Riders United Will Never Be Divided?
A Cautionary Tale of Disrupting the Platformization of Urban Space

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Introduction

Digital platforms have become a staple of everyday life, a trend reified by the Covid-19 pandemic. While providing conveniences to their users and consumers, these technology companies arguably have various detrimental effects on society: communication platforms, for example, are criticized for enabling surveillance by collecting big data sets while digital service platforms stand accused of eroding labor standards. Both data protection and labor standards hinge on effective government regulation, yet public oversight of platform companies is still piecemeal.

What is more, the algorithms and the code used by platform companies are also jealously guarded business secrets, rendering algorithmic decision-making a black box. In lieu of being able to reverse engineer code to understand the effects of these decisions on urban space, geographers have proposed workaround methods such as proxying (Fields/Bissell/Macrorie 2020) or studying 'glitches' (Leszczynski 2020) to scrutinize digital platforms. Especially labor-mediating platforms lend themselves to being studied this way: after all, "[…] it is not necessary to know how the machine works to know if you are getting a raw deal when it comes to payday, or when you have to deal with a bullying manager or keep up with an ever-increasing pace of work" (Moore/Joyce 2020: 942). To put it simply, while the source code platforms run on is not openly available, exploring platform operations at the scale of the everyday and through the lived experience of workers can help us make sense of the transformations brought about by platform capitalism, and thus produce knowledge to inform public debate over regulatory frameworks.

In my contribution to this volume, I follow this line of inquiry by analyzing the labor organizing efforts that took place at the Berlin-based platform Gorillas in 2021. Gorillas is the *enfant terrible* of the local start-up scene: the company became the first German start-up *ever* to achieve *unicorn status* – the Silicon Valley term for a start-up that reaches a valuation of one billion dollars (Partington/Lewin 2021). While the start-up scene is in awe, the exceptional pace of business growth and influx of investor capital has sparked discontent among the company's workers. Since February 2021, Gorillas workers have pursued various strategies to struggle for better working conditions, including initiating a *works council*, calling for wild cat strikes, i.e., strikes without the involvement of a union, and facing Gorillas management in court.

My analysis of this ongoing conflict situates the struggle over labor rights at Gorillas within other organizing efforts in the platform economy. The empirical material includes both formal research interviews and informal conversations with workers as well as an engagement with workers' publicly available digital communications. Since many of the collective actions have been documented on social media as they unfolded, social media posts provide a detailed timeline and a chronicle of the events. In the first section, I lay out the specifics of the local platform economy in Germany's capital Berlin and introduce Gorillas. I then recount the collective struggle over working conditions at the company and draw on research on previous platform economy organizing to highlight similarities and differences between Gorillas and these movements. I argue that a particular combination of external circumstances and successful organizing strategies enabled a relatively small group of workers to, at least temporarily, disrupt a growing billion-dollar business. While the collective actions at Gorillas, therefore, illustrate how local conditions can be successfully leveraged to disrupt a platform's operations from below, the paper cautions against generalizing from the Gorillas experience – given the unpredictability of venture capital-driven markets – it remains a cautionary tale.

Situating the case of Gorillas in Berlin's platform economy

As the pandemic is reaching its two-year anniversary, the logistics and delivery sectors have emerged as some of the clear economic winners of this period. In addition to record profits for Amazon and DHL (DHL Group 2021; Weise 2021), the lockdowns also benefited online retail in the food and gro-

cery sector. In Germany, online food shopping has increased by 60 % since the pandemic started (HDE 2021: 8). Spurred by this growth, venture capitalists have heavily invested in food delivery platforms: two internationally established ready-to-eat-meal-delivery brands, UberEats and FoodPanda, have (re-)launched in Berlin in 2021 to contest the local monopoly of Lieferando and Wolt. In addition to the well-established model of delivering meals prepared in restaurants or dark kitchens, consumers' increased appetite for food delivery has also produced new business models in grocery retail.

