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PROBLEMS OF EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF COURIERS IN EUROPE

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Abstract. In given article authors of the study examine the main challenges food and goods delivery market are facing, including but not limited with a focus on employment conditions of delivery couriers, market competition, technology, safety, competitive strategies, and possible solutions. Given article reviews academic work published over the past five years by paying special attention to algorithmic management, burnout, inequality, and the legal status of couriers. The courier-delivery sector underwent rapid growth during the 2019 pandemic, and the number of couriers delivering groceries and other items has continued to rise each year. Yet labor legislation for couriers remains poorly structured, resulting in unfair working conditions and inadequate social protection. The authors surveyed courier employment in several countries around the world, and the findings enable them to propose recommendations for improving working conditions and strengthening regulation of the delivery market within the European Union.

Keywords: couriers, delivery platforms, labor relations.

Introduction. The rapid expansion of online-commerce platforms, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, has dramatically accelerated growth in the delivery market. According to international estimates, the global delivery sector was valued at US \$1.1 trillion in 2022 and is projected to reach US \$1.5 trillion by 2027 [1]. Couriers forms the backbone of this industry, yet their employment and legal status remains a pivotal issue intertwined with safety concerns, algorithmic pressure, and a lack of employment benefits. Countries in Europe and around the world are attempting to address these challenges in different ways. Employer associations and trade unions are involved in the search for solutions, and disputes frequently end up in court. The present study seeks to synthesise the key problems associated with courier employment and working conditions, and to analyse how these issues have been tackled in England and the European Union, using the Deliveroo platform as a case study. On the basis of this analysis, the authors draw a series of essential conclusions and propose paths to resolving accumulated problems.

Basic theoretical and practical provision. Over the past five years a considerable number of scholars and researchers worldwide have examined courier-delivery platforms. In France, for example, Anne Aguilera, Laetitia Dablanc, Camille Krier, Nicolas Louvet and others have addressed the subject. In their article “Platform-based food delivery in Paris before and during the pandemic: profile, motivations and mobility patterns of couriers” they explore couriers’ work motivations and mobility models in Paris [2].

Finnish scholars Henri Kervola, Soili Hyvönen, Erika Kallionpää and Heikki Liimatainen, in “Flexibility and freedom suit me better: food-delivery couriers’ preferred employment status,” investigate the reasons behind choosing courier work and the employment status couriers themselves prefer [3].

Pinar Ozyavas, Evrim Ursavas, Paul Buijs and Ruud Teunter, in “Integrating shift planning and pick-up and delivery problems under limited courier availability,” consider how to fulfil all incoming delivery orders when staff numbers are constrained [4].

Ashish Nair, Rahul Yadav, Anjali Gupta, Abhijnan Chakraborty, Sayan Ranu and Amitabha Bagchi, in “Gigs with Guarantees: Achieving Fair Wage for Food-Delivery Workers,” study the quest for fair remuneration in courier delivery [5].

Yet in turn, the same group of researchers: Anjali Gupta, Rahul Yadav, Ashish Nair, Abhijnan Chakraborty, Sayan Ranu and Amitabha Bagchi also focus on fairness in food delivery in their work *FairFoody: Bringing in Fairness in Food Delivery* [6].

Researchers Oleksandr Rossolov, Anastasiia Botsman, Serhii Lyfenko and Yusak O. Susilo, in “Does courier gender matter? Exploring mode-choice behaviour for e-groceries crowd-shipping in developing economies,” place special emphasis on courier gender and delivery-mode choice behaviour in developing countries [7].

Ankush Chopra, Mahima Arora and Shubham Pandey, in *Delivery Issues Identification from Customer Feedback Data*, investigate how to detect problems by analysing feedback from customers who have used delivery services [8].

All of these studies have made significant contributions to understanding courier work globally and in individual countries. Yet none addresses simultaneously the intertwined questions of courier employment, wage determination, protection of couriers’ social and economic interests, the role of trade unions, and court decisions in the United Kingdom and Europe.

