Composing Subversive Subjects: The Emergence and Endurance of Collective Action in Non-Unionised Work

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Morgan R Powell

School of Social Sciences

Department of Sociology

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Abstract

Taking the overall decline of industrial action and trade unionism in Britain as its starting point, this thesis seeks to understand how workers come to take collective action against the wishes of their employer in private sector workplaces with no established trade union presence. In order to do so, it undertakes a single in-depth case study of an instance which is anomalous to these circumstances: collective action in the food delivery platform sector, specifically through the 2021-22 Stuart Delivery dispute.

Such a potentially extensive object of study necessarily implies consideration of multiple facets – relating to subjectification, collective decision-making, political-economic context, labour processes, and worker organising, for example. This demands the development of a wide-ranging theoretical framework, capable of explanation whilst maintaining space for variation and contingency. This thesis reviews literature from Labour Process Theory, Marxist Industrial Relations, organising literature, and Social Movement Studies, drawing on their most valuable features but finding that each are limited in their analysis of how ideas interact with material contexts in the emergence of collective action. A dialectical materialist model is proposed, based on the use of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Class Composition Analysis (CCA) in tandem. This framework is developed through empirical research on the Stuart Delivery dispute, drawing on Michael Burawoy's Extended Case Method in its use of immersive participant observation.

Per CHAT's approach, the analysis of empirical data takes the form of a downward analytic movement: beginning with a vague conception of the whole (the absence of workers' visible collective action); studying the object in increasingly minute detail; and then ascending back to the whole having clarified its nature. Chapter Four analyses the Stuart Delivery dispute at its highest level, understanding it in relation to global political-economic trends and historical contexts relating to workers' struggle. Chapter Five focuses on strategising in order to understand the nature of the dispute, specifically by seeking to analyse the internal dynamics of the workers' campaign. This helps understand how the campaign was able to endure for six months in a sector without a far-reaching, established union presence. Chapter Six then moves to the level of the specific workplace, identifying features in Stuart couriers' working lives which were conductive to collective action, before Chapter Seven details precisely how collective action emerged in this workforce, initially without any union support. The thesis concludes with an overview of the innovative conceptual approach developed herein.

Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Copyright Statement

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First and most significant thanks are owed to the workers and organisers who participated in this research. Thank you for tolerating my doubtless strange, inquisitive presence in your workplaces, meetings, protests, sometimes even your own cars. I hope that I can continue to combine my research with political practice in ways that support your struggles.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Ethan Bradley, Chair of the IWGB Couriers' Branch in 2020-2021, whose absence was felt throughout the dispute described herein.

Introduction

"One cannot expect to recover lost faith by decree, especially when the broader reasons for that loss cannot just be wished away. Thinking political action today must take tendency, composition and complexity as inescapable starting points. What this more disenchanted perspective might lose in assurance, it certainly gains in sobriety and awareness of challenges and risks; and to be materialist, as Althusser once put it, is above all to avoid telling oneself any stories."

- *Rodrigo Nunes (2021:118)*

0.1 Workers' grievance and resistance in 21st century Britain

The ideas motivating this thesis emerged in a call centre in the North East of England in 2018. As described in the account published under the pseudonym Bob Elliot (2018) – for fear of reprisals from employers – this was not a happy workplace. Low pay, strict surveillance, and intense time pressure characterised workers' day-to-day experience, and yet these problems were not met with open, collective resistance: "There was no union presence and most people I spoke to either did not know what unions were or only had vague ideas about them. Management did not have to bother discouraging people from joining unions – they could get by pretending that they didn't exist".

This same image – of grievance and a corresponding absence of ostensible resistance – has characterised the experience of swathes of Britain's workforce in the first decades of the 21st century. Declining trade union membership has coincided with stagnant levels of job satisfaction, rising stress, and periods of severe real-terms wage decreases, with unions notably absent in the private sector and amongst younger workers in particular (Coatman, 2020; CIPD, 2023; Partington, 2023). Perhaps more significantly – given that trade union membership is not the sole measure of workers' willingness to respond to grievances (Atzeni, 2020) – 2017 saw the lowest recorded numbers of workers involved in strike action, with just 79 work stoppages identified by the Office for National Statistics (2018).

Crucially, this thesis does not take strike action – nor other means by which workers collectively defy their employers – as a problem to be resolved. Rather it recognises the withdrawal of labour as amongst the most powerful means available for workers to resist

capital's intensification and degradation of their lives within and beyond the workplace, driven by its innate need to produce profit. That same need is simultaneously the source of workers' enormous power in relation to their employers (Heller, 2018:61-2). The *indeterminacy* inherent in the extraction of labour-power – workers' ability, by virtue of being living, thinking subjects, to slow down or stop working entirely – opens the possibility of severely limiting the production of profit (Marx, 1976:320). Per Harry Braverman: "The transformation of working humanity into a 'labor force,' a 'factor of production,' an instrument of capital, is an incessant and unending process. The condition is repugnant to the victims, whether their pay is high or low, because it violates human conditions of work; and since the workers are not destroyed as human beings but are simply utilized in inhuman ways, their critical, intelligent, conceptual faculties, no matter how deadened or diminished, always remain in some degree a threat to capital" (1998:96).

The very ability of capital to reproduce itself – on both a local, immediate scale and as a system of global order – relies on preventing the realisation of that threat: on workers complying with instructions from employers. With this disruptive potential in mind, the absence of workers' collective action in the conditions described above appears especially baffling. Understanding it is the primary concern of this thesis.

0.2 Against the foreclosure of subversive possibility

In a particularly stark diagnosis, the late Mark Fisher related such "reflexive impotence" to *capitalist realism* – a pervasive foreclosure, in the popular imaginary, of any alternative to how things currently stand (2009:21). A range of analyses reach the same conclusion in defining neoliberal capitalism as a monolithic structuring force which permeates all aspects of early 21st century life (Davies and Gane, 2021:5; Brown, 2015:17). One empirical feature of this ideological paradigm is its fostering of *personal, individual fulfilment* in and through work, regardless of material conditions. This is conceived of in critical literature as a means of ensuring workers' compliance in the midst of debasement, channelling grievance into aspirational desires for escape and personal improvement which do nothing to challenge the underlying causes of grievance (Jaffe, 2021; Horgan, 2021:12; Lordon, 2014:53).

The value of such diagnoses is that they draw attention to the nature of capitalism not as a solely technical arrangement relating to production, but as a *mode* of production: in need of shaping *ideas* amongst its constitutive human elements; of producing subjects both able and

willing to carry out the tasks necessary for its reproduction, who will behave as expected within the employment relationship (Read, 2003:153). Yet, simultaneously, the downside of such accounts is their risk of affirming the very foreclosure they critique: of overlooking or denying the potential for antagonism in their emphasis on the hegemonic nature of ideology.

Applied carefully, Marxist thought can counteract said foreclosure while starting from recognition of the same circumstances. In the Marxist tradition, class – the classification of workers *as* workers – is a necessarily conflictual relationship. Profit maximisation and wage maximisation are diametrically opposed impetuses which necessitate an underlying tension in the relation between worker and employer. Regardless of whether open, declared resistance is taking place between them, every worker and employer is involved in class conflict by the very nature of their positions in capitalist order (Ollman, 2003:20). Within that everyday tension, the potential for open antagonism is ever-present: within the implicitly mandated need to sell one's labour is the difference with those who enforce that need; within the neoliberal drive to self-fulfilment through work is the potential kernel of recognition that other routes to self-fulfilment may be available; within the reliance of capital on labour is the potential for radically breaking that relationship (Therborn, 1980:62-3). In recognising such latent, immanent potential, the question then becomes: how can it be realised?

As with compliance, the emergence of subversion – the deliberate undermining of existing order, the *inverse* of compliance – relates to questions of subjectivity; specifically, to how people in the circumstances described above *decide* to challenge their employer, accessing and enacting ideas contra those instilled by capital against enormous pressure (Lordon, 2014:49). To make this all the more difficult in the context of the workplace, effectively exercising workers' disruptive potential requires mounting a challenge *in combination* with one's colleagues, because it is capital's reliance on the *combined* force of labour-power that is the very source of that potential (Marx, 1999:79). In workplaces with no established union presence – as in the call centre described at the outset – the pre-existing, infrastructural basis for such collective subversion is itself absent. Meetings, leaflets, and email lists which might provide workers with means of accessing ideas regarding the potential power of collectivity might not be present at all. Workers in the majority of Britain's private sector face such circumstances – where only a small minority of workplaces have collective bargaining agreements with unions (Waddington, 2019).

Understanding strikes as instances of "a refusal to obey those socially prescribed as authorities" (Gouldner, 1965:66) entails understanding the justification for that refusal; understanding collective action as an *idea* – a possibility that can be taken up by multiple individuals at once, contra the individualist, aspirational, self-serving subjectivity referred to above. As such, this thesis seeks to understand the production of a *subject* who undertakes this ideation and subsequent action – at both the level of the individual and the combined, collective subject, via the move between the former and the latter.

The emergence of such a subject is no simple nor sudden event. Grievance does not mechanistically lead to open resistance in the form of collective action – neither in the workplace nor beyond it (Nunes, 2021:280). A mediating process takes place between discontent and the decision of multiple workers to jointly address it. This process is the subject of this thesis, which – through combined empirical research and theorisation – finds that subversive subjects, willing to defy their employer, are composed of the very circumstances by which they are exploited, and in turn learn to compose themselves as explicitly antagonistic actors.

0.3 A case study of exception

In the call centre described above, an attempt at cohering such a subversive subject took the form of failed efforts to convince colleagues to unionise. The proliferation of "workplace organising" literature in the 2010s and '20s is evidence that others have shared both a desire to undertake similar efforts, and experiences of failure (McAlevey, 2016; Bradbury et al., 2016; Allinson, 2022; Hughes and Woodcock, 2023). In seeking to understand failure – and the wider absence of workers' collective action discussed above – this thesis looks to an instance of broad success, where collective subversive subjects emerged and took action against the wishes of their employer.

