



The Algorithmic–Bureaucratic Precarization of Migrant Food Delivery Workers in Italy

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Abstract

Our article uses a socio-legal lens to examine the construction of precarity among migrant food delivery workers in Turin, Italy. We argue that the Italian migration system, and the way it is implemented, narrows the range of sources of income, and pushes migrants into a condition of liminal legality, formatting the malleable workforce upon which food delivery platforms deploy their biopower. We thus suggest that the commodification of migrant labor in the platform food delivery sector in Turin, while driven by platform logics, is rooted in, and compounded by, the contradictions and opacity of the Italian immigration regime. We thus advance the novel concept of algorithmic–bureaucratic precarization which allows an understanding of how the interaction of the legal and the digital causes migrant workers to be held on the outermost margins of employment. By drawing on ethnographic data collected during the Covid-19 pandemic, we chart the growing centrality of food delivery platforms in the political economy of migration. In so doing, we show how the

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interaction between shifting migration policies, information asymmetries of digital platforms and legal loopholes exacerbates the socio-economic vulnerability of migrant workers. We unpack algorithmic–bureaucratic precarization by describing the entanglement of legal and procedural failures that illegalize migrants and asylum seekers and put them at risk of exploitation. Through the specific case of migrant food delivery workers in Turin, we contribute to the legal geography literature on precarization by highlighting how the platform economy is reshaping the nexus of neoliberal flexibilization and restrictive migration policies.

Keywords

gig economy, Italy, socio-legal studies

Introduction

At the end of May 2020, the Public Prosecutor's Office of Milan, Italy, published a report with the findings of a month-long investigation into the hiring practices of Uber Eats Italy, the food-delivery operation of the US-based ride-hailing corporation Uber (Milosa and Tundo 2020). The 60-page court order painted a chilling picture of worker exploitation involving senior managers of Uber Italy at the expense of migrants in desperate need of an income. Based on witness testimony and evidence gathered by the investigators through surveillance, the Public Prosecutor's Office concluded that Uber Italy relied on two Milan-based intermediary firms to recruit hundreds of asylum seekers waiting for residency permits for humanitarian reasons from all over Northern Italy.

According to the court order, the workers were “in conditions of such social vulnerability” (Allaby 2021) to be willing to accept starvation wages, around 3 euros per delivery. In a recorded conversation quoted in the report, a senior Uber Italy manager showed self-awareness, saying, “We have created a system for desperate people” (ibid.). The report caught the headlines of Italian newspapers, led to the receivership of Uber Italy, and set the stage for two civil suits, including one in which Uber executives were accused of acting as gangmasters, a charge typically associated with casual agricultural labor.

By lifting the curtain on how an iconic name of the digital economy exploited the loopholes of the Italian asylum regime, the investigation brought into sharp relief how a business sector — digital platform work — infused with narratives of agnostic algorithmic management driven by market efficiency imperatives runs on a institutionally disempowered workforce.

The impact of the Public Prosecutor's Office's report was amplified by the increased visibility of food delivery couriers against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. As Italian urban areas went into lockdown in March 2020, the number of migrants signing up for food delivery platforms swelled dramatically. Biking

through empty streets and often wearing makeshift personal protective equipment (PPE), these couriers played a critical role in the functioning of cities, delivering not only food from restaurants but also medicines and essential items to citizens with limited mobility. And yet, while boosting the number of orders and increasing earning opportunities, the pandemic also engendered risks that added to the uncertainty inherent in the dynamics of platform work and the migrant condition in Italy.

This situation was common in most major urban centers and across most high-income economies, where, in recent years, migrant workers have become central to the burgeoning gig economy (Lata, Burdon, and Reddel 2022; Altenried 2024; Bonhomme and Muldoon 2024), an ever-expanding sector characterized by the digital matching of demand and supply of specific services through web- or app-based platforms (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn 2019; Woodcock and Graham 2020).

While one may argue that Uber Italy was a rogue outlier, our contention in this article is that the “system for desperate people” that the intercepted Uber executive referred to builds upon the interaction between the legal elusiveness and the algorithmic control of digital platforms, and the way restrictive immigration policies compound the power of employers over migrant workers. We argue indeed that the Italian migration regime, and the way it is implemented, narrows the range of income sources and pushes migrants into what Menjívar (2006) calls “liminal legality” characterized by its ambiguity, as it is neither an undocumented status nor a documented one, but may have the characteristics of both (1008). It thus formats the malleable human life upon which food delivery platforms deploy their biopower, “coordinating the performance of, and extracting the value from, its vital productive energy” (Gregory and Sadowski 2021, 2).

Our article engages with the interdisciplinary literature that focuses on the intersection of opaque algorithmic management and migration regimes (Mendonça, Kougiannou, and Clark 2022; Maury, Hakala, and Näre 2024; Orth 2024). It aims to tease out the shifting political economy of migration by capturing the interplay of toughening policies against irregular migrants (De Haas, Natter, and Vezzoli 2018; De Genova 2002) and processes of “neoliberal flexibilization” (Peck 2001) resting on the demise of standard employment relations (Schor et al. 2020). We focus in particular on the gap between the “official” and the “unofficial” versions of migration and labor laws (Tuckett 2015, 115) as we ask: *What are the implications of the interaction between shifting migration policies, algorithmic management, and inadequate labor laws for migrant workers?*

In so doing, we contribute to the rapidly expanding literature on the interplay of migration regimes and gig work both theoretically and empirically. At the theoretical level, we develop the concept of *algorithmic-bureaucratic precarization* to complement existing frameworks that examine how conflicting temporalities, arising from border, labor, and platform logics, shape, and exacerbate, the experiences of food delivery workers. (Andersen, Chen, and Smith 2024; Stingl and Orth 2024). At the empirical level, we draw on ethnographic data collected during the 2020–2021

pandemic in Turin, a major Italian post-industrial city and one of the first urban areas in Europe to witness organized protests by food delivery couriers (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017; Chesta, Zamponi, and Caciagli 2019), to examine the blurred boundaries between legality and illegality that migrant platform workers navigate daily as they contend with a condition of legal liminality.