In this new segment, local platforms Gorillas and Flink as well as the Turkish platform Getir compete with supermarkets to deliver groceries to a customer's doorstep within a very short time, often less than ten minutes. Advertisements for these platforms and their warehouses have become ubiquitous across the city's central residential neighborhoods. Gorillas launched shortly after the first Covid-19 lockdown in May 2020, and quickly expanded. It not only sells groceries at largely the same retail prices as large supermarket chains, but it also offers a much faster service than supermarkets – for a relatively small delivery fee of €1.80 (Gode 2021). To ensure these extremely fast deliveries, Gorillas operates through an infrastructure of small warehouses staffed by e-bike couriers, so-called *riders*, and warehouse workers, known in the company lingo as *pickers*. When a customer places an order through the Gorillas app, staff at the nearest warehouse quickly get to work: a picker collects the ordered products from the shelves, and hands them over to a rider. The rider puts the goods in a backpack, gets on an e-bike, and delivers the order to the customer's doorstep. In contrast to the archetype of meal-delivery, where workers were considered freelance *partners*, who had to own their own bikes and were paid per *gig*, Gorillas offers its workers employment contracts and e-bikes to enable fast deliveries. These *perks* made working for Gorillas as a rider or picker a comparatively good option for many workers at first – especially since most of the Gorillas workers have recently migrated to Berlin and have very limited options on the job market. Given the choice between these options, my interlocutors compared working conditions at Gorillas favorably to other jobs they could get on other labor platforms or in the hospitality and tourism industries. While Gorillas employment contracts have their own challenges, they do offer workers the benefits of employee status including

sick leave, paid vacation, and, for the most part, health insurance coverage[1]. A former Gorillas worker I interviewed explained:

> "[...] I was super happy with the job because [...] I always [used to] work in contact with customers like bar, restaurants, also customer care and stuff. With Gorillas I didn't have to see any customer. [...] And it was a really nice environment [...] and the salary was really good. [...] I wish to find another job again, a good job, well paid like Gorillas."[2]

As the company raised more and more capital and grew at an exponential rate, however, the stark contrast between the company's available budget and its refusal to spend any of it on pay raises or better-quality equipment eventually sparked frustration among the workers. Some had believed in the start-up culture promise to *work hard until you make it*. Yet, even after Gorillas had 'made it', nothing changed substantially for them.

#WeWantSantiBack: Labor organizing efforts at Gorillas

In addition to the tension between the start-up's astonishing success with raising ever more capital and the working conditions on the shopfloor, the weather played an important role in sparking the first labor organizing efforts at Gorillas. During an extremely cold and snowy week in February 2021, riders faced icy roads which made their jobs more dangerous than usual. On February 9th, riders at three different Gorillas warehouses went on strike after being forced to deliver goods despite heavy snowfall that day. A day later, the Gorillas Workers Collective (GWC)[3] began tweeting about working conditions, starting a new Twitter account, @GorillasWorkers, which called for additional strikes (GWC 2021a). Ceding to the strike pressure, Gorillas management decided to temporarily shut down operations. After this initial success in halting deliveries until the snow subsided, the GWC also began advocating on behalf of warehouse pickers, who up until this point still had to come in for

1 In Germany, the type of employment contract determines whether it includes statutory health insurance. So called *student worker* contracts or *mini jobs* – both specifically precarious employment forms exempted from many of the German labor standards – do not cover health insurance.

2 Interview with former Gorillas worker, conducted in June 2021.

3 There are different accounts as to when exactly the GWC was formed. Different workers have indicated different starting times.

their shifts. The GWC demanded pickers, too, ought to be given paid time off (GWC 2021b). Shortly after this incidence, the GWC began to voice additional grievances:

> "Riders, did you know that we all earn a different hourly wage? While most get 10,50€/h, there are some earning 11,25€/h, 11,50€/h and 12,00€/h. This is not regulated in written [sic] by any ascending wage structure in our contracts. #equalpay4equalwork #gorillas #berlin" (GWC 2021c)

During the following weeks, additional issues were discussed between the workers and online. The GWC created its own Telegram[4] channel which has over 1.000 subscribers. The activists use this channel to collect information about problems such as the lack of appropriate gear for deliveries during cold and rainy weather, problems with faulty or late wage payments, safety issues related to Covid-19 and bike defects, and concerns over workers' privacy when CCTV was installed in several warehouses. Polling their co-workers about workplace grievances gave the GWC a sense of how widespread these issues were beyond the warehouses they themselves were familiar with.