The authors of the present study therefore set themselves the task of examining courier work from hiring through termination, analysing the legal framework in the European Union and the United Kingdom.

The courier food-delivery market first took shape in Japan, where stable forms of ready-meal delivery already existed in the 17th century. In the 20th century, however, commercial leadership and large-scale expansion shifted to the United States, which introduced major chain-based and technological solutions [9].

In Europe, food delivery began to develop much later, mainly from the mid-20th century. At first it revolved around traditional takeaway dishes, especially Chinese, Indian and pizza, reflecting the multicultural make-up of urban populations. During the 1970s and 1980s British cities, and London in particular, actively adopted the practice of telephone orders from restaurants and takeaway outlets [10].

A real leap came with the spread of the internet and digital platforms. The early 2000s saw the launch of the first online food-ordering services, such as Just Eat, founded in Denmark and firmly established in the UK market after 2006 [11]. The 2010s ushered in a new phase: app-based delivery. In 2013 entrepreneurs Will Shu and Greg Orlowski founded Deliveroo in the United Kingdom, and the company quickly became a European market leader [12]. Today Deliveroo operates in the UK, France, Belgium, Ireland, Italy, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and Hong Kong. The platform pioneered an algorithmically managed delivery model that relies on independent couriers. Meanwhile rival platforms such as Uber Eats, Glovo and Foodora were expanding worldwide, so that by the 2020s food delivery had become an integral part of urban infrastructure.

The COVID-19 pandemic markedly accelerated the shift to digital channels, making couriers indispensable in the “last-mile” segment [14]. Figure 1 illustrates the rapid growth of European platform-based deliveries after 2019 driven in large part by the pandemic. As the sector has grown, attention has increasingly focused on couriers’ social vulnerability. Most couriers are self-employed and receive no health insurance, paid sick leave or pensions. In Scotland 60% of couriers have faced racist or physical attacks, and 100% of female couriers have encountered sexual harassment; in New York 21% of couriers have been assaulted (nypost.com). Migrants and women, whose qualifications are often unrecognised, have proved especially vulnerable, suffering both discrimination and a lack of legal protection [10].

Revenue of Food and beverage services, United Kingdom, in USD Billion, 2017-2025

**Fig. 1. Revenue of Food and beverage services, United Kingdom, in USD Billion, 2017-2025 [14]**

It should be noted that algorithmic management plays a central role in how labour is organised on the platform. Under such a system couriers do not know the criteria by which orders are allocated to them, which reduces the predictability of their earnings and heightens work-related stress [15]. At the same time, the employer's constant pressure to deliver ever faster triggers dangerous driving and increases the number of traffic accidents and injuries not only among couriers but among other road users as well [17]. In response, couriers in China have begun forming protest communities against algorithmic diktats, and the government has started to introduce regulatory legislation [16]. Similar trends are beginning to appear in Europe, where the European Union is debating the creation of transparent algorithms and minimum protection standards for couriers.

Competition both between platforms and among couriers themselves intensifies this instability. Without guaranteed employment, couriers work for several services at once and target peak hours to raise their income. High turnover, particularly visible in India, is explained by rising costs, falling earnings and a lack of career prospects, highlighting the weakness of platforms' retention strategies [19]. Training and communication are often purely formal: instruction is delivered online with no human support, leading to frustration and isolation [20].

In response, the EU and other jurisdictions have begun discussing possible solutions: implementation of so called rider laws for couriers, recognition of hybrid employment forms, guarantees of a minimum income (e.g. the WORK4FOOD model), transparent algorithms, broader insurance cover, regular training and feedback, and stronger collective representation through unions, co-operatives or online communities [18]. These measures are seen as prerequisites for a fairer and more durable model of platform work worldwide.

Yet Finnish research shows that 68.4% of couriers actually prefer self-employment even though it yields little or no pay when orders are scarce [3]. They do not wish to bond themselves to a single employer.