Our article is structured as follows. We first review the literature on migration and platform labor, fleshing out the concept of algorithmic–bureaucratic precarization to highlight the role of the law and the administrative assemblage entrusted with its implementation in shaping an ideal reserve army of food delivery couriers. After discussing our empirical setting and methodology, we present our data, briefly describing the transformations of platform labor in the context of our investigation and illustrating first how migrant food delivery couriers understand the opportunities afforded by platform work, and then how, in the scenario of the pandemic, they navigated algorithmic and legal uncertainty. Next, we analyze our findings, suggesting that the commodification of migrant labor in the platform food delivery sector in Turin, while driven by platform logics, is rooted in, and compounded by, the contradictions and opacity of the Italian immigration regime. Finally, we draw our conclusions by synthesizing the key findings of our study, examining recent legal developments that have implications for platform migrant labor, and outlining potential avenues for future research in this field.

Algorithmic–Bureaucratic Precarization

Over the past 15 years, there has been a proliferation of digital platforms offering a broad range of services. This trend has emerged in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and as a result of the confluence of technological innovation, a glut of corporate savings, and a significant surplus population of workers left jobless by the crisis (Srnicek 2017). By leveraging data and algorithms to connect end-users or to improve the matching of supply and demand for goods and services, digital platforms rearticulate economic relations between capital and labor. This process has given rise to “platform labor” (Huws 2020), a digitally-enabled type of work characterized by the fragmentation of the employment relationship into discrete tasks or gigs — hence the term gig economy, often used interchangeably with platform economy; the intermediation of online platforms; and *dataveillance*, or the monitoring of practices and preferences through the tracking of personal data.

Platform labor is a non-standard work (NSW) subcategory in the service sector, which, according to the economic historian Aaron Benanav (2020), is “the choice site for job creation through super-exploitation because the wages of service workers make up a relatively large share of the final price that consumers pay” (60). Driven by large-scale deregulation of employment relations across the Global North, the location-based gig economy is exposed to the vagaries of the local markets and exacerbates the risk of “super-exploitation” inherent to the service

sector, where “the wages of service workers make up a relatively large share of the final price that consumers pay” (Benanav 2020, 60).

Currently, the main victims of this super-exploitation within the gig economy are migrant workers. This is confirmed by findings from a survey conducted by the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) across EU member states, which indicates that foreign-born workers are overrepresented in the platform economy, with “migrant workers often segregated into lower-paid and more insecure work” (Piasna, Zwysen, and Drahokoupil 2022, 29). This is further reflected in the ever-expanding academic literature exploring the intersection of platform labor and international migration regimes — a body of work that has grown significantly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drawing on case studies from Europe (Gebrial 2022; Newlands 2022; Iazzolino and Varesio 2023; Altenried 2024; Diz and Casas-Cortés 2024; Maury, Hakala, and Näre 2024; Orth 2024; Stingl and Orth 2024; Van Doorn and Vijay 2024; Webster and Zhang 2025), Latin America (Bonhomme and Muldoon 2024), Australia (Wang and Churchill 2024), and the United States (Atttoh, Purcell, and Brenner 2024), this scholarship sheds light on the stratification and fragmentation of labor power in the gig economy (Altenried, Bojadživev, and Wallis 2021; Lata, Burdon, and Reddel 2022; Maury 2024), and on how this heterogeneity is shaped by the entanglement of multiple temporalities arising from border regimes, the organization of platform work, and migrants’ strategies for navigating insecurity (Popan, 2024; Stingl and Orth 2024; Sun, Veen, and Wright 2025). Besides their empirical contributions, these analyses have expanded the theorization of the nexus of migration and platform work. For instance, the concept of “platform facades” (Sun, Veen, and Wright 2025) captures how migrant workers circumvent the restrictions attached to their status by finding and exploiting loopholes in platforms’ compliance regimes and work practices. Riordan, Robinson, and Hoffstaedter (2022) apply intersectional injustices as a lens to examine the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for migrant platform workers, while the notion of “migrant infrastructure” (Van Doorn and Vijay 2024; Huijsmans 2025) is mobilized to highlight the significance of digital platforms within migrants’ life and career trajectories.

In this article, we attempt to further theorize the articulation of shifting migration regimes and digitally-mediated forms of value production. Our concept of algorithmic-bureaucratic precarization mainly builds upon Lewis et al.’s notion of hyper-precarity (2015), a condition emerging “from the ongoing interplay of neoliberal labor markets and highly restrictive immigration regimes” (582). Their emphasis on “the inter-connections between neoliberal work and welfare regimes, asylum and immigration controls, and the exploitation of migrant workers” (580–581) foregrounds the link between “precarious migrant labor exploitation” and the political economy tide begun in the 1970s with governments in the Global North restoring “management’s ‘right to manage’ the labor process, while abandoning the post-war commitment to full employment and universal welfare in favor of wholesale privatizations” (581). Our concept of precarization acknowledges that the experience

of precarity among migrants varies “over time and through space” (Chacko and Price 2021, 4598) and is shaped by the looming threat of dismissal and deportation (Kundnani 2007, 62) and the interplay of precarious work and precarious citizenship (Goldring and Landolt 2011). For scholars focusing on the entrenchment of austerity regimes, precarity is at once a frame to make sense of a condition of limited agency and labor insecurity induced by neoliberal policies (Hira-Friesen 2018), and a catalyst of socio-political claims (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). Sharing Alberti et al. (2018) remark that the concept’s popularity has watered down its analytical and political effectiveness, we focus on precarization as a situated process shaped by objective conditions, as well as the perception of insecurity among immigrant workers (Anderson 2010).

