Worker Resistance in Digital Capitalism

Introduction

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Recent debates on media activism and digital labor suggest an urgency to examine the intersection of these two lines of inquiry—namely, how workers counteract and resist digital capitalism. This Special Section approaches the question through a set of studies into the old and new challenges facing workers in a wide range of sectors and in different parts of the world. It examines the mundane and novel tactics adopted by workers for collective action, solidarity building, and the construction of alternatives to the prevailing narratives of digital capitalism. Overall, this article argues that struggles cannot be separated from the local manifestations of the structural constraints that underpin digital capitalism: postcolonial conditions, local economic regimes, global division of labor, normative perceptions of certain jobs, institutional privileges or barriers, and the identity of the workers themselves. These situated struggles, however, animate multiple sources of solidarity that have the potential to cross such lines.

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Digital capitalism is a terrain of intensifying social conflict, and labor struggles are the most acute local manifestations of such conflict. Technology is key in driving the inequalities generated by global capitalism. To borrow Ruha Benjamin's (2016) words, the introduction of technology is crucial in that it allows capital to "innovate inequity." Indeed, work is increasingly shaped by technologies such as platforms and algorithmic systems, which standardize and reorganize the labor process, incorporate managerial tasks, and devise new forms of value appropriation. Technologies are used to decompose and outsource jobs, thus intensifying precarity. New surveillance techniques are used to control and discipline workers, and new forms of despotism in the digital workplace are on the rise. Digital technology, in sum, augments the all-too-human forms of corporate and managerial power that shape workers' lives.

Yet workers just do not passively obey the rules of the digital economy. If anything, they are the engine that drives capital's need to introduce new technology and other managerial techniques to subdue an unruly workforce (Panzieri 1967; Tronti 2019). Looking at workers' agency, resistance tactics, technological subversion, and attempts at building counterpower is key if we are to understand the development of digital capitalism. And it would be hard to ignore the many emerging ways workers oppose capital's power. In the last decades, the ubiquitous penetration of digital technologies in warehouses, workshops, offices, and app-based workplaces has increasingly been met with novel workarounds and solidarity-building techniques. Both overt organizing and covert resistance unite workers from traditional sectors like hospitality to booming industries such as logistics, online crowdwork, or the urban gig economy. Workers have adopted digital tools, repurposing them toward the communication needs of their organizing drives (Grayer & Brophy, 2019). The repertoires of tactics inherited from the industrial era have also been revived, adapted, and extended, fueling new struggles within and against digital capitalism and its organizational logics (Cohen & de Peuter, 2020; Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Qiu, 2016). Look no further than drivers in the ride-hailing industry across the streets of the world, domestic workers and freelancers in North America and Asia, food-delivery couriers in Europe and Canada, warehouse workers in urban peripheries across the globe, software engineers from China to California, and game designers and other tech workers in cities across North America.

We are no longer witnessing an emerging or novel phenomenon. On the contrary, we have moved from a bubbling phase of new struggles to a sedimentation of the forms of solidarity and recomposition that have shaped the digital economy in the last two decades (Cant & Woodcock, 2019; Posada, 2019). Yet many questions remain on the table. What are the new challenges and potentials for labor organizing brought about by the new wave of autonomous decision-making technologies? Which new forms of class composition boost solidarity and organizing in the digitally mediated work environment? What roles do technologies, cultures, geographies, and infrastructures play in worker organizations?