Food delivery platform work is rife with such cases in the very circumstances described above – indeed, arguably, in an intensified version of those circumstances. Emerging in the early 2000s and burgeoning following the 2008 financial crisis, food delivery platform work is characterised by imposed self-employed status, piece-rate pay, minimal job security, and digitised employer surveillance – to name just some of its features which align most obviously with the raw competitive ethos of neoliberal capitalism (Srnicek, 2017:87; Davies, 2017:xvi). The comparatively new nature of the industry means that there is no obvious pre-

existing history of successful unionisation to draw upon, while the racialised nature of its largely migrant workforce – in the context of Britain's "hostile environment" – makes collective action appear especially high-risk (Badger, 2021:64). At the same time, through fostering cultures of intra-workforce competition and entrepreneurialism, platform firms seek to produce self-directing, independent worker-subjects, driven by conceptions of meritocracy and aspiration (Gilbert and Williams, 2022:129-30).

Yet, in 2016, Deliveroo couriers in London launched a strike in response to the firms' shift from providing hourly wages to per-delivery payments, sparking a conflict that continues to shape and reshape the sector in Britain and beyond – with frequent strike action, non-strike forms of protest, efforts at unionisation, and a range of other subversive initiatives contrasting sharply with overall union decline and worker acquiescence in the wider private sector (Woodcock, 2021; Bessa et al., 2022; Umney et al., 2024). While the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) – a relatively new union, aimed explicitly at organising in the gaps left by established union retreat (Però, 2020) – was quick to involve itself in that conflict, its organising efforts coexisted alongside non-union initiatives undertaken by workers from 2016 onwards, with the often difficult interplay between unionisation efforts and such *wildcat* action coming to characterise struggle in the sector (Woodcock and Cant, 2022).

In 2021, couriers working for the platform firm *Stuart Delivery* launched what would become the longest-lasting instance of collective action in the sector to-date, responding to a 24% reduction in their base rate of per-delivery pay. This saw the combination of union-led action through the IWGB and wildcat action emerging amongst local Stuart workforces with no pre-existing union presence. The Stuart Delivery dispute is the case study selected in this thesis, in an effort to understand emergent collective action in a private sector workplace without an established union presence.

0.4 Research questions and thesis structure

Based on the above, this thesis seeks to understand how workers' collective action can emerge in circumstances of widespread union absence and ostensibly unfavourable context. Doing this requires attention to the micro-level details by which the decision to act emerges. As such, its guiding research questions are:

(1) How do workers come to take collective action against the wishes of their employer in private sector workplaces without an established union presence?

(2) How does the idea of taking collective action emerge amongst the workforce?

(3) How is collective action in non-unionised work sustained over time?

Chapter One reviews literatures relevant to this matter, beginning with workplace-focused literature which examines the emergence of collective action in ostensibly hostile conditions. Whilst this literature's attention to contextual circumstances is valuable – such as in the significance that it attributes to workers' collaboration in the labour process as a basis for collective action – it is found to lack sufficient attention to questions of *ideation*, whereby workers come to perceive collective action as a potential means of addressing problems. Literature from Social Movement Studies (SMS) is considered as a potential means of correcting this, given its emphasis on the significance of *ideas* in collective action. While SMS literature poses a number of constructive challenges – in particular, by insisting that researchers prise apart the ostensible unity of a collective subject to understand its constitutive elements – it is found to tend towards idealism, overlooking the significance of material context. From the most useful features of each of these literatures, the need is identified for an explanatory approach which analyses the interaction of material and ideational processes in the emergence of collective action.

Chapter Two sets out to construct such an approach, beginning where the previous chapter ended by outlining an intellectual history of *Cultural-Historical Activity Theory* (CHAT) – a Marxist framework for understanding subject-formation developed from the work of Lev Vygotsky. CHAT is adopted due to its attention to micro-dynamic processes of decision-making in combination with a thorough conception of how ideation and material context interact. Brecht De Smet's development of CHAT – in dialogue with Antonio Gramsci's thought – is identified as particularly valuable, given that De Smet applied the theory to the study of workers' collective action. Four features of De Smet's CHAT are outlined to demonstrate the value of the approach: multivocality and collaboration; immanence; internal leadership; and external leadership. Methodological challenges in applying this conceptual framework are considered, and threefold Class Composition Analysis (CCA) is identified as a means of improving analysis using CHAT, but with some clarifications regarding CCA's conceptual vocabulary. The resulting framework is developed throughout the remainder of the thesis.

Chapter Three presents the approach to research deployed in the proceeding empirical chapters. Building on the theoretical framework developed in Chapter One and Two, the thesis' analytics strategy is described as a "downward analytic movement" – beginning with a vague conception of the whole – specifically, workers' collective action; studying the object in increasingly minute detail; and then ascending back to the whole having clarified its nature (De Smet: 2015:46-7). Michael Burawoy's *Extended Case Method* is drawn on as a means of applying this analytic approach to real-world research, particularly through participant observation in tandem with theorisation (2009:xii). The chapter details precisely how participant observation, recorded and unrecorded interviews, a focus group, and documentary analysis were used to analyse the emergence of collective action amongst food delivery platform couriers.

Chapter Four commences the downward analytic movement with an examination of the origins of the Stuart Delivery dispute, utilising CHAT's concept of *prehistory*. This begins with an analysis of the platform economy using academic literature in conjunction with company documents published by Stuart and related firms. It understands Stuart's 2021 pay restructure as part of an ongoing pursuit of profitability in challenging circumstances, leading to frequent alternations in the technical composition of the workforce. The chapter then considers the prehistory of food delivery platform workers' struggle over pay and conditions in Britain, outlining the significance of the interplay between unionisation efforts and workers' wildcat action in an account which lays the basis for the proceeding chapters.

Chapter Five moves to more detailed study of the Stuart dispute as an instance of collective action in a sector with no established trade union presence. Using CHAT, the campaign against Stuart is understood as constituted by five nested, constitutive *projects* – differentiated by their distinct origins, secondary objectives, and available artefacts. Attempts to merge these projects into a single campaign are analysed through an account of s*trategising* in the dispute, and the ultimate failure to do this is understood as key to the campaign's failure to reverse Stuart's pay restructure. Three features of the Stuart campaign – the boycott tactic, spreading the campaign, and the use of a strike fund – are analysed as illustrative examples of the drift and ultimate fragmentation of the projects which constituted it. Finally, the strategic practices of Stuart Delivery itself are considered. This offers an innovative analytic approach to the study of strategising in industrial conflict, in this case

facilitating thorough understanding of how collective action was sustained in such a long period in difficult circumstances.

Moving further downward in analytic terms, Chapter Six begins to analyse the micro-dynamics of workers' wildcat action, drawing on insights from fieldwork in McDonald's carparks where couriers waited for orders. The chapter details three processes – prior to explicit, open collective action – which couriers both experienced and practiced in their working lives, and which laid the groundwork for open strike action. These are: the formation and development of workers' communities, in collaboration and in tension with one another; the formation and generalisation of grievances, specifically through the clash between material reality and the ideology which Stuart sought to foster within its workforce; and practices of workplace misbehaviour and compliance which acted as a prehistory of explicit strike action. The combined result of these was an internally complex collectivity within the workforce, but one with the coherence and confidence to defy their employer.

Chapter Seven then provides a detailed, empirical account of precisely how collective action can emerge in workplaces with no established union presence, through the case study of the Stuart workforce. In accordance with the theoretical framework developed in Chapter Two. emergence is understood as a process of workers drawing selectively on features of their technical and social compositions, and of mutual pedagogy within the workforce gradually generalising subversive ideas, the roots of which were described in Chapter Six. In this chapter, the interaction of ideation and material contexts comes to the fore.

Finally, the thesis concludes with a return from micro-level details to the wider, conceptual question of collective action in non-unionised work, relating insights from empirical chapters to the theoretical framework developed earlier on. Specifically, the thesis' key theoretical contribution is a conception of collective action as immanent within labour processes, but as requiring a pedagogic process – appropriate to workers' specific circumstances – to actualise. An account is provided of the aftermath of the Stuart dispute in the platform economy, and consideration is given to how further investigation, utilising the insights developed in this thesis, might be undertaken.

Chapter One: Literature Review

"History does nothing, it 'possesses no immense wealth', it 'wages no battles'. It is man, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; 'history' is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means for its own particular aims; history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims."

- *Marx and Engels (1956:125)*

1.1 Introduction

A vast literature exists regarding the study of antagonism within the capitalist employment relationship. This chapter reviews literatures with particular applicability to the emergence of collective action amongst non-unionised workers in Britain's contemporary private sector, specifically exploring the compatibility and tension between two traditions: workplace-focused scholarship and Social Movement Studies. It aims to identify and synthesise the best features of these, and to supersede their limitations through a coherent analytic approach outlined in Chapter Two.

The first section considers Labour Process Theory, Marxist Industrial Relations and organising literature. It specifically reviews John Kelly's mobilisation theory (1998), Maurizio Atzeni's return to the labour process (2010), and Jane McAlevey's organising model (2016), given their attention to foundational micro-dynamics in instances of collective action. While each approach recognises the significance of micro-dynamic processes in emergence, it is argued that each also contains room for improvement on precisely this point – specifically, through the analysis of latent processes of *ideation*, whereby workers come to perceive collective action as a potential means of resolving problems.

Social movement studies (SMS) literature is considered as a potential corrective to the above, due to its greater attention to the significance of ideas in collective action. In particular, Alberto Melucci's (1996) collective identity theory poses three constructive challenges to the workplace-focused tradition, but entails significant methodological difficulties in its applicability to studying workplace conflict. In seeking to address such difficulties, SMS *framing* and *dialogic analysis* are reviewed, but are found to tend towards idealism, reducing the significance of material context. As an alternative emerging out of John Krinsky's (2008) work within SMS, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory is found to provide a promising source

of theoretical-analytic innovation in understanding how workers come to take collective action, recognising the significance of ideas *in interaction* with their context.