On the one hand, migrants from different backgrounds, including asylum seekers and those categorized as “skilled migrants,” face significant challenges when seeking to find a job that matches their skills in the country of arrival, due to unfamiliarity with the new country’s recruitment dynamics, language barriers, lack of recognition of their overseas qualifications, and discrimination (Abkhezr and McMahon 2022; Orth 2024). On the other, the low entry barriers of app-based gig work allow migrants to gain financial independence through a smooth and quick recruitment process. On the downside, the lack of employment contracts entails that the workers bear all the risks and costs associated with their activity. Therefore, for instance, in the food delivery sector, a business with a significant presence of couriers with a migrant background, the vulnerability of migrant workers is exacerbated by the paradox that “the job is legally regulated but the employment relation is not recognized by the employer” (Elbert and Negri 2021, 5). In this business niche, this relationship is triangular, as the platform connects restaurants, couriers, and customers. And yet, couriers are the weakest link, exposed to a broad range of risks spanning from bearing the costs of health hazards, compounded by the lack of social protection, to wage depression because of labor oversupply.

Our concept of algorithmic–bureaucratic precarization thus complements Benanav’s (2020) argument that firms’ exploitation of workers depends on “the strength of each country’s labor-protection laws” (61) and resonates with the specific literature stream that discusses how the “(re)production of social, legal, and algorithmic differences intensify the processes of rendering work more insecure” (Maury 2024, 1169).

In so doing, we draw attention to the way migration laws and bureaucracy further disempower migrants and asylum seekers, making them more vulnerable vis-à-vis food delivery platforms. Moreover, digital platforms’ algorithmic obfuscation is mirrored by bureaucratic opacity, amplifying the uncertainty that defines the subjects of our study as both migrants and platform workers, even more so at a time of global uncertainty such as the one coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic (Žuk and Žuk 2022; Janta and Ladkin 2024).

It is important to note that framing the entire migrant experience of platform work solely in terms of exploitation risks oversimplification. Maury (2024) underscores the

extent to which digital platforms can support the entrepreneurial aspirations of migrant workers. Similarly, Van Doorn and Vijay (2024) describe this app-mediated labor segment as “Janus-faced” (3), highlighting how migrant agency and subjectivity are central to navigating an unpredictable labor market. Migrants do so by mobilizing heterogeneous networks and leveraging individual skills and resources. In this context, digital platforms intersect with arrival infrastructures, generating “new chances and risks for migrant workers whose mobility is often regimented and/or curtailed” (ibid.).

However, as we argue in the remainder of this article, the capacity of food delivery platforms to exploit income-insecure workers relies not only on the structure of labor protections but also on their implementation — and, crucially, on the extent to which these labor protections are misaligned with migration laws. In the Italian case, this disjuncture is further exacerbated by the discretionary power of local police headquarters (*questure*) in enforcing immigration regulations.

Context and Methodology

The setting of our research, Turin, occupies a prominent position in the national labor and migration geographies. Since the Post-War period, the city has been a significant migration hub in Northern Italy. Home to the leading Italian automotive firm, FIAT, since the early 1950s Turin has been attracting a steady flow of migrants searching for job opportunities, mainly from economically deprived Southern Italy. The number of internal migrants peaked through the 1960s and continued throughout the 1970s (Musso 2002), strengthening the ranks of the local industrial unions. Since the 1980s, Turin has experienced a slow process of deindustrialization (Capello 2020) and, yet, the city has never ceased to be a place of arrival, lately for a growing number of asylum seekers arriving in Italy by crossing the Mediterranean or through the Balkan route. This persistence as either a destination or a mooring in broader mobility systems rests on multiple factors, including the city’s proximity to France, where migrants from Francophone West Africa could rely on established migration chains, and Turin’s network of cooperatives and NGOs, buttressed by a consistent string of left- or center-left-leaning administrations integrated within the local reception system.

The legacy of the city’s labor history also survived in the unions’ attention to migrant issues and a constellation of grassroots organizations, inspired by the language and the tactics of the Autonomy movement, which in the 1960s and 1970s extended the struggle “from the factory floor to the city as a whole” (Vasudevan 2017, 152). These organizations, in Turin and elsewhere in Italy, have provided different types of support to refugees and asylum seekers through advice and hospitality in occupied buildings, leveraging their linkages with ideologically contiguous groups within the same autonomous space, such as the No Borders movement, advocating freedom of movement and actively helping migrants across the French border.