This Special Section is an attempt at discussing some of these themes. It is also the result of a conference that never was. The second edition of the Log Out! Conference was to take place at the University of Toronto in early 2020, but the COVID-19 pandemic had something different in mind. After canceling the conference, we refocused our attention on how workers the world over were redefined as both essential and disposable at the same time. Yet the conference had attracted a group of top-notch original thinkers whose work we still wanted to collect under a common framework. The first Log Out! Conference resulted in a collection of short essays published by the magazine *Notes from Below*, including a history of worker

mobilizations in hi-tech economies, the conditions of possibility for worker organizing, and the role of worker-led inquiries into the hidden abodes of digital capital (see Delfanti & Sharma, 2019). This time around, we aimed at bringing together critical research on how workers from different sectors of digital capitalism worldwide confront, negotiate, and disrupt the technologically mediated conditions of work that structure and mediate their lives. We wanted to theorize worker organizing, refusal, and subversion, as well as the material and political economic components of resistance to digital capitalism. Once again, we wanted to value knowledge produced with and for workers—a critical standpoint to understanding situated labor politics.

The result is a set of articles that look at worker struggles from several different viewpoints, deploying different theories and methods to look at a multiplicity of case studies. These cases were rooted in specific local economies and cultures spanning from Brazil and the United Kingdom to India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and the United States. We believe that such diversity enriches this Special Section: For instance, the articles discuss a manifold repertoire of tactics, each linked to local histories, economic sectors, and class identities. This not only reflects the vast diversity of the global amorphous entity that we call digital capitalism but allowed us to identify three main threads woven into the articles that compose this Special Section. We start with the various situated sources of identity formation that go beyond workers' shared professional experience. These forms of identity influence the aforementioned repertoire, giving workers a set of tools to be used in their struggles. We then move to the ambivalences and contradictions that imbue emerging forms of solidarity and resistance. Workers must confront the uneven and conflicting nature of digital capitalism as they organize, lest they allow it to tear their struggle apart. Third, workers produce counternarratives that represent important discursive weapons to deploy in their struggles, ones that resonate with other constituencies in the digital economy and push them to the frontlines of the fight.

Intersectional Identities, Multiple Sources of Solidarity

Digital workers experience fractured workplaces that extend into their daily lives both in time and space. This focus beyond the workplace has become a common thread of research on digital capitalism. Yet some of the articles we collect in this Special Section catch nuance of how worker identities, not just their labor, are shaped by factors that exceed the workplace. In turn, these multiple and diverse identities influence workers' ability to struggle, their political styles, their use of tactical media, and the alliances they form.

Solidarity must be studied in context, as preexisting cultures of mutual aid and other historical trajectories play a crucial role in shaping today's forms of organizing. Take Jakarta's gig workers. In her article about the local *ojol*, or grassroot communities of Indonesian mobility platform drivers, Rida Qadri describes how they organize around basecamps that penetrate the urban space. In the process, they develop a complex set of aesthetics and practices, including identity-defining features like group logos, names, and iconographies. Here, solidarity emerges as a continuation of the social relationships that define working class urban life in Jakarta.

The role of diasporic and racialized communities in shaping the way workers deploy communication strategies "from below" is at the center of Rafael Grohmann, Mateus Mendonça, and Jamie Woodcock's research. The ethnic composition of Brazilian food delivery riders in the United Kingdom and Brazil influences

the use of digital platforms to build worker collectives, and at the same time contributes to the formation of workers' collective identity. For instance, Brazilian migrant riders in the United Kingdom rely on their peers to access jobs and deal with racism. Some even turn into social media influencers. In Brazil itself, collective identity is linked to the Black and peripheral communities that provide most workers to the local app economy.

Professional and managerial factors are at play too. Sreyan Chatterjee moves beyond geographical and cultural determinants of identity in his article about worker response to the automation of legal services in India. Identity formation in this field, he argues, is linked to managerial choices to isolate specific subsets of the workforce, for instance, through surveillance and performance reviews. Most white-collar workers in his study identify as immune to negative changes in their work conditions, and thus the way they experience managerial power leads to individualized and covert forms of resistance rather than open organizing.

Turning to crowdwork, Cheryll Soriano extends the analytic scope to include the entrepreneurs who design and build alternative labor platforms to ameliorate the challenges faced by Filipino workers. The study focuses on the organizational logics of two alternative platforms and investigates "the means of association" created and facilitated by the platform owners (Irani & Silberman, 2013, p. 616). Soriano's study proves the continued significance of social identity (e.g., gender), geographical affinity, and locality as means and source of association.