One of the platforms that has decisively shaped working practices in food delivery is Deliveroo. Subsequent sections of the study examine how Deliveroo manages relations with couriers through a flexible-employment model that scales services quickly yet also creates labour vulnerability and attracts criticism for exploiting platform workers. The analysis focuses on algorithmic control, the legal status of couriers and the impact of such models on union activity and the defence of labour rights.

Founded in 2013, Deliveroo has grown into one of the world's largest food and goods delivery platforms, working with more than 160 000 restaurants and supermarkets including Marks&Spencer, Whole Foods and Waitrose [28]. It embodies the gig-economy model, marked by short-term contracts arranged

through digital apps. While this arrangement offers flexible schedules and a low entry threshold, it also lacks the classic guarantees of paid holidays, sick leave, steady wages and union protection [22].

In the United Kingdom Deliveroo couriers are officially classed as self-employed contractors, not employees. They are therefore ineligible for the National Minimum Wage, unprotected by employment law and unable to demand collective bargaining. Couriers may refuse orders, wear no uniform and work for competitors simultaneously. Deliveroo invokes a “substitution clause” that lets couriers hand orders to someone else, something that the UK Supreme Court views as inconsistent with an employment relationship [21].

This interpretation proved decisive in the IWGB union’s bid to secure collective-bargaining rights for couriers under Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights [23]. Despite protests and litigation, in 2023 the Supreme Court upheld the Central Arbitration Committee’s decision: Deliveroo couriers have no statutory right to union representation [25]. Although this was a serious setback, the IWGB continues to mobilise couriers and pursue international legal channels [24].

Self-employment can have harsh outcomes. Courier Celia Campos, for instance, worked 333 hours in July 2024 yet earned only £6.27 an hour, much below the legal minimum. “You have to do a lot of deliveries when they pay one or two pounds per order,” she says. “The people who own these companies don’t think about us, they think only about themselves” [27].

Deliveroo’s stance contrasts sharply with Uber, whose drivers were recognised as “workers” (an intermediate status between self-employed and employee) by the UK Supreme Court in 2021. The Court stressed that Uber controls prices, sets contract terms and sanctions drivers who reject orders control that it deemed absent in Deliveroo’s more arm’s-length model [26]. The level of platform control thus proves decisive for legal status.

Regulatory trajectories are now diverging. The EU is debating a Platform Work Directive that could classify couriers as employees and grant them labour rights [18]. The UK, favouring flexibility and deregulation [23], is unlikely to follow suit. British firms may therefore try to export the Deliveroo model to other markets, complicating the fight for fair conditions.

Conclutions.

Problems in the delivery industry are multi-layered, ranging from algorithmic exploitation and job insecurity to gender- and migration-related risks. The study’s authors recommend legislative reform, transparent algorithms and social insurance.

Entrepreneurs, keen to cut costs, will marshal expensive legal talent to argue against social guarantees for couriers; the UK experience shows that this strategy can succeed. Even unions do not always prevail. Because Deliveroo operates internationally, EU countries must anticipate such risks. Without coordinated action, the Deliveroo model could spread, eroding labour standards elsewhere.

Therefore the European Union must side firmly with delivery workers. Only by extending the full suite of social-protection mechanisms to couriers can this form of work be turned into civilised employment. A comprehensive solution will require state regulation, technological improvements and organisational innovation within the platforms themselves.

Based on all above mentioned, authors of the study formulated the following recommendations to EU member states regarding to the platform/gig-work:

- 1) Legally cap working hours. Courier hours should not exceed the limits set in the labour code of the country in which they perform their work.
- 2) Set a statutory minimum hourly wage. Courier-delivery workers must receive at least the national minimum hourly rate applicable in the country where the service is provided.
- 3) Guarantee paid sick leave and holiday. Courier-delivery workers should be granted rights to sick leave and annual leave, calculated in proportion to the hours they have worked on a given delivery platform.

The authors acknowledge that these measures will inevitably raise the cost of courier services and may therefore dampen demand. Nonetheless, they argue that such steps will help the EU and, by extension, other jurisdictions, advance toward a rule-of-law society that protects the interests of its citizens and residents.

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