The role of unions and grassroots organizations in supporting migrant workers had methodological and analytical implications for our study. Besides facilitating our access to the participants of our research, they featured in the accounts of migrant workers, helping them organize and providing legal support. CGIL, Italy's largest union, and the Turin chapter of Deliverance Project, a grassroots organization of logistic workers and food couriers, provided us with critical support during the 15 months of our fieldwork between September 2020 and December 2021. Around 40 participants, including couriers working for various platforms (UberEats, Glovo, JustEat, Deliveroo), lawyers, union leaders, and activists, were interviewed in either French, English, or Italian, or attended multilingual focus group discussions. We sought to include participants from various countries (Pakistan, the Gambia, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Benin, Mali, Libya, and India). It was often difficult for us to pin down the real legal conditions of the participants in our study because of the vague and contradicting accounts that they shared on shifting statuses due to the loss of regular papers, suspended expulsion orders, and arrival from other EU countries. Therefore, the research participants mentioned in our article, unless specified otherwise, all fall into the irregular migrant category. The couriers who participated in our interviews and FGDs were all males because of the absence of foreign female workers in the food delivery sector. After being introduced to a few couriers gravitating around the CGIL union and Deliverance project, we relied on a snowball sampling method to recruit other participants. We also approached couriers in two areas in central Turin where they usually gathered, waiting for assignments.

In the next section, we delve into the interaction of migration and labor laws in the Italian context.

The Socio-Legal Construction of Migrant Precarity in Italy

In this section, we examine the legal framework governing the intersection of migration and access to the labor market in Italy over recent decades. The intersectional vulnerability of migrant workers in Italy arises from the convergence of increasingly restrictive immigration policies and the flexibilization of labor relations (Calafà 2021). As in other Southern European contexts, Italian state policies on labor migration have been shaped by sharp fluctuations between economic liberalization and political hostility toward immigration (Pastore 2014).

Since the early 2000s, and particularly following the introduction of the 2002 “Bossi-Fini” Law — named after its two right-wing proponents — the Italian immigration regime has progressively reinforced the conditionality of residence permits on both employment status and income levels. This legislation tightened the link between legal residency and formal employment while reducing the duration of various types of residence permits, thereby heightening the legal precarity of migrants. Additionally, it curtailed access to residence permits through the quota system, a channel previously used by migrants already working irregularly in Italy to regularize their status. As a result, the system was deliberately designed to render legal entry through formal employment

exceedingly difficult, leaving post-entry regularization — often on a fixed-term basis — as the only viable path to legality.

The restrictive orientation introduced by the Bossi-Fini law has remained a defining feature of Italian migration policy, upheld even under center-left governments (Zincone and Caponio 2006). Prior to 2018, Italian asylum law allowed for two main forms of legal recognition: international protection (granting a five-year residence permit) and humanitarian protection (granting a two-year permit). However, the introduction of Decree-Law 113/2018 — commonly referred to as the “Salvini Decree” after its principal advocate, right-wing leader Matteo Salvini — abolished humanitarian protection. This significantly reduced the likelihood of regularization for asylum seekers who did not fall squarely within the international protection framework, resulting in a marked decline in humanitarian permits issued since 2019 (Dennison and Geddes 2021).

Furthermore, the decree excluded asylum seekers and former holders of humanitarian protection from the ordinary reception system, undermining their access to essential social and legal services, and effectively excluding them from formal integration pathways. By narrowing the routes to legal residency, the Salvini Decree compelled many migrants to accept so-called *DDD* (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) jobs as a means of maintaining legal status (Chiaromonte, Ferrara, and Malzani 2019). These policy shifts have deepened what we refer to as hyper-precarity — a condition in which migrants face the compounded vulnerabilities of irregular or unstable legal status, heightened by the systemic challenges of maintaining legality within an increasingly restrictive immigration regime.

Two points are relevant to our argument.

First, immigration laws and policies shape different forms of labor for migrant workers. These laws create categories of entrants, impose employment relations, and construct institutionalized uncertainty (Anderson 2010, 301). Notably, various migration laws passed by the Italian parliament over the years have sustained a steady demand for low-skilled labor in sectors like agriculture (Corrado 2018). This has effectively produced a disposable migrant workforce “socially included under imposed conditions of enforced and protracted vulnerability” (De Genova 2002, 429).

Second, the fragmentation of the regularization process and the contingency of permits on regular job contracts further complicate matters. Uncertainty about the bureaucracy translating laws into procedures spreads among authorities, activists, legal practitioners, union leaders, employers, and migrants. This uncertainty over implementing specific legal provisions strengthens the “liminal legality” of migrants, whose agency is restricted by their real or perceived deportability. As Menjivar points out, “a situation of ‘liminal legality’ is neither unidirectional nor a linear process” (Menjívar 2006, 1008). Regular migrants can find themselves illegal on short notice due to lost documents, legal setbacks, or political changes.

While the transformations of the food delivery sector opened doors for many migrant workers, both legal and irregular, they remain largely excluded from labor

protection as platform workers. The lack of recognition of riders as employees is a common feature of platform work, not just in Italy. The weakening of full labor protection for atypical workers is a legacy of reforms passed between the late 1990s and early 2000s (the 1997 “Treu Package” and the 2003 “Biagi Law”). These reforms broke with the previous Italian labor law, which was based on a clear distinction between “subordinate employment” and “self-employment”. This branching out impacted immigration rules, where two different work permits were issued: one for subordinate work and another for self-employment.

The Treu Package and Biagi Law increased labor market flexibility and the proliferation of “para-subordinate” forms of work, creating a grey area where temporary and “atypical” workers (employed through “coordinated and continuous collaboration” or “occasional collaboration”) enjoyed limited employment protection.