At the end of March 2021, another concern came to the fore: the precarity of employment contracts issued by Gorillas. By default, all Gorillas workers receive a contract that is limited to one year and includes a six-month probation period. In Germany, employers can contractually mandate probation periods of between three to six months. During this time, an employee can be terminated easily and almost immediately without any reasons given, typically with a notice period of two weeks. After the end of the probation period, much stronger labor protections apply; employers need to cite reasons for terminating a contract and adhere to longer notice periods (the specifics depend on the industry and the type of contract but typically would include a three-month notice period) (BMAS 2021). Given this legal framework, long probation periods – as well as limited contracts – are a way for employers to sidestep labor protections.

When a rider who was a core member of the GWC was fired towards the end of his probation period (GWC 2021d), workers began to question the legitimacy of probation periods that covered half of their entire employment period. To challenge these precarious, albeit legal, hiring practices, three GWC activists initiated procedures for the formal election of a *Betriebsrat* (works

4 Telegram is a messenger app widely used in Germany.

council)[5] in early June (GWC 2021e). In mid-June, however, yet another rider, Santiago, was dismissed shortly before his probation period ended. Riders again went on strike, and this time, news of the campaign to reinstate Santiago generated attention both in the traditional media as well as on social media. The GWC successfully forged ties with journalists, unionists, and other activists, and this support base joined the physical picket lines and helped spread the hashtag #WeWantSantiBack online. As the campaign gained momentum, it spawned solidarity actions from other Gorillas warehouses in Germany and beyond. Throughout June and July 2021, several wildcat strike actions took place, and workers temporarily blocked warehouses across Berlin. In mid-July, the German Minister of Labor intervened to mediate between the parties. At a joint meeting between Gorillas managements, the minister, and the workers, the GWC presented a list of 19 demands that included payment of outstanding wages, a reduction in the length of probation periods, air conditioning for warehouses, and the issuing of work phones, to name but a few (see GWC 2021f for the full list). At the time of writing in December 2021, Gorillas management seems not to have met any of these demands. However, between September and December 2021, workers won several lawsuits relating to the limitations and the long probation periods of Gorillas employment contracts (Arbeitsgericht Berlin 2021a; GWC 2021g). Furthermore, Gorillas had sued the GWC, disputing the legality of their attempt at forming a works council. In November 2021, the Berlin Labor Court dismissed the company's lawsuit and confirmed the workers' right to form a works council (Arbeitsgericht Berlin 2021b). Following from this, the court also affirmed the temporary protection of those who were directly involved in preparing works council elections: under German law, they cannot be fired, not even during probation. Hence, the court judged the termination of GWC members who had been dismissed, likely in retaliation for their labor organizing, illegal. As a result, the company was ordered to reinstate these workers (GWC 2021i).

5 In Germany, all companies that have more than five employees are legally entitled to have a works council (*Betriebsrat*). A works council represents all workers of the company in disputes with management and provides oversight during hiring and firing processes (ETUI 2016).

