

Labour disputes and organising approaches in the platform economy exemplified by food delivery couriers in China and Germany

Videoconference Saturday 10th December 2022, 09:00 to 13:30 hrs. (CET)

In the wake of the global spread of the COVID 19 virus since the early 2020s and the imposition of month-long lockdowns in most states around the globe, the largely contactless provision of food and prepared meals to people through food couriers has seen a huge upsurge. The expansion of courier services has been fuelled by ongoing digitalisation, which has taken over increasing areas of everyday life, the economy and the work place in many countries around the world in recent years, and which has created its own economic sector in the form of the so-called platform economy.

The expansion of platform-based food delivery services was reflected in the boom of company start-ups, reorganizations, and mergers, as well as sales and increasing numbers of couriers and customers.

In China in 2020, there were more than 8 million registered food couriers working for the two major providers Ele.me and Meituan alone, which dominate 90% of the market. Sales of the food delivery market in China have increased 30-fold in the last ten years. In Germany, Lieferando, part of the Dutch Just Eat Takeaway group, is the market leader, with orders up 50 million year-on-year in 2021, bringing its revenue to €3.2 million. However, future declines in food orders are foreseeable due to the global rollback of lockdown measures - with the exception of China - and crisis-related savings constraints among consumers* in EU countries, for example.

Although there are country- and region-specific differences in platform-mediated work, it is generally characterized worldwide by poor wages, lack of social security and health protection, and repression against unionization. As in much of the platform economy, circumventing labor protections is part of the business model in the food delivery market. The precariousness of employment, which has been increasingly promoted in recent decades, is being exacerbated in the platform economy.

While there have been a number of recent official legislative initiatives against this practice, such as the preparation of an EU directive since 2021 or the issuance of specific guidelines by the Chinese government in July 2021, it remains to be seen whether these will have an impact in reality.

Nevertheless, these developments show effects of numerous protest actions that food suppliers* have carried out against exploitation and repression worldwide in recent years. After the imprisonment of Rider Mengzhu on February 25, 2021 in Beijing, who had campaigned for an independent organization of riders in China, there were solidarity actions in many places inside and outside China. An example of labor struggles in this sector are also, for example, the protests of bicycle couriers of the Berlin start-up company Gorillas against poor wages and fixed-term contracts as well as for better equipment and the right to organize since spring 2021. With court support, they succeeded in establishing a works council in summer 2021.

The conference aims to bring together food delivery workers from Germany and China (mainland and Hong Kong) for an exchange on working conditions and labour disputes in their countries. Taking into account that delivery is done in different ways - on foot, by bicycle, e-bike, moped, motorbike or even car. The exchange will highlight the differences and similarities and reflect on the way people working in this sector organize themselves and how they work together internationally.

As part of the working class, the question of their organization arises: in the form of traditional or anarcho-syndicalist trade unions or in collectives beyond trade unions as well.

Questions

- How has the food delivery industry developed in China (mainland and Hong Kong) and Germany in recent years?
- What are the working conditions of food delivery workers in mainland China, Hong Kong and Germany?
- How have they fought labour disputes and developed organising strategies?
- What are their similarities and differences in the two countries?

Programme

Saturday 10 December, 09:00 – 13:30 hrs (German time), 16:00 – 20:30 hrs (China time),
Conference languages are English and Chinese with simultaneous translation.

Hour CET /China	
09:00 / 16:00	Welcome by the convenors Overview of the delivery industry and the platform economy worldwide <i>by Simon Schaupp, University of Basel</i>
09:20 / 16:20	Overview on mainland China: Food Delivery Platforms and Workers in a Strong State <i>by Lee Yu, Researcher in Hong Kong</i>
09:35 / 16:35	Overview on the situation in Hong Kong <i>by Grace, Riders' Rights Concern Group, Hong Kong,</i>
09:50 / 16:50	Overview on the situation in Germany <i>by Simon Schaupp, University of Basel</i> Followed by questions and comments from participants
10:30 / 17:30	Break
11:00 / 18:00	Reports on working conditions and labour disputes from activists: <i>Xie Xiaofeng, delivery worker and activist from mainland China</i> Followed by questions and comments from participants
11:30 / 18:30	On the Foodpanda delivery workers' struggle in Hong Kong <i>by Siutong, Riders' Rights Concern Group, Hong Kong</i> Followed by questions and comments from participants
12:00 / 19:00	Short break
12:15 / 19:15	Grocery delivery services from Flink <i>by Elmar Wigand, Action against Labour Injustice, Cologne</i> Food delivery services from Lieferando <i>Semih Yalcin, Lieferando works council</i>
12:45 / 19:55	Followed by questions and comments from participants
13:30 / 20:30	Final open discussion + closing remarks End of the conference