The coordinated and continuous collaboration contract (Co.Co.Co.) is essentially a hybrid between employment and self-employment. This form is unique to the Italian job market and increasingly attractive to employers, as it reduces labor costs and allows for more flexible staffing. Social security benefits are lower compared to subordinate employees (Gramano and Gaudio 2019). While there’s no formal subordination to the employer, the worker is theoretically independent. However, in the context of platform work, riders are constantly subject to algorithmic pressure and demands, lacking freedom to organize their jobs. Couriers are either hired through Co.Co.Co. or requested to work as independent contractors. For the latter, Italian law requires them to open a value-added tax (VAT) number (*partita IVA*), which incurs activation costs for the worker. As self-employed, they have no right to labor rights like paid holidays and sick leave, thus highlighting how “employment precariousness becomes both the rising source and the dire consequence of legal precariousness” (Chauvin, Garcés-Mascareñas, and Kraler 2013, 127).

As we will describe later, food delivery platforms started operating in Turin against this fuzzy legal backdrop, initially relying on Co.Co.Co. contracts and then, as competition intensified, on loose partnerships with independent contractors. However, the common practice of identifying workers as independent contractors forced migrants to obtain a VAT number, automatically excluding them from subordinate workers’ employment protection and preventing them from qualifying for a residence permit for “subordinate work”. The data we present below illustrates the implications of these legal and procedural intricacies for migrants’ lives in the food delivery sector.

Platform Work Opportunities

As suggested in the previous section, the changes in the composition of Turin’s migrant population reflect the city’s “restructuring and rescaling” (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2009, 178). The automotive sector was not only a critical pull factor for internal Italian migrants but also the backbone of the local economy. Yet, its demise did not significantly curb immigration. As the city grew more ethnically

diverse through the 2000s, the ratio of migrant labor absorbed by the local service sector gradually increased to 51 percent in 2017, while 13.6 percent of the migrant population residing in Turin and its surroundings found occupation in industry, 25.6 percent in the building sector, 5.7 percent in commerce, and 2.8 percent in agriculture (Ponzo and Donatiello 2017). Policy initiatives, such as the EU-funded FORWORK — Fostering Opportunities of Refugee WORKers — supported migrants with humanitarian protection to find work in local commercial enterprises, including restaurants.¹ Besides those migrants who benefited from job mentoring programs and were trained as kitchen helpers and waiters, others had exclusive agreements with specific restaurants to deliver food.

The first food delivery platform in Turin, Pony Zero, started operating in 2013. Benefitting from EU seed capital for sustainable mobility initiatives (Iazzolino and Varesio 2023), this startup initially acted as a fleet partner for the UK-based tech firm Just Eat. While Just Eat managed the app, Pony Zero was in charge of the logistics. Its couriers, equipped with bicycles and branded jackets, were hired as Co.Co.Co workers. They were selected based on skills including familiarity with the city plan and good knowledge of the Italian language, as Pony Zero's management model was based on the coordination between the couriers and the dispatchers who assisted the couriers through the deliveries from the firm's head office in Turin. As a result, Pony Zero mainly employed Italian nationals.

In 2016, the foreign digital platforms Foodora, Deliveroo, Glovo, and Uber Eats made their foray into the Italian market. Existing firms, including Just Eat, were forced to restructure their logistic network, doing without contractors like Pony Zero, recruiting couriers without intermediaries, and placing greater emphasis on the role of the app in mediating the communication between the central office and the couriers. The fierce competition among food delivery platforms led to a worsening of contract relations and a deterioration of the quality of work, thus prompting collective actions as early as 2016 (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017). However, these transformations allowed an expansion of the courier pool by lowering the entry barriers as the platforms provided the delivery instructions through the courier app, including in English. The migrants working as restaurant couriers were particularly eager to sign up with multiple platforms, producing in person an ID and a copy of their residence permit at the local premises of the food delivery platforms.

Glovo rapidly emerged as the dominant actor in the food delivery sector by diversifying its services to include supermarkets, pharmacies, and tobacconists, while also introducing a cash-on-delivery option. As discussed elsewhere (Iazzolino and Varesio 2023), the company further consolidated the centrality of its app, effectively gamifying the labor process through the implementation of bonuses, performance

¹ <https://agenziapiemontelavoro.it/progetto/forwork/>

scores, and rankings. These mechanisms were instrumental in managing the workforce and allocating shifts based on couriers' performance metrics.

The practice of subletting accounts became increasingly common among migrant couriers, particularly those who, in the absence of valid work permits, depended on peers with regular documentation to access the platform. For many migrants excluded from formal labor markets, platform work represented a rapid — albeit precarious — pathway to economic self-sufficiency.

Such was the case of L., a Senegalese national who has remained undocumented since 2011, following a police stop during which he was found in possession of six grams of cannabis — an incident that led to a deportation order that was never enforced. Unable to secure formal employment, L. borrowed his cousin's account, who possessed a valid residence permit, and reported that, despite the income's volatility, food delivery work enabled him to meet his basic needs (February 13, 2021).

Other migrant workers perceived platform labor not merely as a survival strategy (Schor et al. 2020), but also as a stepping stone toward entrepreneurial ambitions. One interviewee, B. from Pakistan, who had worked for three different platforms since 2018, was able not only to support his family in Pakistan but also to invest in the co-ownership of two small kebab kiosks in Turin (March 29, 2021).

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 significantly increased the visibility of the food delivery sector. As the national lockdown implemented in spring 2020 severely impacted the restaurant industry, many migrants employed as kitchen or waiting staff lost their jobs. With Italian cities effectively at a standstill, the business volume of food delivery platforms rose dramatically.

Due to their role as a vital human infrastructure enabling the circulation of goods during a time of crisis, couriers were granted the status of essential workers by local authorities, allowing them to move freely despite restrictions. However, as observed by Elbert and Negri (2021), this designation placed additional pressure on couriers, who were expected to comply with hygiene regulations — often at their own expense.