Riders United: Platform organizing at large

The workers at Gorillas arguably attracted so much attention because labor organizing in the platform economy is considered extremely difficult. Mainstream unions have long struggled with the fragmentation of work under neoliberalism, and unionizing workers in Germany's expansive low wage sector – one of the largest in Europe (Grabka/Schröder 2019) – has been a long-term issue not least because migrant workers make up a significant portion of this workforce and unions have long struggled to include them (Bojadžijev 2008; Krings 2021). Rather than posing entirely new challenges, platform labor amplifies these existing difficulties. Unionizing platform workers is to organize a highly fragmented workforce with few interpersonal relationships: many platform workers neither meet nor know their co-workers, nor do they have a human-being for a supervisor. Many work as *independent partners*, i.e., freelancers who have to provide their own work equipment and are paid for one gig at a time. In addition to the anonymity of social relations, building union power with no physical workplace infrastructure to rally workers around is challenging, with domestic and home workers being another case in point (Shinozaki 2015). For these reasons, established unions have so far largely failed to achieve a significant rate of unionization amongst platform workers (Woodcock 2021).

With most platform workers not being union members, labor organizers cannot fall back on union strike budgets to cover lost income. Without a strike budget, stopping work to protest working conditions means forgoing immediate wages and tips in the hope of increased future income. However, this calculation is often hardly possible for platform workers: platform workers tend to be 'hustlers' piecing together a meager livelihood from their work and usually have no savings to fall back on (Ravenelle 2019). What is more, being largely a migrant workforce, they tend to be excluded from social welfare and unemployment benefits, and, depending on immigration status, they often need to earn a steady income to remain in the country (Lam/Triandafyllidou 2021).

Despite these challenging circumstances, Gorillas is not the first time platform workers collectively struggle for improvements. Platform workers have been striking against changes in payment systems across Europe in London, Toronto, and Turin, as well as in India and China, since at least 2016. Berlin itself has seen platform economy organizing before when food couriers at Deliveroo and Foodora – both platforms that specialize in delivering ready-

made meals – founded the syndicalist union DeliverUnion in 2017 (New Syndicalist 2019).

Notwithstanding ongoing organizing efforts at Gorillas, I want to propose that the case of Gorillas differs from other attempts at organizing platform workers. Collective actions serve as an illustration of just *how many* factors need to come together to leverage worker power. Some of these factors are external to the organizing factors and include the timing of the protests and the spatializations of grocery delivery models as well as the visa regime that produces a certain type of worker at Gorillas. Other components of the successful collective action are created by the workers themselves, such as their ability to successfully leverage advantages created by these external circumstances and foster community ties that carried the protests forward. This specific combination of circumstances gave workers leverage to organize at Gorillas but is not necessarily replicable. To contextualize the success of collective actions at Gorillas thus is not to underestimate the considerable amount of work the GWC and its allies put in, nor to belittle the importance of building worker power vis-à-vis platform companies. Yet, to better understand the prospects of labor organizing against platform companies, it is crucial to situate the case within the broader frame of a venture-capital driven sector of the economy. I will turn to each of these aspects to examine how they make the organizing efforts at Gorillas different from previous organizing efforts in the platform sector.

Contextualizing the collective actions at Gorillas

Starting with the external circumstances, it is, first, important to note the timing of the protests: the push to form a works council, as well as the first wave of strikes, coincided with a particularly quick expansion of the platform economy in Berlin. As a result, Gorillas workers benefited from an industry pivot: since the rapid growth of the food delivery sector, platform riders have been offered employment contracts rather than being subjected to the gig model. Both the recently launched grocery-delivery start-ups, as well as the established ready-to-eat platforms, have largely shifted from per-drop payment to offering a mix of hourly pay and bonuses. So unlike previous gig workers that went on strike, Gorillas workers did not have to sacrifice their primary income entirely. And thanks to its large support base, the GWC was also able to crowdsource a budget to cover lost tips, which form a considerable