Finally, Michael Siciliano delves into another context, that of U.S. content producers working with platforms such as YouTube. Social media workers must surrender their control over the content and form of what they produce. Their aesthetic judgment tends to be subordinate to both global capital's platforms and White male hegemony within the intermediary organizations they work for. Drawing on Tronti (2019), Siciliano argues that organizing against this alienation may provide a potential path to collective resistance across fractions of the increasingly platformized "creative" classes.

Facing Ambivalences and Contradictions

Apart from addressing a wide range of local, sectorial, trans-local, and intersectional sources of solidarity, the authors of this Special Section also interrogate the ambivalence and contradiction permeated in workers' struggles and formation of collectives. A textured analysis of the complexity and predicament of labor organizing does not deny workers' spirit or action of resistance but accounts for the full spectrum of their embodied and lived experiences within the contradictions generated by their encounter with digital capitalism.

The mobility-platform drivers in Qadri's article establish and practice diverse forms of collective care. Yet in her appeal to focus on the "structural conditions" of possibility and constraint for the articulation of work's collective agency, Qadri contests the aspiration toward a universal playbook of collective actions or unionization. She shows how the "resilience" and "embeddedness" of local institutions and workers' social world shape their collective perceptions and practices. At the same time, she prompts scholars to confront and recognize the richness, complexity, and contradictions that refuse to be buried in the abstraction of labor activism and rights.

Philippine alternative and indigenous social platforms embrace a growth imperative and the government's promotion of platform labor as the extension of the service industry. This puts workers and their "entrepreneurial solidarities" in an ambivalent position vis-à-vis the pathway toward institutionalizing labor protection and rights. Soriano acknowledges the social change ushered in by "alternative" platforms despite their political and ethical ambivalence. She also points out the structural constraints that preface the sustainability of alternative platforms because of the Philippines' postcolonial conditions and longstanding position as an exporter of service labor in the global capitalist system.

Ticona and Tsapatsaris apply a feminist theorization of counterpublics to conceptualize resistance around domestic work platforms. The "platform counterpublics" they analyze are coproduced by workers and clients through the circulation of negative customer reviews about the major U.S. service, Care.com. To overcome the platform's power to curate and control the content published on its own website, this alliance must move beyond the platform and on to online spaces that evade platform power. The authors call for an extended lens that looks beyond a platform-centric framework to examine the multiple and contradictory sites where platform counterpublics emerge and communicate.

Platformized content creation is also ripe with contradictions. According to Siciliano, creators that are subject to daily management and normative training from their employers become attuned to the platform's metrics—affectively, aesthetically, and technically. The routinization of their work pace and the disparities between a diverse workforce and a White-male-dominated management, however, propel content workers to become "intellectually" critical of the impact of metrics that reinforce a racialized and gendered domination system. Siciliano's notion of "alienated judgment" captures the inherent ambivalence experienced by content creators and posits the ways resistance and solidarity may coalesce under this framework.

Grohmann and colleagues use an infrastructural perspective to illuminate the contradictions inherent in platformized delivery work. Complementing Marxist perspectives on the overlap between means of communication and means of production, they point out that from a worker's standpoint, communication should be perceived as part of an ambient surrounding. The infrastructural character of communication distinguishes the labor struggles of platform workers from traditional industrial mobilizations as communication technologies are firmly embedded in and intensify platform labor. Yet the very same material, social, and technological conditions are repurposed by workers for solidarity building and mobilization.

Counternarratives and Discourses

Narrative and discourse are fundamental sites of contestations to destabilize the normative economic regimes and governance logics of platform capitalism (Pasquale, 2016). By constructing and circulating counternarratives, workers amplify their voice and bring the state of work within digital capitalism into the public discourse. The mediated exposure of precarity and inequity can be used to damage a firm's reputation or projected image in the eyes of stakeholders, potential investors, and clients.