Unlike the food delivery couriers in Argentina examined by Elbert and Negri (*ibid.*), the participants in our study were unable to leverage the power associated with their central role in the pandemic economy (Wright 2000) to demand improved working conditions or to organize collective action against platform companies. While most interviewees downplayed health-related concerns, they nevertheless acknowledged the advantages of increased assignment volume and safer road conditions due to reduced traffic during lockdown (Iazzolino and Varesio 2023).

As the public health crisis subsided and Italian cities began to lift restrictions, a combination of labor oversupply and declining order volumes led to a significant decrease in income for couriers. As we elaborate in the following sections, interviews with migrant couriers in Turin highlighted two interrelated dimensions of uncertainty — algorithmic uncertainty and legal uncertainty — that compounded the economic precarity experienced in the aftermath of the lockdown.

Algorithmic Uncertainty

As couriers found themselves idling around restaurants, awaiting increasingly erratic delivery requests, they became acutely aware of the significance of the formal reputation and rating system, and of their limited control over it (Rahman 2021). As we have discussed in a previous article, our interviewees demonstrated considerable ingenuity in navigating a fluid platform labor environment, where the allocation of tasks, the rating system, and the fee structure for each assignment were obscured behind a façade of algorithmic efficiency (Iazzolino and Varesio 2023; see also Wood et al. 2019).

During our fieldwork, this algorithmic opacity was largely perceived by participants as intentional. Many interviewees believed that the uncertainty surrounding task allocation served to compel couriers to exert additional effort, in the hope of securing future work (Focus Group Discussion with migrant couriers, March 16, 2021). This concern was particularly pronounced with regard to Glovo. According to both our interviewees and in-app messages they shared, Glovo was perceived as the platform most explicitly discouraging couriers from rejecting assignments, regardless of how unprofitable or time-consuming they appeared, by suggesting that a high refusal rate would negatively impact the assignment of future tasks.

Glovo also directly links the couriers' overall rating and the allocation of work slot. Even experienced couriers admitted their bewilderment vis-à-vis the criteria used by the platform to manage their work. As reported by L., from Gambia,

I don't understand how many deliveries Glovo wants me to do. They do what they want with our score. If you deliver four orders in two hours of high demand, they should raise your rating, but sometimes they lower it. It is stressful. I try to work fast, I am always running, but now I've stopped worrying about my scores because I cannot see the logic. (December 07, 2020)

Recalling his platform work experience, I., from Senegal, stressed the contradiction between the legal framing of their relationship with the digital firm as an entrepreneurial partnership and the way the platform obfuscates the mechanisms through which it disciplines workers.

At the beginning, I could only work 5 hours a day. Then, when I reached a high rating, Glovo allowed me to work more hours. But it is never clear how and when you get to that point. You work as a slave because you feel that it's never enough. Does this mean being flexible? And yet, if you're an independent partner, you should be able to decide when and for how long to work. (February 03, 2021)

The strategic uncertainty through which food delivery platforms compel the couriers while eluding the employment relationship is compounded by the fact that the workers are left to their own devices, even when they fall victim of bike theft and are therefore unable to work. This radical responsabilization (Fleming 2017) was

particularly evident during the first COVID-19 wave, in March 2020. Not only were the couriers responsible for their PPE because of the uneven distribution of protective equipment, such as gels and masks, by the platform firms, but, because of their contractor status, they could not access social protection benefits such as paid sick leave. A., a cultural mediator from Pakistan, recalled the case of a country fellow who used to work for Glovo, Just Eat and Uber Eats until

one of his flatmates got Covid. Therefore, all those living together had to isolate themselves for at least two weeks. Not only he lost his income for two weeks, but Glovo, for which he did most of his deliveries, reset his rating. He lost most of his score and, even once he was out of isolation, he struggled to get back to his previous earnings. (February 19, 2021)

As a result of similar experiences, some interviewees admitted working at the pandemic's peak even though they displayed COVID-19 symptoms lest they would lose a much-needed income for themselves and their families in their country of origin. Moreover, during the lockdown, Glovo and other food delivery platforms closed their local branches. All interactions between the workers and the main offices shifted online. All required documents for the recruitment were uploaded and verified through the app. The increased distance between the couriers and the managers narrowed communication channels to appeal against widespread complaints, such as the loss of points or wage theft. M., from Pakistan, pointed out that, since the pandemic, complaining had become increasingly complex, even when, like in the account he shared with our research team, he had an outstanding credit with Glovo for 1000 euros (March 03, 2021). Still, all his attempts to claim that money had hitherto gone unanswered. His situation was compounded by the fact that, being his working permit expired, he was wary of starting legal action against the firm. This point leads us to the next section, where we describe the legal uncertainty that weighs on migrant couriers.

Legal Uncertainty

As independent contractors, all platform workers are fully responsible for national insurance and revenue payment. To operate within the national law while eluding an employment relationship, food delivery platforms require couriers to register for VAT once they have reached the legal threshold of 5000 euros. Failure to comply with this requirement entails the freeze of their account. However, registering for VAT is not enough. Often, workers who had registered a VAT number when they had earned over 5000 euros were unable to meet the expenses to retain it in the subsequent years. Since the renewal of the residence permit is contingent upon the regular tax position of the migrant worker, these missed VAT payments are a "ticking bomb", according to a lawyer who has long been involved in judicial proceedings against the exploitative practices of digital platforms in Turin (March 21,

2021). This was the case of S., a courier from Pakistan, who confirmed that, despite having a VAT registration, “*I cannot pay the taxes to maintain it, so I cannot renew my residence permit*” (February 15, 2021). Another courier, O., from Morocco, was able to pay the required 300 euros per month for social security and retain his VAT registration only because he had another part-time job (February 19, 2021). Our interviewees thus suggested that, due to the inability to pay taxes regularly, the delinquency rate among migrant couriers is very high. As confirmed by a CGIL union leader, “*many couriers are full of debts with the state. They work, but do not pay taxes*” (E., March 01, 2021).