Moderators:

- 09:00 – 10:30 Thomas Sablowski / Peter Franke
 11:00 - 12:00 Christa Wichterich / Daniel Fuchs
 12:15 - 13:30 Tian Miao / Ingeborg Wick

Convenors of the conference

Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (<https://www.rosalux.de>)
Thomas Sablowski, e-mail: thomas.sablowski@rosalux.org
Critical China Forum:
Peter Franke, e-mail: forumarbeitswelten@fuwei.de

Registration

Please send a written and binding registration by e-mail for participation in the online conference, stating your name, address, organisational affiliation and e-mail to

Peter Franke, e-mail: forumarbeitswelten@fuwei.de, **until Thursday 8 Dec. 2022 latest.**

Participation will be confirmed by e-mail and an access code will be sent shortly before the conference.

About the Critical China Forum:

In the polarised debate on developments in China and its role in the shifts and upheavals in the capitalist world order, differentiated analyses are often neglected. We want to bring emancipatory, internationalist positions into the political discussion and point out possibilities for action in solidarity. It is about addressing the prejudices in the "West" against China as well as the relations of domination, capitalist exploitation and the destruction of nature in China. We oppose racism, chauvinism, simple black-and-white thinking and military escalation, which are gaining in importance in the course of growing world market competition and geopolitical power confrontations and are currently shaping state action.

We offer an information platform and organize public discussion events on China. Our topics include labour relations, social movements, gender relations, environmental policy and international relations. So far, staff from the universities of Erfurt, Kassel, Cologne, Leipzig, Passau, the HU Berlin, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, the NGO PowerShift as well as members of gongchao.org, the Forum Arbeitswelten, IG Metall, IG BCE and GEW have taken part in the discussions.

Short introductions of speakers

- 1. Simon Schaupp** is visiting professor for science and society at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology. He has researched labour struggles in the gig economy and also worked as a rider. He is engaged in various initiatives for workers' rights.
- 2. Lee Yu** is a researcher based in Hong Kong. Her academic work is focused on platform employment, migrant labour and industrial relations in China
- 3. Grace** is a programme officer at the Riders' Rights Concern Group (RRCG), a labour organisation which organises platform delivery workers in Hong Kong. RRCG is under the supervision of the Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee. She is also a part-time delivery worker.
- 4. Xie Xiaofeng** from mainland China has been a crowdsourced delivery rider for three years. He is active in raising awareness and actions over migrant workers' rights issues and committed to promoting the riders' self-organisation, voice out and enhancing labour rights.
- 5. Siutong** is a programme officer at the RRCG and a part-time delivery worker.
- 6. Elmar Wigand** is a social researcher, author and online editor and works as press spokesman for the non-profit „Action against labor injustice“. From Dec. 2021 to May 2022, he worked in Berlin as a rider for the flash supermarket Flink. Currently he is fighting in the labor court for a permanent contract.
- 7. Semih Yalcin** is the chairman of the general Lieferando works council and member of the Cologne works council.

Short introductions of moderators

- 1. Thomas Sablowski** is senior research fellow for political economy of globalisation at the Institute of Critical Social Analysis of Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Berlin, Germany

2. Peter Franke is a social scientist and member of the board of the Forum Arbeitswelten. He has been organising contacts and exchanges between labour and social activists from China and Germany since 2003.

3. Christa Wichterich is social scientist and presently does research as a freelancer about informal labour, care and labour struggles, comparative in India, China and Germany.

4. Daniel Fuchs is assistant professor at the Department of Asian and African Studies at Humboldt University of Berlin. He is a co-founder of the Critical China Forum and his research focuses on labour relations and strikes in China.

5. Tian Miao is a doctoral student in sociology at the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main. Her research is focused on industrial development, production regime and labour relations. She also writes articles on workers' collective protests in China.

6. Ingeborg Wick is a board member of the „Forum Worlds of Labour“ which focuses on China and Germany. She was a long-standing researcher on women's work, globalisation and precarisation at the South Wind Institute of Economics and Ecumenism.