portion of workers' income. The #WeWantSantiBack campaign likewise coincided with major business news: Gorillas' main corporate competitors Flink and Getir received large amounts of investment capital at funding rounds in June 2021 and immediately started recruiting as many riders and pickers as they could (Stothard 2021). As companies outbid each other for workers to scale as fast as possible, there were, and still are, many job openings in the industry. At the time of writing, delivery companies in Berlin offer roughly the same salaries and conditions, including employment contracts, payment above minimum wage with a starting salary of €10.50/hour, and often also an e-bike. Benefits that previously made Gorillas stand out to the first applicants are now more or less the industry standard. These fairly uniform conditions across delivery platforms in Berlin also meant retaliation by management – terminations and not renewing contracts when they expired – was somewhat buffered. Given the number of job openings in the sector, everyone who got fired because of their workplace activism and wanted to continue working in the delivery sector was able to do so easily.[6] In short, the fact that several companies with similar business models launched in Berlin at the same time, and demand for staff was high, workers in the city occupied a better bargaining position than previous platform workers found themselves or currently find themselves in other cities.

Second, the ability to take the risk of losing one's job and being forced to look for another one – either in the industry or beyond – is possibly also related to the demographics of the Gorillas workforce. As mentioned earlier, digital labor platforms overwhelmingly attract migrant workers in Germany (Altenried 2021; Schaupp 2021). While Gorillas is no exception to this general tendency in platform work – warehouse and delivery workers are mostly recent arrivals to Berlin – in some important ways, Gorillas workers *do* differ from both the 'migrantized' workforce in non-platform jobs and from other platform workers who are also migrants. Recent research on platform work in Canada, for example, points to a large prevalence of migrant workers on employment visas, which make it difficult to change jobs (Lam/Triandafyllidou 2021). The Gorillas workers I encountered, on the other hand, are by and large not on such visas. Instead, Gorillas workers are often either dual citizens of both a non-EU and an EU country – and hence able to work and move freely under the Schengen agreement – or they hold student or working holiday visas. Under these latter visa categories, one's immigration status is not tied

6 Interview with GWC member, conducted in October 2021.

to a specific employer; in the cases of students and EU citizens, their immigration status is not conditional on generating an income at all as long as they can support themselves financially. Consequently, losing a particular job then does not immediately risk Gorillas workers' ability to stay in Germany. While fulfilling contract-hour targets or financial targets in employment visa categories is often needed simply to secure an individual's ability to stay in the host country, it is also often a prerequisite to bring family members or pay off a migrant's journey (Bauder 2006; Könönen 2019). Student and working holiday visas, on the other hand, tend to be issued exclusively to young people in their 20s or early 30s. In contrast to employment visas or asylum stipulations, working holiday visas rule out bringing a spouse or other dependents to Germany. Likely because of these visa regimes, none of the workers I spoke to – regardless of their gender – had any financial responsibilities towards dependents in Germany. While some workers send money to their families abroad, in Germany they only had themselves to support, and migration projects were individual lifestyle projects rather than joint family decisions. Nor were the workers I interviewed required to meet specific income targets to be able to stay in the country, pay for their journey, or apply for family reunion. Considering these circumstances, I would argue, it was more feasible for Gorillas workers to take risks with organizing than it is for most migrants in comparable low-wage jobs. The combined factors of not being subjected to immigration-related labor requirements and being young and unattached meant that Gorillas workers are overall comparatively better positioned to fight for labor rights.

Third, in addition to the timing and the demographics of the Gorillas workforce, the organizing efforts also benefited from the particularities of grocery delivery logistics, namely its spatialization. All grocery delivery startups that have launched in Berlin in the past two years promise extremely short delivery times, in most cases less than ten minutes. The almost instant delivery makes them distinct from the scheduled delivery services offered by supermarket chains, and it is even faster than ordering from a restaurant through a meal-delivery app. To deliver this fast is extremely challenging given that the so-called 'last mile' in logistics is the most expensive part of the supply chain and computationally also the most difficult problem to solve (Altenried 2019). The new grocery delivery models approach this problem by relying on both a reduction in complexity and a very localized infrastructure.

