The survey results stand in contrast to the Deliveroo narrative that riders, as ‘independent contractors’ with control and flexibility, are not at all interested in unionising. Deliveroo claims that the protesting riders are not representative of all workers, but while the number of ‘rider activists’ might indeed be small, from a historical-sociological perspective, union formation always begins with a critical mass. The riders that are organising now could become future union activists, and therefore possible drivers for union revitalisation.

The findings presented here point rather to a lack of union activity and tailor-made union organising strategies (at the time of study) due to the novelty of the platform-based food delivery industry. However, Belgian unions are catching up and making headway in this area.⁵ Although the platform economy is still relatively marginal in terms of employment, the Deliveroo case has offered them opportunities to rediscover a more systematic approach to organising, such as setting up small-scale (app-based) recruitment experiments and engaging creatively with groups of workers who are beyond their traditional realm of activism. In pursuing such

5 They have, for example, made contact with the riders through various means, such as ordering pizza via the Deliveroo app from multiple restaurants so that the riders would all end up gathered together in one location; the trade unionists then offered the pizza to the riders for free while listening to them about their experiences with the ‘algorithmic management’ of Deliveroo. Conducting a small survey has been another means to identify their profiles and issues. Bike repair workshops could also be a possible way to bring the riders together in one physical space.

efforts, trade unions should not, however, consider and organise the riders as an entirely homogenous group based on age. Firstly, as seen from the survey results, this is a diverse workforce in several ways and, secondly, the workers hold subjective understandings of their job quality (Goods *et al.* 2019). Trade unions can work with this heterogeneity by developing diverse, tailor-made organising strategies that focus on young people's transitions from school to work as well as on the working lives of platform workers who are not students.

Engaging with the riders would give unions a window of opportunity to win trust among students and demonstrate how they can be of value to them as they leave education and enter the world of work. 'Formative' experiences of unionism are, moreover, likely to influence people's future attitudes towards trade unions (Vandaele 2019).⁶ Moreover, the platform-based food delivery industry enables trade unions to reach out to migrants and to more precarious salaried workers. Unions can offer some stability and experience in this fast-changing industry, and their efforts in the food-delivery platform industry could give them new legitimacy in other industries confronted with digital labour platforms, 'independent contractors' and freelancers. The 'United Freelancers', a recent initiative by the Belgian Christian union confederation (Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond/Confédération des syndicats chrétiens) to set up a union to organise freelancers, could be seen in this regard.⁷ Unions could also help the riders with their tax declarations and support them with leadership training and educational programmes, which would help to overcome the riders' lack of knowledge and give them the tools to become potential future union activists. Finally, the recently founded Transnational Federation of Couriers, set up in October 2018 by riders from eleven European countries and supported by some long-established as well as grassroots unions, may offer a potential forum for mutual learning and exchanging experiences and views (see Dufresne 2019).

While the original riders' protests calmed down after February 2018, fresh protests against wage cuts kicked off in the city of Ghent in June 2019 and there is talk of further actions in both Ghent and Antwerp. Even in the fast-adapting, tech-savvy platform economy, the future is unwritten.

6 It remains to be seen, however, whether this would result in unionisation once students enter stable careers in other industries, especially if no unions are present in the workplace.

7 See <https://www.unitedfreelancers.be>

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