References and links

International Labour Organisation (ILO), A global analysis of worker protest in digital labour platforms, ILO Working Paper 70, June 2022 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms_849215.pdf

Delivery Hero Riders United, see <https://globalmayday.net/deliveryheroridersunited/>

Asian Platform Labour Conference 2022, 18-20 August 2022, <https://asianplatform2022.org/>

Fairwork Summit: Fair Work on Digital Platforms, Wednesday 14th September 2022, 2pm – 4pm CEST, <https://fair.work/en/fw/fairwork-summit-fair-work-on-digital-platforms/>

On Hong Kong:

Labour Action China reports on riders in 2022:

March : <https://us17.campaign-archive.com/?u=36b5b651e1e0e38f726cba0e3&id=c1efcf3fb>

Aug. : <https://us17.campaign-archive.com/?u=36b5b651e1e0e38f726cba0e3&id=4608b45582>

Riders' Rights Concern Group (HK), https://twitter.com/RRCG_HK they cooperate with the Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee <https://www.hkcic.org.hk/?lang=en>

International Confederation of Labour (ICL) Campaign (9.8.2022) „Support foodpanda riders in Hong Kong after deadly accident“ <https://www.iclclit.org/support-foodpanda-riders-in-hong-kong-after-deadly-accident/>

Karen Hui/Danny Ho: „Deliveroo Workers' Strike in Hong Kong: An Interview“, in: Asian Labour Update Issue 89 May 2021, 11-17.

On mainland China

Analysis of the online delivery industry and the prospects of the labour movement (in Chinese)

Aug. 2022: <https://www.linking.vision/?p=14081&fbclid=IwAR2EBWpNdeg5cNqVKyqhLF3Hbit0gMOhB9gQnu5KqE8m1wXn0iGKdFFnGgE>

<https://www.linking.vision/?p=14081&fbclid=IwAR2EBWpNdeg5cNqVKyqhLF3Hbit0gMOhB9gQnu5KqE8m1wXn0iGKdFFnGgE>

China Labour Bulletin, Food delivery driver stabs self in protest over fines and unpaid wages (30 August 2022); Two years on from the viral investigation, “Delivery Drivers, Trapped in the System,” the industry has seen little regulatory change or union representation for workers' obvious needs. <https://www.clb.org.hk/content/food-delivery-driver-stabs-self-protest-over-fines-and-unpaid-wages>

Chuxuan Liu/Eli Friedman: „Resistance Under the Radar: Organization of Work and Collective Action in China's Food Delivery Industry“, in: The China Journal, Vol. 86 July 2021, p. 68-89. (<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/epdf/10.1086/714292>)

Free Menzhu Campaign in 2021 <https://deliveryworkers.github.io/>

Forum Arbeitswelten Blog, Riders weltweit in Bewegung. Über das Entstehen grenzüberschreitender Solidarität, 28.10.2022. www.forumarbeitswelten.de/blog/riders-2/

On **Europe** in general:

European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), Agnieszka Piasna, Wouter Zwysen, and Jan Drahokoupil; The platform economy in Europe. Results from the second ETUI Internet and Platform Work Survey, Brussels 2022, https://www.etui.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/The%20platform%20economy%20in%20Europe_2022.pdf
Survey Presentation Working Conditions in the Platform Economy (17.2.2022)
<https://www.transform-network.net/calendar/event/working-conditions-in-the-platform-economy/>

On **Germany**:

Simon Schaupp, Algorithmic Integration and Precarious (Dis)Obedience: On the Co-Constitution of Migration Regime and Workplace Regime in Digitalised Manufacturing and Logistics, in Work, Employment and Society
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/09500170211031458>
Simon Schaupp, Cybernetic proletarianization: Spirals of devaluation and conflict in digitalized production see <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/03098168211017614>
Heiner Heiland, Simon Schaupp, Digitale Atomisierung oder neue Arbeitskämpfe? Widerständige Solidaritätskulturen in der plattformvermittelten Kurierarbeit, in Monumentum Quarterly Vol. 9 No.2 <https://www.momentum-quarterly.org/ojs2/index.php/momentum/article/view/3385/2675>
Robin de Greef: "Riders United! Arbeitskämpfe bei Essenlieferdiensten in der Gig-Economy. Das Beispiel Berlin", hg. Die Buchmacherei, Berlin 2020.
<https://diebuchmacherei.de/category/riders-unite-arbeitskaempfe-bei-essenslieferdiensten-in-der-gig-economy-das-beispiel-berlin/>
Elmar Wigand: „Eine Affenschande. Der Lieferdienst Gorillas reagiert auf Streiks seiner Rider mit Entlassung und Union-Busting“, in: Junge Welt 8. Oktober 2021, S. 12-13.