In the meal-delivery business, companies must mediate workers and two dynamic variables, the restaurant's location, and the customer's location. In

grocery delivery, however, the pick-up location remains fixed as riders only deliver products within a specific radius of each warehouse and return to the same warehouse after every delivery[7] – the only changing variable is the customer's location. This reduction in complexity not only serves a business rationale, it also lends itself to collective action: it is much more feasible to picket individual warehouses than it would be to block off hundreds of restaurants or dark kitchen locations. To keep distances between a customer's location and a warehouse short, platform-operated warehouses are directly located in residential neighborhoods rather than on the outskirts of cities, where rent for industrial warehouses tends to be cheaper. The built environment of residential neighborhoods, however, limits the size of platform-operated grocery delivery warehouses compared to industrial supermarket warehouses[8]. Picketing these physically small warehouses with one or two entrances, of course, requires fewer workers than attempting to block off an entire regular-sized industrial warehouse. With these factors combined, the spatial organization of grocery delivery platform logistics makes disruption of the supply chain attainable.

Fourth, thanks to the spatial configuration of grocery delivery, Gorillas workers were able to co-produce social infrastructures. Importantly, these social infrastructures are what make or break organizing efforts at companies. Given the fragmentation of digitally mediated labor, planning collective actions requires co-workers who do not know each other and are subjected to digital surveillance and algorithmic management to build trust and relationships (Bronowicka/Ivanova 2020; Leonardi et al. 2019). For these reasons, previous ride-hailing and food courier organizers relied on reaching out to workers in public spaces where they are identifiable by their platform-branded backpacks (Tassinari/Maccarrone 2020; Woodcock 2021). In the case of Gorillas, however, warehouses provided a ready-made physical space for workers to cultivate these relationships by 'hanging out' between deliveries. As one picker I interviewed recounted, "We put [on] music, we make coffee and eat all the time."[9] The company even advertised warehouses as the "homebase for all riders to catch up with the crew, take a break and unwind" and

7 Some companies also dispatch workers with two to three orders at a time, but workers still regularly return to a warehouse during their shift.

8 The price of real estate in central urban districts likely also plays a role but it would go beyond the scope of this article to discuss this aspect in detail.

9 Interview with former Gorillas worker, conducted in June 2021.

even organized company-sponsored parties there to foster warehouse communities (Gorillas Company 2021a; 2021b). In addition, Gorillas used to assign riders and pickers shifts at different but recurring warehouses[10]. This allowed workers to get to know co-workers at multiple warehouses located in different parts of the city, and information could be easily shared between different warehouse communities. As a result, the GWC was able to draw on strong informal group dynamics and social infrastructures that had formed in the first months of the company's existence. The importance of this early external advantage became even more apparent in the aftermath of the summer 2021 strikes when management reassigned GWC activists to entirely new warehouses. In these new locations, the organizers had to begin building mutual trust with their fellow workers from scratch, which impacted their ability to organize.[11]

In addition to the strength of social ties fostered in physical space, the workers also created a rich digital space to socialize. Most platforms, including Gorillas, do not have features for workers to contact each other through the app they work on. As van Doorn (2017) argues, this is not a "bug but a feature": app developers deliberately design digital labor platforms in a way that shields companies from being held accountable for workplace issues. To overcome this widespread problem, platform workers often rely on other digital meeting places on social media to communicate with each other. Examples include Reddit threads, Facebook groups, or WhatsApp group chats, in which workers discuss covering each other's shifts, warn each other about bad-faith customers, sexual predators, or scams (van Doorn 2020b; Tassinari/Maccarrone 2020). Woodcock (2021: 2) points to these digital spaces as "digital watercoolers" because they serve the same social purpose as coffee rooms or watercoolers in office environments: a space for co-workers to meet informally, share workplace gossip, and chat about problems.

