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# THE CONVERSATION

L'expertise universitaire, l'exigence journalistique

## Young, poor and vulnerable: delivery riders in France are demanding better wages and social protection

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### Langues

English

Français



Painting by artist Arnaud Adami, exhibited at Galerie Valerie Delaunay, Paris 2021. Arnaud Adami, untitled, oil on canvas, Author provided (no reuse)

*“In their ideal world, the platforms, you should say nothing, smile politely, ‘Hello, Sir’, ‘Goodbye’, climb the stairs, deliver, never fall, never have an accident, never complain... Before, we used to be paid €5, now it’s €2.60, you can’t say anything. Go ahead and drive! And if you’re delivering warm stuff, forget about red lights but don’t die please!”*

This quote from a young delivery rider illustrates the subordination of the labour force that lies at the heart of the platform economy: an ecosystem governed by the tyranny of algorithms.

How are these workers cared for, when they face multiple hazards with minimal protection? What are their social protection needs?

These questions are at the heart of debates around the Social Security Financing Bill for 2022 presented last September in France.

Meanwhile, in December, the European Commission released a proposal to improve working conditions for platform workers that establishes a presumption of employee status. The proposal seeks to promote quality jobs in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights.

## **Young, poor and vulnerable**

As part of our ongoing research into the conditions of platform workers, we surveyed more than 200 delivery riders in France via an online questionnaire and follow-up interviews with 15 of them.

The workers who responded to our questionnaire were young (three-quarters were under 30), and their earnings were low: less than €900/month before deduction of taxes and charges for half of them. Half of them worked between 20 and 40 hours a week, though the time spent waiting for an order is not paid, which prevents many from holding down another job (60% did not have another professional activity); 97% were technically self-employed.

Before becoming delivery drivers or riders, 37% were out of work, and this category was most likely to have been doing this work for more than three years.

The preferred means of transport was the bicycle (37%) or electric bicycle (26%), with these delivery workers earning less than others (22% earned less than €900 per month), while the majority who use other modes of transport, for example scooters, earned slightly more.

The delivery workers we interviewed revealed extreme economic and physical vulnerability.

One told us:

*“I was hit by a pedestrian. I broke my hand. I didn’t realise I had a fracture, so I continued to work. There are many delivery drivers... who keep working with fractures because they cannot afford to stop, or because they do not have the social security cover to be able to stop and get treatment.”*

Only 31% of the riders we surveyed had have never had health problems because of their work. We do not know the exact number of accidents and deaths of platforms workers, but riders remain vigilant and are increasingly mobilised on that issue.



Delivery riders for the delivery app Frichti protest their working condition in Paris, June 2020. Francois Guillot/AFP

## A lack of social protection

The vulnerability of a delivery worker depends on the risks to which they are exposed and the social protection they may have.

According to our survey, the most vulnerable delivery workers are the least protected. This includes previously unemployed, undocumented workers and long-term delivery riders.

These highly vulnerable delivery workers are among the 32% who said they were not covered by social security, and they know little about their rights (25% of delivery workers who answered the questionnaire did not know whether they were covered by social security or not).

They tend not to inform their employer in case of problems (57% did not report an accident or illness to the platform). Of those who did, 61% did not receive any help. Workers told us the benefits offered did not compensate for the loss of income during work stoppage:

*“It’s no use. I knew very well that the RSI (Régime social des Indépendants) didn’t cover anything or almost nothing. I knew that the supplementary contracts with the platforms were very low-cost, extremely low-cost contracts, and I knew that there was no point in making the request.”*

The variation in the vulnerability of workers is largely due to the holes in the social protection system in France. Platforms currently benefit from a legal and institutional vacuum over their official status, but that may be changing.

In Spain, since August 2021, every delivery worker is considered an employee. This resolution is supported in France by unions and collectives of delivery workers, and also by the European Parliament.

A report by the Parliament's Committee on Employment and Social Affairs recently said the group “strongly believes that formal and effective coverage, adequacy and transparency of social protection systems should apply to all workers including the self-employed.”

If the EU manages to pass legislation to this effect, it has the potential to improve the lives of millions of platform workers.

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*Morgane Le Guern from the MGEN Corporate Foundation for Public Health contributed to this article.*

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