1.2 Literatures on conflict at work

1.2.1 Marxist Industrial Relations and Labour Process Theory

Two literatures place particular emphasis on antagonism within the capitalist employment relationship: Marxist Industrial Relations and Labour Process Theory. Both of these emerge as critiques of established literatures, and at first glance both promise fertile theoretical bases for studying the emergence of workers' collective recalcitrance.

The normative foundations of mainstream, non-Marxist Industrial Relations theory (IR) limit its value when studying the micro-dynamics of emergent antagonism (Heery et al., 2008:14-15). Overall, it has tended to assume harmonious underlying interests between workers and capital, with a subsequent empirical focus on the *management* of workplace conflict and a related tendency to focus on such macro- and meso-level subjects as trade union structures, collective bargaining procedures and policy (Heery et al., 2008:2-8; Ackers and Wilkinson, 2008:54; Hyman, 1975:196; Cant, 2020:29). This can be understood as an unsurprising result of the field's deep historical roots in Fabian liberalism and reformism (Ferge, 2008:39-40).

However, the 1970s saw the consolidation of explicitly Marxist IR, with an emphasis on antagonistic class relations which necessitated closer attention to conflict (Ferge, 2008:40). Richard Hyman emerged as a key figure in this tradition through his prolific work analysing multiple forms of workers' collective action as expressions of class conflict, including misbehaviour (1975:186-8), strikes (1989), and trade unionism (2001), providing the basis for a series of theoretical and empirical developments which continue to inform the study of antagonism at work (Gall, 2012:135; Kelly, 1998:20; Atzeni, 2010:3; Cant, 2020:31).

Hyman's work is relevant to this thesis in several ways. His insistence on divergent class interest between employers and workers justifies the study of conflict (Kelly, 1998:20); his move away from mainstream IR's focus on macro- and meso-level industrial actors demands attention to the activity of workers themselves (Hyman, 1975:12); and, similarly, his critical attitude towards institutions, including unions – as imbued with the potential to both facilitate and limit workers' collective action (1975:194-5) – entails consideration of the micro-dynamics of workers' activity, prior to, concealed within, or existing alongside more visible

forms of action and organisation, such as unions (Yates, 2015:240; Flesher Fominaya, 2015:147).

However, noting the above qualities draws attention to a significant empirical omission in Hyman's work: a lack of detailed attention to precisely *how* workers come to take action. Gregor Gall notes this, going as far as to argue that Hyman's silence on the particularities of workers' activity undermines the Marxist nature of his early work, due to its lack of practical applicability (2012:144-5). John Kelly implies a similar though less severe critique, identifying Hyman's work as a crucial influence on 1980s-90s labour process ethnographies – discussed below – whose "interest in management strategy and practices […] far outstripped any interest in worker organization and mobilization" (1998:20).

Concurrent with the consolidation of Marxist IR, 1974 saw the publication of Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* – the founding text of Labour Process Theory (LPT). From his perspective as a socialist militant outside of professional scholarship, Braverman set out to reinvigorate Marxist analysis of the mode of production in the twentieth century (1998:7). Like this thesis, Braverman begins with Marx's recognition that the transformation of labour-power into labour is *indeterminate* – that is, that workers have the potential to resist or to comply with the extraction of surplus value from their labour, through their innate capacity as living labour (Braverman, 1998:35; Marx, 1976:285; Thompson and Smith, 2017:118). For Braverman, this necessitates attention to specific methods deployed by management to control labour and ensure smooth extraction of surplus value – the *labour process* (Wardell, 1999:4).

It is beyond the scope of this review to outline Braverman's analysis of managerial control in full – including his central deskilling thesis – but assessing the utility of LPT requires considering its overarching theoretical contribution. In his focus on control, Braverman sought to break with industrial sociologists' existing concern with individual, subjective experiences of work to focus exclusively on the "objective" conditions of production, to the extent that he deliberately omits any consideration of the "consciousness, organization, or activities" of workers themselves (Braverman, 1998:96-97, 18-19). This leads to the most relevant critique of Braverman for the purpose of this thesis: that Braverman's analysis of control "exclusively from the side of the object" leaves a gaping omission regarding *how workers respond to the labour process* (Burawoy, 1978:249; Cant, 2020:122; Brophy, 2010:474).

The result is an only partial account of capitalist production, downplaying the significance of workers' struggle against management – the concern which drives this thesis. Where resistance appears in Braverman's account of the labour process, it is as a knee-jerk, mechanistic reaction to management-induced conditions, seemingly without any process of decision-making on the part of workers, with no obvious ideational element: "a subterranean stream that makes its way to the surface when employment conditions permit or when the capitalist drive for a greater intensity of labor oversteps the bounds of physical and mental capacity" (1998:104). For his harshest critics, this omission nullifies the utility of Braverman's LPT due to its stubborn refusal to recognise the dialectical relationship between class conflict and production (Gartman, 1999:93; Kelly, 1985:32).

In response to this and a wealth of other critiques (for an overview see Wardell, 1999:5-6), post-Braverman LPT moved gradually ever-further away from its original theoretical basis, maintaining a primary interest in managerial control but seeking to incorporate various means of conceptualising worker resistance and compliance (Wardell, 1999:7-11; Kelly, 1985:50). The result was a crisis in the tradition by the 1990s, following adjustment to the extent that LPT came to rest upon multiple, divergent theoretical foundations (Thompson, 1990:95). Key amongst these was a recognition that managerial control took a range of forms, rather than the hegemonic Taylorism on which Braverman insisted (1998:60-61). Nevertheless, control remains the focus of scholarship in the LPT tradition to this day, with secondary interest in how workers' agency interacts with it (Cant, 2020:43). This does not invalidate the tradition – particularly its valuable insistence on close attention to the strategies deployed by management, which may help us understand the endurance, success or failure of workers' collective action – but demands that we supersede it.

That both early Marxist IR and LPT pay little attention to the emergence of workers' collective action might be explained by the period in which they emerged. Compared to the present day, both Braverman and Hyman saw significantly higher levels of worker confidence in the US and Britain respectively, expressed through industrial action and unionisation (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024; Machin, 2000:631). Subsequently we may recognise that there may have been less urgent need to consider precisely how such activity emerged in the first place, prior to its most visible forms. For literature that pays closer attention to this question – and is therefore of greater value to this research – we must look to more recent contexts.

1.2.2 John Kelly's Mobilisation Theory

Gall and Holgate (2018:562) place Kelly's *Rethinking Industrial Relations* (1998) genealogically alongside Hyman's work within the Marxist IR tradition, but its contents are distinguished by detailed attention to "how individuals are transformed into collective actors willing and able to create and sustain collective organization" at work (Kelly, 1998:38). With this focus, Kelly is responding to a threefold contextual challenge: the defeats of militant unionism in 1980s Britain; the ascension of centrist politics within the labour movement of the 1990s; and the increasing displacement of academic IR by Human Resources Management, which takes the perspective of employers as its starting point and social partnership as its end goal (1998:15). By providing a detailed explanatory account and model of collective action at work, Kelly sought to assert and expand space for the Marxist IR tradition in increasingly hostile circumstances.

Surveying existing IR for the analytic means to craft such a model, and finding it lacking, Kelly turns instead to social movement theory (1998:4-19). He applies insights from the SMS theorists Charles Tilly (1978), Doug McAdam (1988), and William A. Gamson (1992) to analysis of workers' collective action, aiming to create a framework that is generalisable, applicable, and testable at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of political-economic conflict (1998:24, 38).

Five causal components of collective action emerge from Kelly's adoption of social movement theory, each of which are necessary for action to take place: *interest; mobilisation; organisation; opportunity;* and *different forms of collective action.*

The first, *interest*, centres on the development of a sense of *injustice* amongst workers and its generalisation. "Injustice" in this sense is distinct from broader "dissatisfaction", with the former arising when the legitimacy of employer control is brought into question – through the violation of formal laws, agreed limits of consent, or popular beliefs, such as shared "ideas of fairness" (1998:27). Injustice necessarily implies the possibility of achieving "justice" through some form of action (1998:29), while dissatisfaction, by contrast, implies a grievance which may be perceived of as inevitable or as impinging only on personal preference without violating the aforementioned conventions (1998:27).

For perceptions of injustice to be generalised as collective interest, three "critical processes" must take place: the attribution of blame to the employer, rather than to abstract structures;

the activation of workers' pre-existing social identities which are conducive to action, such as identities based on affinity with colleagues or on union affiliation; and the presence of leaders who frame matters in such a way that both aforementioned processes are successful (1998:29-31). Without developing and generalising a sense of injustice – "the sine qua non of collective action" – the following stages are redundant (1998:27).

The second stage in Kelly's explanatory account is *mobilisation*, defined by Tilly as "the process by which a group acquires collective control of the resources needed for action" (1978:7). The key resource that Kelly considers is workers themselves, drawing on Bert Klandermans (1984) to argue that workers will decide whether to act on their sense of injustice based on careful cost-benefit analysis, considering such instrumental questions as the potential social or financial costs of action. Breaking with Klandermans however, Kelly argues that such analysis is necessarily collective, taking place through discussion during the "micro-mobilization context" of early-stage workplace organising (McAdam, 1988:134-5). Again, leaders are crucial in shaping the direction of such discussion through linguistic framing, which may provide the opportunity to go beyond purely instrumental analysis to broader value-based, political consideration of cost-benefit, though this is not necessary for action to result (1998:51-4).

The final three components are only briefly explored by Kelly, as he feels that they have received greater attention in IR scholarship than the above factors. *Organisation* concerns the need for a dense social network amongst colleagues, encouraging shared responsibility and preferably – though not necessarily – formalised through union membership. *Opportunity* emerges from the balance of power between workers and employers, both within the particular workplace and more broadly at the structural political-economic level. Finally, Kelly argues that *different forms of collective action* may result from this process, depending on the balance of power and intervention of leaders, going beyond the traditional focus of IR on strikes (1998:36-8). Each of the above stages contains the potential for failure, raising the possibility of inaction even in unjust circumstances.