During the organizing drive at Gorillas, the satirical Instagram account @gorillasriderlife2 served as an increasingly frequented digital watercooler. Founded by a group of apolitical riders, it was at first neither related to the GWC nor the company itself. It was not started with a view to organize workers but merely to provide a space for workers to vent about their work-life online. The account provided comic relief through shared memes and jokes

10 In March 2021, this policy was changed and now workers are assigned to a single warehouse (GWC 2021h).

11 Interview with GWC member, conducted in October 2021.

about being a rider at Gorillas. The created content was relatable to workers' everyday work-life, whether they were already politicized or not, drawing nearly 3.000 followers (Gorillas Rider Life 2021). As the campaign for better working conditions progressed, however, the GWC and the riders behind the Instagram account began collaborating. The @gorillasriderlife2 account thus became a two-way communication channel for the GWC. Thanks to the account's large follower base amongst Gorillas workers, information about collective actions could be spread easily and fast, and, in turn, the GWC was also able to poll workers about their grievances and crowdsource demands.

In sum, the spatial organization of grocery-delivery both enabled physical strike action as well as important social infrastructure among workers that the other, less radical approaches, could take advantage of. The social media accounts, for example, led to collaboration with different labor and migrant justice groups. After getting connected through Twitter, these groups supported the early GWC activists in their push for works council elections. Through these joint efforts, the GWC was able to mobilize nearly 200 workers to come to the first election necessary for establishing a works council[12]; and later to attract trade union and labor activists to accompany workers to their court hearings.

Even though the struggle is ongoing, it is possible to relate the Gorillas example back to previous organizing efforts in the platform economy and point to both similarities and differences. Drawing on their ethnographic observations of delivery strikes across the UK in 2018, Cant and Woodcock (2020) suggest that organizing efforts within the platform sector were only successful if they followed two principles. Those were, one, making strategic use of existing informal group structures and, two, rallying around winnable workplace-specific grievances. The organizing efforts at Gorillas fit both tenets: the GWC successfully drew on social ties that had already existed in physical space and created additional digital spaces to bolster these connections. Moreover, the early strikes in February 2021 had a specific and winnable goal, i.e., to stop deliveries until the snow subsided. Given that the weather was a short-term phenomenon, Gorillas management could pragmatically agree to a temporary work stoppage seeing as it cost the company less than longer-term concessions likely would. The first organizing goal was therefore very

12 The process of forming a works council requires several steps: a first election to vote on candidates for an *electoral board*. The electoral board is then tasked with preparing the main elections for the works council.

clear and time-bound, and the spatial layout of the warehouses made it feasible. The GWC's organizing strategy thus enabled the workers to replicate previous positive experiences with organizing in the platform sector.

However, this success also hinged on factors beyond the activists' control: the changes in the industry that led to employment contracts rather than freelance gigs; the launching of competing platform companies in Berlin that coincided with the organizing efforts; the particular vulnerability to delivery disruptions inherent in the grocery delivery model; as well as the workers' comparative privilege as social-media savvy, young migrants who were able to take risks with organizing because the worst-case scenario of losing their job did not result in deportation or failing financial responsibilities towards others. Lastly, September 2021 also saw a triple election in Berlin[13], and the timing of the campaigns during this super-election year may have also added to a particular political climate that was ripe for agitation and media attention. As the organizing has since progressed, the erstwhile campaign focus has broadened into a long list of demands, which have not been met so far. It remains to be seen whether these much more ambitious goals, such as having a dedicated visa team at Gorillas Human Resources to help workers with immigration procedures, will eventually be achieved.

Conclusion: A cautionary tale

Overall, the case of Gorillas may substantiate a geographic reading of platforms as "simultaneously embedded and disembedded from the space-times [they] mediate" (Graham 2020: 7). Thanks to tremendous amounts of capital, platform businesses seem disembedded from the constraints of regular businesses and out of reach of regulators. They neither need to turn a profit nor sustainably use their resources, including their workforce, as long as fresh capital abounds. At the same time, however, the case of Gorillas also shows that the company's very business model relies on a neighborhood-based network of warehouses, embedding the platform at a very local level. And this embeddedness opens opportunities for collective action to disrupt the business effectively at this scale in a way that previous meal-delivery organizing

