

Igniting 'improvisational unionism'

The case of Deliveroo couriers in Belgium and the Netherlands

A wave of labour action by food delivery couriers created the opportunity for traditional trade unions to respond to new challenges in the platform economy.

By Tom Cassauwers¹

In 2018, the location of Deliveroo's Brussels headquarters was a byword for idyllic. Based in Ixelles, a well-heeled suburb of the European capital, the building was right next to a beautiful park that is also home to a former monastery. But one day in January, this suburban calm was shattered by a few dozen angry Deliveroo couriers who showed up on their bikes.

Until that point, the riders had been able to invoice Deliveroo via SMart, a Belgian labour market intermediary which acts as a proxy employer of freelancers, and which had managed to negotiate standardised pay and access to social security for Deliveroo riders in Belgium. But then, Deliveroo decided to terminate its collaboration with Smart, forcing all of its couriers to become self-employed, meaning less wages, no labour protections and more administrative hassle.

The protesting workers, a fleeting group numbering no more than 15 to 20 people at any one time, ended up staying for almost a week, occupying the office of the British food delivery giant. Out of the window hung a banner saying 'Slaveroo'. The couriers began their action spontaneously, started by an activist core of riders, although over time established unions got involved on an ad-hoc basis.

Martin Willems from *United Freelancers*, the freelance section of the Belgian union ACV, says he began to establish links with Deliveroo couriers in 2017, two years after the company launched in the Belgian capital. He was with the couriers during their occupation of the headquarters. Willems says that working with the Deliveroo couriers wasn't easy:

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“The traditional channels of our union didn't work here,” he says. Couriers that work for highly precarious, ‘gig economy’ platforms such as Deliveroo and Uber Eats, that serve as digital middle-men between restaurants and couriers, often have a high staff turnover. Generally riders just work on a platform for a few months, and these young, often migrant, workers sometimes express distrust for unions. “They don’t really know what a union is,” says Willems. “They think it’s something for traditional workers with a permanent contract, certainly not something for them.”



On 8 January 2018, Deliveroo riders rallied outside of the company's Brussels headquarters during a week-long protest against a move to force its workers to register as self-employed. (Mathieux Golinvaux)

And then there was the problem of actually connecting with them in the first place. Couriers don’t just gather in one workplace or on the factory floor. This highly mobile group of workers instead tends to communicate through messaging services like Whatsapp or via informal contact on the street.

Yet over time the unions managed to make inroads with the couriers. Willems recounts how he rode across Brussels on a bike, carrying pamphlets with him, giving them out whenever he saw a courier. At other times, unions ordered large amounts of pizza, just so they could talk to the riders who delivered them.

In turn the unions started offering support to the couriers. They helped in court cases, set up contacts with other social movements and supported them when things heated up, such as when Brussels couriers occupied the Deliveroo headquarters.

This wave of activism was part of the 2017-2018 protest movement amongst platform couriers in Belgium and the Netherlands. By suddenly changing the employment status of their riders in the two countries, without consultation, the company prompted protests where couriers and established unions learned to work together. An unique pattern emerged in comparison to other European countries, where couriers either stayed independent or joined smaller, alternative unions. According to Kurt Vandaele, a

researcher for the *European Trade Union Institute* (ETUI), the Belgian and Dutch experiences offer key lessons for the unions of the future.

“I call it ‘improvisational unionism,’” says the author of a new Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung report *From Street Protest to ‘Improvisational Unionism’ – Platform-based food delivery couriers in Belgium and the Netherlands*. “Which means unions let themselves be guided by the context,” says Vandaele. “Unions are today confronted by new challenges where old models, like collective bargaining, are currently impossible. So they need to adopt new tactics, which happened when the couriers connected with the unions.”

Unions offer a listening ear and a helping hand

During the 2017-2018 protest wave, unions primarily focused on providing support, letting the riders run the show. “In both Belgium and the Netherlands, unions mainly listened,” says Vandaele. “They didn’t just force their model on the couriers. The platform economy was new for unions. They didn’t want to block this innovation, yet they also wanted to improve working conditions for couriers.”

The result of all this activism is still somewhat unclear. Platforms managed to push through the switch to self-employment, and court cases are still unfinished in Belgium and the Netherlands. “It’s still ongoing,” admits Vandaele. Unions also didn’t gain many new members. Little independent data is available on the total number of couriers working in Belgium and the Netherlands, but a Deliveroo spokesperson claimed in the summer of 2019 that there were 2,600 active couriers in Belgium. In March of 2020 a Dutch counterpart said around 2,500 couriers worked for Deliveroo in the Netherlands. But that courier population is constantly changing, which hardly makes for the best recruitment environment.

Nevertheless, Vandaele and Willems say the mobilisation brought with it other lessons and successes. There was media attention. Unions in Belgium and the Netherlands were used to hostile press coverage of their work, but the events were covered in a positive way, particularly in the Netherlands. In addition, “internally, unions now pay more attention to the platform economy,” adds Vandaele. “It also allowed them to experiment with new organising tactics.”

There were some differences in how Belgian and Dutch unions approached their situations. “Organising has been popular in some Dutch unions since the early 2000s,” says Vandaele. “So this wasn’t very new for them.” In Belgium, however, unions tend to be more focused on political lobbying. “This is logical considering their strong position in

Belgian society," explains Vandaele. "If lobbying doesn't work, then they start mobilising, which means bringing out their own militants. These are people who are already committed union members. Organising, however, aims to develop a bigger pool of committed members. So not only those who are already convinced, but also regular members and even un-organised workers."

Vandaele's research offers a number of insights for unions. "Unions often think that precarious workers and young people don't care about unions," says the researcher. "While this protest wave shows this isn't the case. Unions were surprised that these young people were interested in them. They need to engage with these new sectors, they can show new workers that they can help. Platform companies often say that young people don't like unions. But these experiences contradict that."

Willems, who continues to organise precarious workers and freelancers, agrees. "These workers can and want to organise and defend their working conditions, whether or not they like existing unions. The question is if unions can support them in their situation."

He sees this wave of organising as a return to the earlier traditions of unionism. "We cannot only rely on traditional union work," he says. "In the 19th century there were no laws that allowed workers to organise. That all happened because of the struggles of the workers. Today we need to repeat this for new groups of workers. Over the past 30 years unions remained at a standstill. Yet, that wasn't always the case. In our early history we had to develop new tactics and organise. Today we need to do that again."