In an effort to relate his fivefold model to macro-level political economy, Kelly draws on Nikolai Kondratieff's (1979) *long wave theory* to identify the "powerful long-term forces at work shaping the opportunities and forms of collective activity" (1998:83). Long wave theory proposes a cyclical analysis of upswings and downswings in profit, output, and growth following approximate twenty-five-year patterns. Ruptures which bring an end to upswings

are, Kelly argues, characterised by major industrial tension, which Kelly's mobilisation theory explains, positing that a sudden decline in profit leads employers to take measures to restore profitability which give rise to worker perceptions of injustice. In such circumstances, workers find themselves in a generally advantageous position, with significant resources to draw on in struggle following an upswing period. Employers respond to workers' mass-mobilisation through particularly vicious means which serve to assert their power for the duration of the subsequent downswing period, including through ideological reinforcement of employer authority via the state and media. Ruptures at the end of downswings, however, are far more complex and indeterminate in nature. The intense restructuring of work may produce greater injustices, but the lack of workers' resources make action far more costly. The gradual return to profitability may entail higher expectations amongst workers, but may also provide employers with the confidence to ignore workers' demands (ivid:86-103). For Kelly, the test of this framework is its applicability to forthcoming ruptures and downswings (ivid:107).

Kelly's model has proved popular and enduring, having been adapted in training provided by multiple unions (Kelly, 2018:703), and applied and developed in multiple studies of workers' organising (such as Percival and Lee, 2020; Weststar and Legault, 2019; Vassiley, 2018). For the purposes of this project, three significant insights emerge from Kelly's work: that workers' collective action does not emerge mechanistically from context-induced grievances, as it does for Braverman; that formative processes are necessary for action to occur – though they are ultimately indeterminate, containing ample space for inaction to result instead; and that *the development of ideas* acts as a crucial mediator between grievance and action, through workers' interpretation of their context, motivation, attribution of blame, intention, and decision-making.

However, despite the significance of ideation in Kelly's model, his engagement with questions of perception, dialogue, and decision-making are somewhat superficial. This is exemplified in Kelly's conception of "injustice", which multiple authors have argued is one-dimensional, homogenising what may be, in reality, a complex set of perceptions of grievance and motivations for action (Kirton and Healy, 2013:727; Gahan and Pekarek, 2013:762; Lee and Tapia, 2021:638). Wajcman draws attention to Kelly's neglect of gender dynamics in struggle, arguing that gendered (and, I would add, racialised) differences may act as conductive or restrictive influences on workers' perceptions of legitimacy (2000:188). This

critique is echoed by Lee and Tapia (2021:654) who argue that IR's tendency to neglect consideration of diverse social identities leads scholars to assume the existence of a universal worker-subject who undergoes a universal process of mobilisation – one that is not reflected the diverse nature of mobilisation processes found in reality.

Atzeni draws the very utility of *injustice* into question, arguing that the concept is easily integrated into and shaped by hegemonic ideology: that it is "subjective and individualistic", implying that collective action is "the sum of individual feelings" as opposed to being based on necessarily collective, structurally-induced class conflict (2009:7); and that it subsequently risks contributing to the mystification of capitalist relations (2010:18). In addition, the ambiguity of Kelly's conception of injustice is further evidenced by the burry distinction which he draws with "dissatisfaction" (1998:27), denying any potential in the latter to produce such reactions as collective misbehaviour (Hyman, 1975:187). This indicates a need for greater analytic openness – for sensitivity to the potentially diverse meanings which may emerge in workers' micro-dynamic moves towards action.

Related to the tendency towards homogenisation is the rigidity of Kelly's temporally sequential account of emergence, which Atzeni summarises as "injustice – leadership – action" (2009:6). Despite acknowledging that workers' collective action may take multiple forms (1998:36-8), there is a noteworthy prescriptiveness in Kelly's account of causal processes. In a specific example of this, Kelly's model assumes a largely instrumental, rational approach to action through cost-benefit calculation (1998:34), limiting space for diversity of motivation amongst workers, which may take such potential forms as political commitment, with such possible results as sympathy strikes (Gall, 1999:331). Similarly, Kelly proposes no alternative model should each of the five stages of action not come about in turn. For Atzeni, this prescriptiveness is partly a result of Kelly's separation of the mobilisation process from the contextual constraints present in its particular workplace, overlooking the potential for diversity of form (2010:20) – a critique which I explore further in section 1.3.

A similar prescriptiveness also appears in the determinism of long wave theory, which is open to empirical challenge. The downturn in workers' collective action has lasted well beyond the twenty-five-year wave initially suggested – beginning in the 1970s, persisting through the 2008 financial crash and emergence of the platform economy. For Gall and Holgate, this raises the question of whether neoliberalism should be understood as

qualitatively unique in the history of capitalism, more ideologically resilient than previous forms (2018a:571). In a reflective piece, Kelly effectively calls for greater investigation of this, suggesting that research must pay closer attention to workers' perceptions of poor working conditions and of the inevitability of injustice (Kelly, 2018a:706-7)

Each of the above critiques points to the potential for productive additions to the study of emergent workers' collective action. Firstly, closer attention to the nature of ideation in the processes by which workers come to take action, avoiding any deterministic assumptions regarding which particular ideas may result form this, and accompanied by detailed analysis of the specific workplace and general ideological contexts within which ideation takes place; and, secondly, recognising the potential diversity of form in processes of emergence.

1.2.3 Maurizio Atzeni's return to the labour process

Drawing on both the Marxist IR and LPT traditions, Atzeni set out to understand: "What drives workers periodically to contest their surrounding reality and how do they structure their protests?" (2010:15). The latter half of this question aligns Atzeni with Kelly in his attention to the micro-dynamics of workers' action, while the former draws a distinction between the two authors, with Atzeni turning to political-economic context in explicitly considering *why* workplace conflict occurs. This is a deliberate break, with Atzeni developing his approach in contrast with Kelly's.

Atzeni advances four critiques of Kelly, the first three of which are discussed above: that the vague nature of "injustice" lends itself to the mystification of labour-capital relations (2010:19); that Kelly's model imposes a restrictive "mechanical sequence" of "psychological/organizational stages before collective action can materialise" (2009:5); and that Kelly overlooks the significance of the labour process in determining workers' action (1998:27-8). Atzeni's fourth critique relates to the pessimistic basis of Kelly's work in a context of union decline, which Atzeni argues is deeply Eurocentric and focuses too heavily on unionism at the expense of analysing workers' autonomous self-activity (2010:26; 2020:311; Scherer and Fritzen, 2020:230). In contrast to Kelly, Atzeni builds on Silver's (2003) application of world-systems theory to the study of emergent workers' struggle, seeking to embed his research in a global and transhistorical perspective, which allows him to locate specific conflicts within the contexts of transnational outsourcing and technological development (2010:1-2).

Through research on 1990s car factory occupations in Argentina, Atzeni seeks to develop an analytic approach to workplace conflict which "rehabilitates a vision of collective action as a structurally determined and grassroots-based expression of workers' power" (2010:12). His conception of *solidarity* is crucial in this, as "generated by cooperation in the labour process" and providing the very basis of workers' collective agency, allowing the individual worker to "develop a consciousness of her/himself not just as individual but also as part of a group who share similar working conditions […] and whose interests are overall opposed to those of the employer" (2010:12, 27). Aiming to rescue the concept from rhetorical overstretch, Atzeni defines solidarity as a processual condition which takes two forms at work: an "inactive" form, or *"compañerismo"*, which appears as "natural empathy" produced in the everyday cooperation between colleagues within the labour process (2009:13); and an "active" form, where *compañerismo* may transform into collective action and more recognisable organisation (2009:13-14). This activation depends on the crises periodically produced by underlying contradictions in labour processes (2010:29).

In the two case studies which Atzeni researches – at FIAT and Renault plants in 1996-97 – such crises took the form of management efforts to impose salary reductions through new, flexible contracts in the context of neoliberalisation in Argentina (2010:99-100). Each plant had unique conditions resulting from their historical circumstances: FIAT workers' demonstrated significant loyalty to their employer, often held long-term and comparably well-paid positions in the plant, and had little history of disruptive action, with any tension placated by promises of further investment by FIAT in Argentina (2009:10; 2010:127). Renault's workers held more openly hostile attitudes towards their employer, had a stronger union presence, and saw flexibilisation introduced more gradually than at FIAT (2009:10; 2010:99). Yet despite more ostensibly favourable conditions for action at Renault, only the FIAT plant saw "a radicalisation of conflict and the establishment of a permanent state of open confrontation", while efforts at collective action by Renault workers were quickly repressed (2009:9-10).

For Atzeni, close attention to the contexts which shaped workers' solidarity explains this stark difference. At Renault, the cooperation of the recognised union facilitated management flexibilisation (2009:10, 79); the gradual pace of change allowed management to develop a strategy for coping with workers conflict, such as through selective lay-offs (2009:11); and a sense of fear, in a context of rising unemployment, meant that diverse attitudes existed

amongst the workforce depending on their personal financial circumstances, preventing the generalisation of a single shared sense of injustice (2009:11). Active solidarity "remain[ed] blocked between structural constraints […] and the impossibility of identifying a collective agent" (2009:12). In comparison, historically amicable relations between workers and management at FIAT meant that the employer had not developed a strategy to manage outbursts of conflict, while the absence of a strong union presence meant that there was no obvious agent for mediation and compromise (2009:10; 2010:129). Related to union absence, Atzeni notes that an initial lack of clear leadership amongst workers did not hinder the activation of solidarity, inverting Kelly's model by arguing that workplace leaders emerged *through* collective action, rather than as a precondition (2010:99). With the sudden, unexpected introduction of a new contract, workers had little time to develop and generalise a shared perception of injustice, instead: "The day after signing the agreement the workers met again in the plant, discussed developments with their colleagues, realized that they were losing almost 50 percent of their previous salaries and reacted spontaneously by occupying the plant" (2010:72). It was only through conversations during and immediately prior to the occupation that a shared narrative regarding grievance emerged (2009:12).