The persistent risk of losing a work permit due to the inability to renew it, coupled with the lack of pathways to regularize one’s legal status, perpetuates the pervasive uncertainty migrants face in relation to the law. Participants in our study — including couriers, legal practitioners, and union representatives — highlighted a connection between the increasing prevalence of flexible labor contracts and the growing difficulties in renewing permits or converting humanitarian residence permits into work permits. Local police authorities frequently reject such applications on the grounds that these contracts are too short-term or precarious, failing to provide proof of stable and regular income.

Furthermore, when contracts are excessively short or migrants have failed to meet tax obligations, they face significant barriers in maintaining their residence permits. Italian law offers only one alternative in such cases: a short-term permit granted to migrants who register as unemployed while seeking employment (*permesso di attesa occupazione*). However, this option requires migrants to formally declare their unemployment status to local labor agencies, and the *attesa occupazione* permit can be issued only once, leaving no further recourse for those unable to secure stable employment.

Discretionary power, varying significantly across questuras in different Italian cities — plays a critical role in the assessment of atypical employment contracts for the issuance of subordinate work permits. This discretion also extends to the type of evidence required to prove legal status and the format of official documents issued by the police. In some instances, migrant couriers have had their VAT registration questioned on the grounds that platform-based work fails to meet minimum income thresholds. In other cases, they have borne the consequences of inconsistencies between the documentation provided by the questura and the requirements set by digital platforms.

For example, while Glovo permits couriers to upload a scanned copy of the receipt for a renewal application as evidence that the process is underway, Just Eat requires a scanned copy of the official renewal document. According to A., a cultural mediator from Pakistan, asylum seekers are particularly affected by the widespread lack of awareness among digital platforms regarding their legal right to work (February 19, 2021). Despite being entitled by law to engage in employment during the asylum procedure, they are often not issued a proper residence permit, but instead receive only a fragile paper slip — commonly referred to as the *striscetta* —

which is frequently rejected by employers and recruitment agencies as valid documentation. Furthermore, migrants who, due to restrictions introduced under the Salvini Decree, were unable to register with the local registry and thus obtain a VAT number, were compelled to work using the accounts of other registered couriers (Iazzolino and Varesio 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these bureaucratic challenges. Most questuras across Italy either restricted or entirely suspended in-person services, severely limiting migrants' access to information and assistance. The shift to remote work for administrative staff also contributed to significant delays in the processing of work permit applications and renewals. Whereas the standard timeframe for renewing a work permit was previously around 60 days, during the pandemic this process was extended to between one and two years. As a result, numerous couriers were left with expired residence permit receipts and found themselves in a condition of legal uncertainty or outright irregularity.

Discussion

The data presented above suggests that the coercive flexibility through which food delivery platforms manage labor (Richardson 2020) relies heavily on legal loopholes embedded within both labor and migration regimes. These loopholes reflect a fundamental misalignment between the structural demand for cheap labor and the complex legal and bureaucratic barriers that migrant workers face when attempting to regularize their status (Sciarra and Chiaromonte 2014). Food delivery platforms strategically exploit this misalignment to extract surplus value “by keeping labour costs low and providing minimal labour protections” (van Doorn and Vijay 2024, 2).

We propose that what we term algorithmic–bureaucratic precarization is sustained, on the one hand, by the overlapping opacity of platform operations — including task allocation, performance evaluation systems, and payment structures — and, on the other, by the bureaucratic machinery of immigration control. As a labor lawyer with experience representing platform workers, including migrants, at the Turin Labour Court observed, “the algorithm does not make the market more efficient. It encapsulates the firm’s view of what behaviour must be rewarded or sanctioned” (February 21, 2021).

The dual disjuncture between the formal and informal applications of migration law, and between these and labor law, ultimately serves the interests of platform capitalism. This legal ambiguity allows platforms to maintain control over workers by perpetuating the threat of irregular status and, in extreme cases, deportation. Consequently, a “holistic account of law” — one that considers both structural dynamics and individual agency — can reveal “when and how it is likely to serve particular powerful interests” (Orzeck and Hae 2020, 833).

The inherent precarity of platform work is intensified for migrants whose legal status often limits their ability to engage in public protest or collective bargaining. This condition of platform dependency (Schor et al. 2020) is particularly acute

among migrants who face a lack of viable employment alternatives. The result is a form of hyper-precarity, shaped by intersecting structural conditions: a marginalized position in the labor market, socio-legal vulnerability, transnational responsibilities related to social reproduction, and gendered labor dynamics. Together, these factors contribute to the entrenchment of migrants in exploitative and unstable work arrangements (Lewis et al. 2015, 582).