13 Seats in three different levels of government were up for election: the federal parliament (*Bundestag*), Berlin's City Council (*Senat*) as well as seats at the municipal level (*Bezirk*).

efforts could not have. At the time of writing, several wins have transpired: the Berlin Labor Court ruled in favor of the workers who had been fired in connection to their organizing efforts; the court has also confirmed workers' rights to form a works council and ruled the limitations on workers' contracts illegal. Outside the legal realm, Gorillas as a company has been widely criticized in the press and decried as a bad employer. Whether or not this has hurt the company's efforts to acquire new customers is difficult to assess. However, the bad press has marked them out as a target for other local activist groups: in August 2021, an anonymous group poured glue into the locks of five Gorillas warehouses during the night, delaying deliveries the following morning. The activists cited "unfair working conditions" and "solidarity with Gorillas workers" as their motives (Kluge 2021). Lastly, the case of the fighting workers at Gorillas also has potential to reach beyond the platform economy. Wild cat strikes are a challenge to Germany's model of industrial relations based on social partnerships and dialogue in which worker-initiated strike actions without union representation are deemed illegal. Given the mixed results of pursuing social dialogue mechanisms in the platform economy (Frenken et al. 2020; Johnston 2020) and beyond, the more radical tactics of the GWC's organizing efforts may well become a tale to inspire a new generation of labor organizers.

However, I have argued such a tale should be treated with caution. Only the fortunate combination of external factors and internal factors led to a temporarily successful disruption of the platform's operation. To reiterate these points: external factors beyond the workers' control have included the timing of the protests; the demographics of the Gorillas workforce; and the spatial organization of grocery delivery and its susceptibility to service disruptions. Factors internally fostered by workers were strong community ties and workers' ability to create digital watercoolers to strengthen the existing sense of community. The GWC's skillful use of social media also gathered a large network of outside supporters and attention from unions and politicians during an election year. It was this – perhaps unique – combination of factors that facilitated collective action at Gorillas.

Comparing this specific case again to the wider context of platform worker movements, it is important to lastly highlight the volatility of this venture-capital driven sector. The fate of the previously mentioned grassroots initiative DeliverUnion in Berlin can serve as an example: DeliverUnion had, to an extent, managed to overcome the challenges of anonymity and the lack of a physical work-place infrastructure. Over three years, activists

worked on organizing Foodora and Deliveroo riders while Berlin witnessed a 'delivery platform war' between different food business conglomerates. When this competition culminated with a merger of Lieferando and Foodora (Ksienrzyk 2019), Deliveroo's investors saw better return-on-investment prospects in other markets and shut down Deliveroo's operations in Germany in August 2019. The investors' decisions thus abruptly upended existing organizing efforts and practically overnight, 1.000 riders and drivers lost their jobs (Lomas 2019). It was thus the investors who ultimately decided the future of these food couriers, and some workers even left Berlin entirely to follow Deliveroo abroad (Altenried 2021). Similarly, the delivery platform FoodPanda recently announced the end of its operations in Germany after less than six months of launching in Berlin (Kläsgen 2021). These examples highlight the vulnerability of worker struggles vis-à-vis capital flight (van Doorn 2020a), and, therefore, the most interesting question may be whether the strikes at Gorillas have had an impact on investors' perception of Gorillas as a start-up to throw their weight behind.

In early August 2021, DoorDash, one of the biggest players in the food delivery business, entered talks to acquire Gorillas (Partington 2021). What a takeover by a company the size of DoorDash would have meant for labor relations at Gorillas is, of course, up to speculation – and at the time of writing it had not materialized. A corporation of the size of DoorDash, however, is less dependent on constantly raising 'fresh' capital from new investors, and consequently perhaps less likely to care about service disruptions and bad press. While I have shown that workers at Gorillas may have been in a comparatively good bargaining position thus far, the almost-takeover by DoorDash revealed just how quickly the cards on the table can be reshuffled in the venture-capital driven platform economy – and the cards tend to be stacked against the workers.

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