Atzeni's most valuable insight is the necessity of attention to context – both at the immediate workplace level, where *compañerismo* is produced in shared experience of the labour process, and at wider political-economic and ideological levels. By recognising the extent to which context shapes action, Atzeni offers a non-deterministic approach to understanding formative processes, with much greater space for diversity of form than Kelly provides (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020:40). However, this same focus on context carries the risk of overlooking instances of workers' agential practice – a historical tendency in the Labour Process Theory tradition, as discussed above. This is not necessarily innate in Atzeni's approach, yet it seems to happen in his own analysis of struggle at FIAT, where precise details of workers' perceptions, motivations, and decisions are obscured by the invocation of ambiguous "spontaneity". In Atzeni's account of the "moment of mobilisation" – reconstructed through interviews conducted five years after the initial occupation – "people occupied the plant not knowing what they were doing apart from the fact that they needed to understand what was happening. Somebody violently closed the factory gate and the mobilisation became an occupation" (2009:12). This "almost instinctive" (2009:14) activation of solidarity is presented in the long-term context of FIAT's labour process, but

with little detail on workers' preceding perceptions, conversations, and decision-making, as if it were a mechanistic reaction.

This lack of empirical detail undermines the space that Atzeni otherwise creates within his approach for workers' ideation. For example, as part of the activation of solidarity, Atzeni identifies a twofold "recognition: (a) that the employer has the power to order the forms and times for the execution of the work and (b) that who gives this order is by, their very nature, on the other side" (2010:28). He recognises multiple contexts within which such ideas may develop, including those beyond the labour process, such as "nightly conversations with their families, [where] workers were trying to define their sensations" (2009:10) and "a favourable political and cultural climate" (2009:1). Yet in his empirical study of the process by which solidarity is activated, detailed analysis of such meaning-formation is absent.

Cristina Flesher Fominaya argues that invocations of spontaneity "unwittingly (or not) deny agency to social networks and actors", submerging complex prehistories of action (2015:143), while, for Roberto Nunes, they can indicate a gap in knowledge regarding formative processes, filled by "the mirage of an instantaneous transformation" (2021:181). We can see indications of this in Atzeni's portrayal of the sole "moment" of activation in the strike or occupation (2009:13), where long-term, complex, and latent processes through which *compañerismo* is transformed into active solidarity are downplayed (Kelly, 2018a:704). We might contrast Atzeni's account with Alvin Gouldner's research on a 1950s US wildcat strike, in which claims to spontaneity lead the scholar to interrogate processes of planning and dynamics of leadership (1965:90-93), or with Brecht De Smet's granular description of the transformation of a sit-in into a work stoppage in the 2006 strike at the Ghazl al-Mahalla spinning and weaving plant in Egypt (2014:241-2).

Again, this oversight is a risk, rather than necessary feature, of Atzeni's valuable conception of collective action as process, but it demonstrates the need for careful consideration of the interaction between context and agency in the emergence of collective action (Gibbs and Kerr, 2020:7).

1.2.4 Jane McAlevey's organising model

With above critique of Atzeni in mind, we might look to an alternative literature for greater detail on the precise practices deployed by workers in moving towards action. Jane McAlevey emerged as a key figure in efforts at union renewal in the 2010s, delivering

training on workplace organising to an international audience of thousands (Moody, 2020) and directly influencing specific workers' campaigns, such as those of West Virginian teachers in 2018 (Blanc, 2019:111). Like Kelly, her schematic organising model has provided a means of explaining the emergence, success, or failure of workers' action (Nelson, 2019).

McAlevey's work might initially be thought to sit somewhat uneasily alongside Kelly and Atzeni in this chapter, as she makes no explicit reference to the IR or LPT traditions, but rather sits within the tradition of *organising literature*. Like Braverman, McAlevey aims at non-academic audiences, but her work is based on her PhD and has been adopted and critiqued in scholarship (such as in Nelson, 2019; Wood, 2020a). She is included here as a scholar who, like Kelly and Atzeni, pays particular attention to the formative, micro-dynamic processes through which workers come to take action (McAlevey, 2020:9).

The organising tradition is perhaps most famously exemplified by Saul Alinsky's (1971) manual on community organising – an influential text within North American political activism which McAlevey sharply breaks with, critiquing Alinsky's approach as politically vacuous, reactively anti-socialist, excessively hierarchical, anti-democratic, and inapplicable to the workplace (2016:41-6). For McAlevey, Alinsky's heavy influence on American unionism is a "critical factor" in ongoing union decline (2015:416), leading to the prioritisation of professional, "corporate" campaigns over direct engagement with workers, and entrenching a bureaucratic, detached model of leadership (2016:17, 56). McAlevey locates an alternative to Alinskyism in the 1930s communist-led organising of the *1199 New England* union, which emphasised democratic practice within unions over the maintenance of bureaucracy, encouraging worker participation, building inclusive majorities within workplaces, and confronting employers collectively (2015:424). Building on this tradition, McAlevey seeks to borrow and update elements of the 1199 model for contemporary use (2016:59).

Key to McAlevey's model is a clear distinction between "mobilising" and "organising" – terms which are used interchangeably and often ambiguously by both Kelly (Holgate et al., 2018:600) and Atzeni (2009:6). *Organising* entails expanding the number of people involved in a campaign by recruiting previously uninvolved participants, as opposed to *mobilising* existing, already-committed activists to attend events and to campaign, without necessarily enlisting anyone new (2016:10-11). Crucially, organising "places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people […] bringing new people into the change

process and keeping them involved", while mobilising implies a conception of change as driven by minorities – specifically, in the context of worker organising, by professional unionists (2016:10).

Drawing on her extensive experience as a professional union organiser, McAlevey outlines a model for such inclusive organising. She posits the identification and development of "organic leaders" by union organisers as the crucial first step – "workers that are the most respected by their peers", as opposed to self-selecting, already-politicised radicals (2015:424; 2016:48). Those leaders then identify key workplace issues, map pre-existing social networks, and conduct "detailed analysis of exactly which workers are likely to stand together" (2016:4; 34). Recruiting through such networks requires gradual, in-person engagement – "the art of what is called the one-on-one conversation" (2016:15), aiming to convince potential recruits that their own self-interest is best served through collective means (2016:36). If such conversations are met with resistance, then the organiser must "frame the hard choice", presenting participation as zero sum: "Take a risk in order to win the desired benefits, or be safe, do nothing, get nothing" (2016:36). Throughout the recruiting stage, increasingly risky "structure tests" are deployed to build confidence, such as by asking participants to sign petitions and openly declare union affiliation (2016:34). The ultimate aim of this model is supermajority participation in an action which challenges employer power – with McAlevey dismissing minority action as "symbolic", unlikely to achieve any fundamental change at work, and unconducive to the ultimate goal of building workers' power (2016:53).

McAlevey can be read as building on the above literatures in several ways: like Kelly, she rejects mechanistic conceptions of grievance leading to action in favour of an emphasis on *process*, through which decisions must be made to produce action; and, like Atzeni, she identifies contextual factors beyond the workplace which may facilitate action, specifically in the social communities related to a workforce. McAlevey seeks to draw the communities that have network ties to the workplace into struggle, mapping interlocutors who may offer support as part of a "whole worker organising" model, which refuses "a one-dimensional view of workers as workers rather than as whole people" (2016:59-70). In a practical sense this is a potential means of increasing workers' leverage in struggle, such as by building support amongst parents for striking teachers (2016:66); and conceptually this refuses the notion of a single, universal worker-subject, recognising that workers may be influenced by

diverse extra-workplace networks when deciding to take action. There is, however, a tension here that prefigures wider critiques of McAlevey's approach: in recognising that the "whole worker" is reproduced beyond the workplace, a key site of meaning-formation is identified where workers may come to frame their experiences of work through dialogue with friends, family, and others (Atzeni, 2009:10). Yet McAlevey often presents ideas as gifted to workers by external organisers via organic leaders. This is visible in her account of organising conversations, which are carefully planned, with messaging perfected through "semantic drills" deployed by union organisers (2016:89). Little more consideration is given to the shared thinking, dialogue, and justification that may be ongoing amongst workers prior to union intervention, or to how that may shape organising efforts.

This largely top-down approach to ideation hints at a further criticism often levelled at McAlevey: that her model assumes the pre-existence of an external union, willing and able to invest in organising the greenfield workplace, which – in the context of union decline – is not necessarily a given. Kim Moody (2020) argues that this assumption denies a crucial site of collective power: workers' self-activity, without union involvement, which often provides the spark for further organisational development. Davide Però (2019) and Alex Wood (2020a) similarly argue that McAlevey's overall strategy excludes significant sections of the contemporary non-unionised workforce who find themselves neglected by unions, comparably isolated from their colleagues by the labour process, and facing far greater structural difficulties in organising – yet it is precisely these workers who have led particularly innovative organising efforts in Britain in recent years (Però, 2019:1-2).

These critiques point to the need to avoid what Atzeni terms "union fetishism" in research and in organising: analytic dependence "on the trade union as the *par excellence* form of organisation" which produces "an interest in the form itself that hides from view border processes of struggle and collective formation" (2020:311). Nonetheless, while union fetishism is undoubtedly present in McAlevey's assumption of union pre-existence, it would be unfair to accuse McAlevey of holding a wholly uncritical attitude towards unions, as she explicitly designs her model in contrast with the Alinskyian methods deployed by narrowly-focused, ineffective union leadership (2016:41-53). As with Kelly and Atzeni, we might build on McAlevey's insights on worker organising through an analytic turn to the micro-dynamic, contextually-situated, joint ideational-material activities of workers as they build towards action, recognising the significance of recruiting and socialising actors in collective projects

(2016:27), avoiding reification of the union form as pre-existent, and recognising the space for diversity of motivation and organisational forms, including those which might emerge from outside of the workplace. The following section looks beyond workplace-focused literatures to consider what such a turn could look like in practice.