Migrants and asylum seekers navigate a spectrum of temporary legal statuses, reinforcing what Menjívar (2006) terms *liminal legality* — a condition further aggravated by the dissonance between formal immigration laws and their *unofficial* interpretations in practice (Tuckett 2015). This discrepancy is particularly evident in the discretionary power exercised by *questure* (local immigration offices) in residence permit renewals, where inconsistent rule enforcement leads to divergent legal outcomes across jurisdictions. Such discretionary practices, as Triandafyllidou (2005, 63) notes, may manifest as “improvisation, innovation, or even favoritism,” underscoring the arbitrariness embedded in bureaucratic decision-making. Consequently, Italian immigration law not only constructs precarity through rigid legal-illegal binaries but also through the protracted and unpredictable renewal process itself — a hallmark of Italy’s *documentation regime* (Calavita 2005; Tuckett 2015).

The bureaucratic *praxes* (Artero and Fontanari 2019) enacted by immigration authorities operate on dual levels. First, *questure* frequently impose extralegal requirements — such as demanding supplementary documents beyond statutory obligations — effectively creating an *unofficial* layer of immigration governance (Tuckett 2015). These practices obstruct migrants’ ability to maintain legal status, especially when renewing work permits or converting humanitarian permits into work-based ones. Second, the resulting arbitrariness forces migrants into protracted temporal liminality (Diz and Casas-Cortés, 2024): enduring lengthy queues for appointments, months-long processing delays, and administrative paralysis when missing documents go uncommunicated.

As our research demonstrates, this discretionary power is most visible in *questure*’s assessments of migrants’ employment contracts, which are scrutinized as proof of self-sufficiency. The opacity of this process fosters an environment rife with uncertainty and rumors, where procedural delays routinely destabilize migrants’ legal standing (Bonizzoni and Artero 2023).

Our findings highlight two interrelated mechanisms driving precarization and illegalization. First, the rise of flexible employment contracts complicates permit renewals, as *questure* often deem such contracts insufficient proof of stable income. Simultaneously, platform couriers — despite being classified as *autonomous workers* — experience algorithmic control and erratic earnings, leaving many unable to meet tax obligations tied to their legal status. Second, the tightening nexus between employment and residency rights — coupled with shortened permit durations and prolonged processing times — heightens migrants’ vulnerability to legal limbo. When permits expire amid bureaucratic delays, employers often reject renewal receipts as substitutes for valid permits, pushing migrants into irregularity

and informal labor markets. This dynamic illustrates how food delivery platforms, much like other low-wage sectors reliant on migrant labor, exploit these structural gaps to shape labor mobility (van Doorn and Vijay 2024, 2).

In conclusion, Italian migration laws and the system of work permits do not reflect the precariousness and job insecurity of the labor market. While the *questura* assesses the existence of requirements for the migrants' work permit long after their application for renewal, their temporary contracts are likely to expire. Despite a provision that allows an unemployed migrant to have an "attesa occupazione" permit to look for a new job, the provision is applied arbitrarily and it might be denied if the person is still working or has a low income. During the months — and recently, even the years — of waiting for the permit issuance or renewal, "migrants inhabited a limbo state in which they were neither 'illegal' nor entitled to the rights and freedoms of a valid permit holder" (Tuckett 2015). Migrants are thus limited in accessing their rights and employment opportunities - unless, as we have previously mentioned, these opportunities fall into the DDD, or dirty, dangerous, and demeaning, category. Food delivery platforms add another D — digital — to this initialism.

Conclusion

In our article, we have embraced a socio-legal perspective to advance the notion of algorithmic–bureaucratic precarization as an analytical lens to approach the multi-layered construction of insecurity derived from migrant workers' market situation and legal status. We have argued that the interaction of policies reducing worker protection and narrowing migrants' path to legal status produces an ideal reserve army of migrant gig workers, deprived of bargaining power and more acquiescent (or supposed to be) to work under safety hazard conditions. We have unpacked our concept of algorithmic–bureaucratic precarization by describing the entanglement of legal and procedural failures that illegalize migrants and asylum seekers and put them at risk of exploitation. Through the specific case of migrant couriers in Turin, we have thus highlighted how digital platforms reshape the nexus between migration policies and neoliberal regimes of accumulation.

Since the publication of Milan's Public Prosecutor's Office's report on the alleged role of Uber Eats in the exploitation of migrant workers, the gig economy has been increasingly scrutinized. Some Courts, including Italy's Court of Cassation (judgment n. 1663/2020), have ruled that couriers are entitled to employment protection because their relationship to the platforms shows all the features of formal employment. In February 2021 the Tribunal of Palermo has ordered to reclassify a courier working for Glovo as a subordinate employee, therefore extending employment rights to him (Guastella 2021). In the same period, Milan's Public Prosecutor's Office widened the scope of the investigation on Uber Eats, including Glovo, JustEat and Deliveroo, for potential tax crimes. The prosecuting team focused on the misclassification of over 60,000 couriers and demanded from the food delivery firms the payment of 733 million euros and the hiring of platform workers with

subordinate work contracts (La Stampa, 2023). Besides Italian courts, the struggle for platform worker rights is taking place within EU institutions as well. In December 2021, the European Commission adopted a proposal for a Platform Work Directive which will require food delivery platforms to reclassify most platform workers. After several years of negotiations, in February 2024, the reform eventually fell apart, because of the opposition of a group of Member States.

These acknowledgments, however, have not yet translated into comprehensive legislation that would qualify platform workers in Italy for the protection afforded to subordinate workers. Given the over-representation of migrant workers in the platform-based food delivery sector, greater coordination of migration and labor policies is warranted to address the stratified and heterogeneous reality of gig work and the greater vulnerability of migrant couriers. Further research is required to address the growing significance of the digital economy, not limited to food delivery platforms, for migrant workers, and emerging forms of migrant activism.

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