The multiple ways that excluded voices construct resistant discourses online are at the center of Ticona and Tsapatsaris' study. In order to criticize and subvert positive corporate images, workers and customers turn to what the authors call "networked gossip." Marginalized groups use gossip to contest oppressive systems. In

the case of Care.com, gossip is used to disseminate subversive narratives about the platform. It is also a contravention to the platform's enforced separation of workers from their clients. Once circulated across the Internet, gossip can be picked up by unrelated people, creating new relationships and alliances.

The professional legal workers studied by Sreyan Chatterjee also encounter powerful corporate narratives on the job, for instance, about the high value of certain projects that workers dislike or positive discourses of efficiency directed to clients. But such narratives are not settled. Counternarratives emerge in response as workers express their lack of professional satisfaction. For instance, the rating system used by the company to monitor them and measure their labor allows workers to dispute a dissatisfactory result, albeit one that exposes them to managerial discipline. Overall, Chatterjee describes a breakdown of sensemaking processes around the nature of work as workers turn a "what do we need to sell?" into a "what do we do here?" narrative.

More structured tactics are adopted by the platform-based couriers studied by Grohmann and colleagues. As they collectively produce forms of "communication from below" in opposition to the employer's top-down logics, workers share tacit knowledge about the functioning of the platform, register and reflect on struggles, livestream actions, and intervene in debates in the public sphere. Moving seamlessly from social media to messaging apps and onto the streets, workers turn communication into a focal point of organization. The circulation of narratives from below thus participates in and reinforces the circulation of struggles.

Conclusions

When we conceptualize new incarnations of capitalism, we often invoke technological changes as heuristic devices to comprehend and periodize epochal shifts at the frontier of accumulation and appropriation. Yet the clash between labor and capital must not be overlooked. To which degree are worker struggles and resistance also distinct in digital capitalism? The tactics of resistance and organizational forms we explored suggest that workers, and not just technology, are at the forefront of efforts to destabilize and transform today's most advanced economic regimes.

Obviously, this Special Section can only scratch the surface of a phenomenon that manifests locally but has come to materialize into a set of global emerging and interconnected struggles within and against digital capitalism. The forms of worker resistance described in the articles animate multiple sources of solidarity that are geographically and culturally situated but have the potential to cross lines such as local economic and legal frameworks; postcolonial regimes and global divisions of labor; and differences based on class, gender, and race-based identities. What is sure is that workers face both predictable and unfamiliar challenges as their lives are shaped by digital capitalism. They are responding by deploying both traditional and novel tactics of resistance, from unionization drives to new forms of sabotage and subversion informed by the technological affordances of digital media.

The dynamics of worker resistance will continue to evolve as workers develop their potential to counter the technological and organizational apparatus of digital capitalism but also face challenges, including those caused by power inequities within the activist projects themselves. Economic inequality and knowledge

gaps produce structural differences in worker's everyday use of digital technology (Schradie, 2021). These ramifications may prove crucial for worker struggles and the labor movement as a whole. The wealth of tactics deployed by workers complicates the picture too, pointing to a large array of reactions they put in place to confront digital capitalism. For instance, a recent thread of research is analyzing how workers subvert and resist new kinds of corporate power by developing practices of "algorithmic solidarity" based on gaming and reappropriating the software systems that dominate labor in the digital economy (Yu, Treré, & Bonini, 2022; see also Chen, 2018). Sometimes, as digital capital encourages us to do, we allow ourselves to forget that beneath the seams technology is far from seamless; it can break down, never fully capturing the creativity of living labor. Exploiting the glitches and fissures between technology and the embodied and situated messiness of human beings can also lead to moments of liberation (Russell, 2020).

Ultimately, a crucial question remains: To what extent can we log out from digital capitalism's seemingly ubiquitous grip? And what does it take to make logging out possible for all?

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