1.3 Social Movement Studies

1.3.1 Social Movement Studies and the Workplace

Multiple IR scholars have identified Social Movement Studies as a source of potential theoretical and methodological innovation in understanding workplace conflict (e.g. Kelly, 1998:24; Darlington, 2013; Grote and Wagemann, 2019). Yet, as Peter Gahan and Andreas Pekarek (2013:758) argue, while SMS literatures have developed rich approaches to studying the micro-dynamics of collective action by analysing ideational processes of meaning-formation and decision-making amongst movement participants, workplace-focused literatures have largely neglected those concerns. The critiques of the above workplace-focused authors each suggest that more detailed analysis of processes of ideation could enrich our understanding of precisely how workers come to take action. This section therefore seeks to move towards such analysis through dialogue between the literatures reviewed above and SMS, identifying points of constructive challenge and compatibility.

1.3.2 Alberto Melucci's collective identity theory

With the above intention in mind, we might turn to any number of SMS theorists. Early *collective behaviour theory* emphasised the socially constructed nature of grievance and the centrality of meaning-maintenance in movement activity (Blumer, 1951:206; Smelser, 1962:9), but tended towards condemnation of collective action in its portrayal of participants as irrational (Edwards, 2014:30). Breaking with this, American scholars developed approaches focused on movements' use of material and contextual resources – most notably in the form of *resource mobilisation* and *political opportunity* theories. In Europe, responding to the upsurge in political contention of 1968, scholars focused on the emergence of "New Social Movements" advancing "non-material" struggles, moving away from the Americans' emphasis on context (Melucci, 1995:61; Polletta and Jasper, 2001:286; Barker and Dale, 1998:66).

For Jürgen Habermas (1987), the post-war settlement in Europe dramatically changed the nature of social conflict, initiating struggles over the nature of rationality itself. Similarly, Alain Touraine (1992) argues that the transition to post-industrialism in the Global North has

established “information” as the primary source of power, control, and conflict, shifting the terrain and content of struggle away from materially-oriented interests and to fragmentary identities. Alberto Melucci builds on both theorists, but goes beyond their macro-level focus by combining the *why* with the detailed *how* of emergent collective action and movement maintenance (1984:821; 1985:792), potentially making his analysis of micro-dynamic interaction within movements especially useful for this thesis.

Developing a “systematic, comprehensive” theory of collective identity formation (Flesher Fominaya, 2010:394), Melucci identifies participants’ active construction of shared meaning as the basis of collective action (1996:69-70). Drawing on Touraine, he argues that meaning-formation takes on an especially strong significance in contemporary “information society”, where “[o]ur access to reality is facilitated and shaped by the conscious production and control of information […] The transformation of natural resources into commodities has come to depend on the production and control of these cognitive and communicative ‘forms’. Power based upon material production is therefore no longer central” (1988:185). In this context, movements struggle over the control of information “on cultural grounds” and through “symbolic” means (1985:795-7).

Specifically, cultural-informational struggle takes place over and through recognition. A challenger may seek to assert a particular definition against that of a hegemonic opponent, who in turn seeks to deny any recognition to their claims (1995:61). The hegemon’s response can serve to strengthen a movement’s *autoidentification* – its sense of internal solidarity through comparison with an opponent (1985:794-5; Flesher Fominaya, 2018:435-6); though it can also achieve the “fragmentation of the collective actor” if the denial of recognition is particularly effective (1996:75). Here, it is important to note that Melucci’s conception of collective *identity* does not imply “the idea of the permanence of a subject” (1996:85); it is used for want of an alternative term to describe a process of continuous, shared ideational meaning-formation by subversive actors (1995:44). By constructing shared perception of the ends of actions, the means of actions, and the opportunities for action in a given context (1995:44), actors may stake a claim to recognition which “challenges the logic governing the production and appropriation of social resources” (1985:798), potentially radically altering dominant cultural codes and imposing new normative ideas, resulting in far-reaching “new patterns of behaviour and new models of organization” (1985:813). This requires

harmonising ideas amongst participants within the collective subversive subject through collaborative decision-making.

For this thesis, the greatest value of Meluccian collective identity theory is the threefold challenge that its poses to workplace-focused approaches to collective action: firstly, to reassess the overall significance of ideation; secondly, to recognise the necessarily *multivocal* nature of shared, collective ideation (Gillan, 2008:248); and finally, to analyse meaning-formation, negotiation, and contestation as taking place in long-term, latent interactions, rather than exclusively in visible moments of recognisable action (Yates, 2015:240).

The first challenge can be understood at two levels: at the level of formative processes, through which workers come to take collective action; and at the higher level of change, understanding how ideas in action may alter their contexts. At the first level, Melucci asserts the need to understand collective actions as emerging through causal genealogies of idea-formation, which include both the processes by which participants are interactively socialised into collective forms (1996:70; Flesher Fominaya, 2018:434), and the contexts which necessarily shape such processes. At the second level, Melucci identifies change as the result of co-constitutive interplay between actor and environment, simultaneously recognising the limiting nature of context and the power of action to alter that context (1995:47).

In comparison, workplace-focused literature tends to underplay or skim over the significance of ideation, with the emergence and practice of collective action being addressed largely in organisational terms, and with change being viewed as taking place through the labour process or wage relation, with limited consideration of ideational struggle between workers and employers. Through a Meluccian emphasis on ideation, we might be better able to understand how workers' come to take collective action "against the odds" – in seemingly isolated, precarious circumstances, or in workplaces that are tightly-managed and surveilled – through the latent construction and generalisation of subversive ideas that encourage action (Flesher Fominaya, 2010:395); we might be better-equipped to analyse cases of action which appear as particularly risky and unexpected, and which challenge assumptions of rational cost-benefit analysis amongst workers (Hunt and Benford, 2004:440); and we might be more likely to recognise sources of subversive ideas which are imported into the workplace from outside, such as from families, communities, wider cultural contexts, or collective memory (Flesher Fominaya, 2018:441). In short, we might adopt an analytic lens which facilitates more detailed understanding of precisely how workers *decide* to take action.

Kelly's conception of "injustice" as necessary for action may be seen as an exception to the aforementioned tendencies in workplace-focused literatures, but the second Meluccian challenge points to the need to avoid the homogenisation and simplification of participant voice, which Kelly tends towards. For Melucci, while collective identity entails some degree of shared definition (1996:70), we must persistently avoid imbuing collective actors and action with prior "unified, ontological essences", instead analysing apparent unity as an interactive and ongoing "system of relations and representations", which both results from and contains a multitude of ideas, often in contention, continuously negotiated amongst participants (1996: 70-6; 1995:43). From this perspective, the researcher must begin by searching for internal difference rather than points of agreement between participants, aiming "to break apart the apparent unity of the discourse of movements and to observe the interactive construction of the unity through differences and conflicts" (1995:60). A methodological focus on ideas-in-contention could avoid the risk of homogenisation, resulting in a particularly detailed understanding of what ideas are shared, how they have come to be shared, and how they have shaped action. It would also avoid reifying official accounts of action, such as those put forward by unions (Atzeni, 2020).

Finally, Melucci challenges researchers to look beyond visible demonstrations of contention to latent interaction, situated within seemingly banal contexts where subversive ideas are gradually produced amongst participants (1985:800-1). While Melucci at times distinguishes sharply between the visible and the latent as two "poles", Luke Yates (2015:240) draws attention the interaction between both, where shared ideas are continuously constructed and renegotiated at "nested levels of latency and visibility" (2015:253). This insight is conducive to each of the above advantages, calling for careful analysis of the history of a collective action through workers' everyday *interactions* and deliberately insubordinate *actions*, without defaulting to the focus on the latter, as tends to be the case in workplace-focused literatures. With this in mind, we might, for example, be better able to consider relations between workplace misbehaviour and industrial action.

Whilst there is significant potential in these proposals, they are by no means easy to incorporate into analysis of workers' collective action. A point of incompatibility emerges from Melucci's idealism: while at times Melucci emphasises the structural constraints that context places on action, elsewhere he presents information – the primary basis and content of struggle – as free floating, abstracted from context by virtue of its "postmaterial" nature

(1985:804). Discussing nuclear technology, for example, Melucci argues that the information that allows for the production of nuclear weapons is indestructible by nature, making the abolition of nuclear technology essentially impossible (1985:806). Yet here the question of how actors come to *access* information arises, and draws our attention to instances where ideational control is practiced through material means – such as through restrictions on the distribution of knowledge regarding nuclear power, through the exclusion of knowledge from historical record, or through the physical barring of union organisers and literature from an enclosed workplace. In denying any interplay between the material and the ideational, Melucci overlooks the co-constitutive nature of both (Weeks, 2011:37-77; Krinsky, 2013:109-113). Instead, he imbues the ideational with an autonomous, transformative power which, faced with an effective combination of material and ideational restriction in reality, may be severely limited.

In the context of the workplace, which may be spatially and temporally bounded in employers' efforts to control living labour, concerns regarding the power of material restriction must be kept in mind (Wood, 2020b:6-7). Yet Melucci effectively abandons analysis of such restrictions, as evidenced in his attitude to workplace conflict, which he argues should be studied through identitarian categories as opposed to being understood through "the wage-earning condition as such" (1996:209). The workers' movement "of the past", Melucci argues, was "deeply rooted in a specific social condition", while today's movements "cannot be referred to any specific social condition" but are rather made up of a multiplicity of definitional claims (1996:84). Yet the wage-earning condition still exists as a basis of social combination (Atzeni, 2009:13), and while the reproduction of this condition undoubtedly functions through the ideational (Burawoy, 1979), the very existence of that condition relies on the existence of a general wage relation in the first place, enforcing a material compulsion to work in service of capital's valorisation (Weeks, 2011:18).

A concrete methodological question emerges from this theoretical tension: of how to analyse the interaction of ideational meaning-formation and material context without reducing the significance of either. This sits alongside two other methodological challenges which arise when adopting insights from Melucci: of how to recognise multivocality in a collective action, discerning dissenting ideas from within those which appear dominant (Gillan, 2008:248); and of how to analyse the long-term negotiation of shared ideas amongst actors,

both through latent processes and visible moments of action (Yates, 2017:240-1). Below I consider proposals from other SMS literatures which may help address these challenges.

1.3.3 Framing and Dialogism

Frame analysis rose to prominence chronologically alongside Melucci's collective identity theory, similarly responding to the neglect of the ideational by resource mobilisation and political opportunity theories (Lindstedt, 2018:2; Snow et al. 2019:394). It imbues ideation with transformative potential in a manner that is comparable to Melucci, viewing "the production of ideas as the purpose of social movements, and not merely as a strategic aspect of social movement behaviour" (Gillan, 2008:253; Snow et al. 2019:392).

While framing is a broad and diverse theoretical-methodological tradition which has changed significantly since its emergence in the 1970s-80s, David A. Snow et al. (2019) summarise many of its fundamental features. It rejects mechanistic accounts of emergent conflict, identifying "interactively-based interpretation" as the means of perceiving grievance such that action results (2019:393). Interpretation consists of diagnosing a problem, identifying a solution, and calling for a corrective response through specific forms of action (2019:396). When a movement practices these stages of interpretation, it produces a coherent "collective action *frame*", in contrast with alternative interpretations (2019:395, 399-400, my emphasis). The production of a single frame is complex, requiring the negotiation of multivocality amongst movement participants (2019:404), producing broad frames which nevertheless allow for internal diversity (Gillan, 2008:250), and containing the potential for significant alteration in the frame over time – though such alteration is under-researched in the tradition (Lindstedt, 2018:2-3). This production takes place within the limits set by existing societal context – the "discursive field" – necessitating the alignment of a movement's frames with available discourse so that they resonate with prospective adherents, lest the movement fail to both sustain itself and achieve any of its aims (2019:398-404). By displacing dominant ideas in the discursive field with subversive alternatives, movements achieve change (2019:393).

As presented above, the framing tradition might potentially be seen as providing a clear methodological response to the limits of workplace-focused literature: regarding the interaction of ideation and structural context, facilitating thorough study of meaning-formation in the micro-dynamic processes through which workers come to take collective action (Gahan and Pekarek, 2013:758). Yet critics draw attention to limitations in frame analysis which relate precisely to this point.

For Marc Steinberg, framing theorists tend to create "ambiguity between reality and its representations" (1999:738) – in other words, sharing Melucci's tendency to separate the ideational from the material, identifying the former as the sole basis of action and sole source of change. John Krinsky adds that there is a related tendency amongst frame analysist to present ideation as taking place entirely within the "black box of mental life", where the rational individual decides whether or not to adopt a particular interpretation in an "apolitical" act of cognition, free from contextual influence (2008:2, 4). Subsequently, the account of emergence which framing tends to pose is idealist and often leans towards methodological individualism, making it difficult to apply to the workplace which, as Atzeni argues, is constituted by its material-ideological context and its collective nature.

The very metaphor of the *frame* lends itself to the abstraction of an idea from its context, bracketing a single, coherent idea in contrast with its alternatives (Snow et al. 2019:393). This can be methodologically necessary, presenting a heuristic abstraction whose components can then be identified – but it nevertheless entails significant risk. The multivocal complexity of collective ideation is easily subsumed into this singular frame, potentially concealing the open-ended and contestable nature of linguistic and cognitive interpretation (Steinberg, 1999:740; Gillan, 2008:259). If this risk is not given due attention by the frame analyst, then "a framework that was intended to highlight processes lapses into fixed description" (Lindstedt, 2018:3). The object of analysis becomes temporally frozen, often in the form of the visible frame proclaimed by a movement's representative – such as a union – as opposed to the frames constructed by participants through latent interaction (Gillan, 2008:250). In such a form, frame analysis provides little value in thoroughly studying the foundational micro-dynamics of collective action.

Addressing such risks, Steinberg draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) *dialogism* to outline an alternative analysis of ideation as contextually embedded and necessarily limited by established normative ideas (1999:743-4), yet open to innovation through contradictions within those same contexts (1999:747). Steinberg argues that hegemonic ideas always contain immanent alternatives within themselves, that any ambiguity in a concept implies the potential existence of subversive interpretations, and that historical meanings or material realities may impinge on the ideas that power-holders seek to maintain. The multivocal nature of collective ideation allows for the realisation of these potentials, though only at a piecemeal

rate, emerging from long-term, interactive processes of questioning dominant codes, rather than through the clash of alternatives presented in framing analysis (1999:747).

Researching textual representations of 1820s-30s cotton spinners in England, Steinberg finds that workers appropriated elements of dominant *genres* – "widely accepted sets of vocabularies, meanings, and rules of use" – to justify calls for higher pay, drawing on liberal political economy and emergent British nationalism to emphasise the value of their work in a manner which simultaneously echoed and challenged employers' claims to legitimacy (1999:757). They also *borrowed* elements of genres which related to geographically and historically distant struggles, linking claims to labour rights with anti-slavery sentiment (1999:766-7). Combining elements of different genres produced a *repertoire*, through which challengers exposed contradictions in dominant genres and depicted alternative futures (1999:751). In the contemporary workplace, we might identify claims to "passion" and "love" as aspects of genres which are evoked in the work ethic, yet which simultaneously imply potential desires beyond and against work (Jaffe, 2021).

Compared to frame analysis, Steinberg's dialogism contains less risk of detaching ideas form their contexts, defaulting to methodological individualism, overriding multivocality, or obscuring the processual nature of ideation. However, in his effort to break with frame analysis, Steinberg briefly appears to adopt one of its most significant limitations: when arguing that struggle over ideas cannot be seen as a source of change in itself (1999:754), he writes that "success in collective action frequently hinges on material resources" which ultimately "talk louder than words in a battle to determine who has the final say" (1999:769). In a reversed reflection of the Meluccian-framing tendency to idealism, this risks drawing too stark a boundary between the material and the ideational, denying their co-constitutive nature by imbuing one with absolute supremacy over the other (Marx, 1975:422). The practical result is reduced space for actors' agency in analysis of action, effectively implying that there are fixed material circumstances which cannot be overcome through struggle – if we understand struggle as necessarily emerging, at least partially, through ideation, legitimating the decision to take action. This pitfall does not, however, necessitate a wholesale abandonment of dialogism.

Extending Steinberg's work, Krinsky argues for dialogic analysis of *activity* as opposed to Bakhtin's exclusive analysis of written or oral utterances, which we can see reflected in Steinberg's work (Krinsky, 2008a:4). Developing *Cultural-Historical Activity Theory*,

Krinsky defines “activity” as necessarily emerging from collective, interactive systems of cognition, perception, and interpretation, but resulting in tangible action which can alter the material (2008a:6). By analysing activity – as inclusive of both the linguistic tools analysed by dialogism and non-linguistic practices – we can recognise the dialectical co-construction of the ideational-agential and the material-contextual without separating either and without imbuing either with primacy (2008:5). From this perspective, the ideational always has the *potential* to affect material change; perception can open a material object to alteration; workers, by perceiving a contradiction between their interests and employers’ control of the means of production, can act on that and can change the very nature of production (Hyman, 1975:6; Krinsky, 2013:111; Marx, 1973:92). Yet that potential is not mechanistically realised: elements of genres which may produce a subversive repertoire may not be available, may be successfully suppressed by power-holders through material-ideational means, or may be ineffectively deployed. A conceptual-methodological approach based on these insights would be well-equipped to capture and analyse the complexity of emergent collective action, avoiding the pitfalls identified in the above workplace-focused and SMS literatures. The next chapter seeks to outline such an approach.

1.4 Conclusion

By examining and comparing distinct literatures, this chapter has identified what is necessary for a detailed analytic approach to understanding how workers come to take collective action in contexts of union absence. Such an approach should take micro-dynamic, contextually-situated, multivocal, latent processes of ideation as its object of analysis, identifying those processes in tandem as key sites from which collective action ultimately originates. It should pay close attention to diversity, contestation, and negotiation amongst actors within such processes, seeking to avoid the tendency to homogenise shared ideas. And it should understand context as simultaneously limiting and immanently open to challenge. The remainder of this thesis will seek to develop and deploy such an approach, beginning with a chapter which provides it with a theoretical basis before applying it to empirical study.

Chapter Two: Theorising the Micro-Dynamics of Emergent Collective Action

"Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted."

– Marx (2019:480)

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, a review of explanatory conceptions of the emergence of workers' collective action found a significant gap in workplace-focused literature: regarding the micro-dynamic processes whereby workers' ideas interact with their material conditions in the emergence of action. Specifically, while literature attributes significance to both the material-contextual and ideational-interpretive elements of collective action, it tends to treat the latter superficially, skimming analysis of the interactive, latent, multivocal processes by which workers come to collectively interpret their circumstances and decide to act. Collective identity, framing, and dialogic social movement theories were considered as potential remedies to this by virtue of their emphatic focus on ideation, but these were found to either abandon analysis of the material in favour imbuing the ideational with primacy (in the case of Melucci), or to draw a stark divide between the material and the ideational, risking superficial accounts of how both interact in the formation of collective subjects (as in the case of frame analysis and, to a lesser extent, Steinberg's dialogism).

The review identified the need for an analytic approach which understands processes of emergence as imbued with practices of ideation which, by necessity, interact with their material context. The challenge, of course, is to understand how that interaction happens – and, moreover, to describe this in a way that is useful for understanding empirical instances of workers' emergent collective action. This chapter aims to articulate a theoretical framework which does this.

Beginning where the previous chapter ended, it outlines an intellectual history of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (henceforth: CHAT), excavating two subterranean streams which apply CHAT to collective action: the Barker-Krinsky and Blunden-De Smet streams. Brecht De Smet's (2015) conception of CHAT – in dialogue with Antonio Gramsci's thought – is

especially valuable and is explored in some detail, with some comparison to Kathi Weeks' *standpoint theory* (2018) and Paulo Freire's *pedagogy of the oppressed* (2017) as means of explanation and enrichment. Four features of De Smet's CHAT are used to illustrate the value of the approach: multivocality and collaboration; immanence; internal leadership; and external leadership. Challenges are then identified in the applicability of CHAT to empirical research, and threefold Class Composition Analysis (CCA) is suggested as a heuristic device which facilitates analysis using CHAT, but with some clarifications regarding CCA's conceptual vocabulary. The resulting framework is applied throughout this thesis.

2.2. Introducing CHAT: Vygotskian origins

CHAT is an interdisciplinary framework for understanding subject-formation, descendent from the work of Lev Vygotsky (Krinsky, 2008a:5; Nardi, 1996; De Smet, 2015:14). Developing during the eruption of political creativity which characterised pre-revolutionary Russia and the early USSR, Vygotsky's thought can be understood as an effort to produce a thoroughly Marxist explanatory account of subject-formation, in opposition to psychologies which declared their affiliation with Marxism without fully adopting its analytic methods and political commitments (Blunden, 2010:126). Specifically, Vygotsky encouraged a theoretical break with vulgar materialist *reflexology*, which denied the possibility of directly observing consciousness, considering it concealed within cognition and thus ultimately inaccessible, choosing instead to study human reaction to material stimuli as an indicator of consciousness (Blunden, 2010: 119-130). We might compare such an approach to conceptions of collective action as emerging mechanistically from grievance.

As an alternative, Vygotsky argued that consciousness could be studied through observation of *mediated activity* – observing how an individual makes use of available material and cultural *artefacts* in their attempts to overcome a *predicament*, such as using a stepping-stool to reach a shelf, or speech to make a request (2020:135-6). In Vygotskyan terms, artefacts are "any product of human labor – a word, a tool, a domestic animal, a walking stick, and mediation means to 'go between'. So an 'artifact-mediated action' is an action in which the person(s) uses an artifact to achieve their aim" (2010:7). Crucially, following such artefact-mediated activity, the individual *internalises* the new practice in their behaviour going forward, applying the same practice to new predicaments as they arise and – through the use of additional artefacts in response to new predicaments – continuously developing their cognitive capacities, or *neoformations* (De Smet 2015:50). As new neoformations emerge,

elements of old neoformations continue to exist as foundations for new ones, "but lose their decisive role in the maturation of the whole", being subsumed within another, "leading" neoformation (2015:51). For example, a child's babbling may be replaced with broken speech, and broken speech replaced in turn by coherent speech – a process which is mediated throughout by the language (an artefact) which surrounds the child.

Anticipation is crucial to overcoming predicament and developing neoformations. Specifically, when facing a predicament, the subject draws on the neoformations that they have developed in response to previous predicaments, and – in recognising the absence of an appropriate neoformation for the predicament at hand – anticipates a function which they do not yet possess. This anticipation precipitates and drives the development of that new function (Vygotsky, 1986:23; Blunden, 2014:6). Later Vygotskyans term this *prolepsis* (Cole, 1996:183), and distinguish between *autoprolepsis*, wherein subjects imagine themselves in a more developed state, and *heterolepsis*, where a different, more-developed subject encourages the individual's development towards a particular future, as in the case of a parent or teacher (Meshcheryakov, 2007:166-7). Crucially, this conception does not understand anticipation as emerging purely from mental ideation, but from the possibilities opened by artefact-mediated activity that has already taken place – i.e. from pre-existing historical-cultural circumstances. New neoformations, then, are always immanent within existing ones; coherent speech is immanent within broken speech; collective action is immanent within individual refusal, as explored below.

The concept of heterolepsis points to an additional important facet of Vygotsky's work: the significance of *instruction* by external subjects. The individual subject never exists in isolation; they are surrounded by subjects of varying degrees of development, in the family for example. Alongside autoproleptic learning, heteroproleptic instruction propels development by assisting in the overcoming of predicament and introducing new artefacts (De Smet, 2014:52). It can, however, also direct the subject towards *pathology* where development is stunted, as explored in greater detail below.

Subject-formation, for Vygotsky, is thus essentially collaborative. In contrast to individualist conceptions of cognition as occurring within "the black box of [individual] mental life", starkly separated from the material world, the internalisation of artefact-mediated activity within and through pre-existing cultural and material surroundings is precisely what constitutes the development of the subject (Krinsky, 2008b:205-6). In addition, this is a

processual conception of subjectification, which identifies subject-development as taking place continuously through different iterations of the learning process described above; to borrow a phrase from Freire, subjects are understood as "beings in the process of becoming – as unfinished, uncompleted being in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (2017:57). And this is a *historical* approach that emphasises *immanence*, in that already-existing artefacts, inherited from context, open the possibility of yet further subject-development.

The Marxist character of this psychology is evident in its historical and dialectical materialism. To name just three examples, this is visible, firstly, in the inseparable co-construction of the material and ideational, whereby the formation of human consciousness relies on the pre-existence of mediating material and cultural artefacts, and the nature of those artefacts are in turn shaped and re-shaped in how they are used to develop consciousness. This is a staunch rejection of Cartesian dualism, insisting on a *both/and* synthesis of ideation and action (Ollman, 2003). Secondly, Vygotsky's conception of development as imbued with simultaneous continuity and rupture, driven by the ongoing resolution of predicaments, is adopted directly from dialectics – the contradiction between subject and object drives transformation through interaction between both, resulting in the emergence of a new, more complex object (Krinsky, 2008a:15; Ollman, 2003:13). And thirdly, the potential for revolutionary transformation is ever-present in the self-emancipatory element of subjectification. While the creation of new neoformations relies on pre-existing circumstances and some degree of external assistance, it is ultimately the exercise of human creativity – which is imminent within those same circumstances – which drives development and opens the possibility that the subject could radically alter the very circumstances from which they emerge (Blunden, 2014:16; De Smet, 2015:10). These features imbue CHAT with a rich potential applicability to the understanding *collective* subjects.

2.3 The post-Vygotskian collective subject

While Vygotsky's account of ontogenesis is deeply relational, it is an account of the *individual* subject. His focus on this leaves us with little idea of precisely how subject-formation takes place at higher levels of collective interaction between multiple individuals, where subjects such as classes or trade unions come into being. This limitation led to the development of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory by generations of later Vygotskians, developing a tradition in their efforts to apply Vygotsky's framework to the study of collective subjects.

This application began with a more specific concern: in Vygostky's threefold model of "subject–mediating artefact–object", we find little consideration of precisely where the *object* comes from and why the subject is motivated to attain it (Blunden, 2010:164). Why is the child motivated to speak? Why is the worker motivated to participate in the labour process? What motivations drive the activity of human society in general?

For Aleksei Leontiev (1978), a contemporary of Vygotsky, this could be resolved through understanding objects as intimately social. In their production of tools to attain basic, essential objects (such as weapons used for hunting), humans produce new objects through the development of tools themselves (by creating the need for evermore efficient tools for use in hunting, for example). Per Agnes Heller's study of the significance of *needs* in Marx: "In so far as we create tools to satisfy our needs, the need for tools is already a new need" (2018:41). There is a necessarily collaborative element to this production of new needs: as more complex tools are *anticipated* (in the Vygotskian sense outlined above), greater collaboration is required; their manufacture demands a division of labour. From this, increasingly complex modes of human collectively develop – termed *activity systems* by Yrjö Engeström (1987), building on Leontiev.

Activity systems are sites of collaboration between people, aimed at collective objects. Within them, individual activity contributes (consciously or not) to the attainment of collective needs (Cole, 1985:151; De Smet, 2015:53). By identifying activity systems as objects of study, CHAT applies Vygotskian thought to collective subject-formation and development.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to detail the 20th century debates over the nature of activity systems (see: Blunden, 2010, for this), three insights are of particular relevance to this thesis. Firstly, activity systems are recognised as being highly internally complex. Later Vygotskians critique Leontiev's insufficient attention to their inner workings (Blunden, 2010:214). Responding to this, Engeström (1987) sought to sketch the means by which objects emerge from and are pursued through activity systems. Drawing on Vygotsky's recognition that mediating artefacts can be material or cultural, ideational, symbolic etc., Engeström expands Vygotsky's model of 'subject–mediating artefact–object' to include multiple forms of mediation. These forms - *community*, *rules*, and *division of labour* - play equally significant roles to that of *artefact* in mediating subjects' ability to overcome predicaments. *Community* provides the cultural-historical framework through which a subject

is able to interpret the object of its predicament; *rules* delineate what actions are acceptable within that framework, where other members of the community provide "choral support" to those actions which fall within the rules and shun or punish those which do not; and *division of labour* relates to the allocation of different actions to subjects which contribute, ultimately, to the attainment of the object which the whole activity system aims at (Krinsky, 2008b:181-4). Tensions between any of these points of mediation engender new predicaments and objects.

John Krinsky (2008b:185) outlines an empirical example of the above, whereby a paid union organiser (*subject*), is seeking to unionise workers (*object*): the inapplicability of a particular vocabulary (*artefact*) to a group of potential recruits (*community*) may demand that the organiser adopt a new vocabulary (a more appropriate artefact) to resolve this predicament (producing a *neoformation*). Adopting said vocabulary (in line with the *rules* of the workforce) may allow the organiser to better understand the grievances held by the potential recruits, in turn giving rise to further *objects*, which this newly-created neoformation (a better vocabulary) may help the organiser to achieve.

Second, Leontiev and Engeström's conceptions of objects as necessarily social emphasise the *immanence* that is present in Vygotsky's conception of subject-development as outlined above. For Engeström in particular, objects are not purely external to the subject, but rather emerge through human collaboration – from the cultural-historical context in which humans operate, the tools which they use and develop, and the cultures which relate to those. This insight is vital for understanding the nature of struggle in capitalism, given that needs – and the subsequent activities aimed at resolving those – are shaped by the contexts in which they emerge (Heller, 2018:24).

And finally, following from the above insight, Engeström (1990) and his contemporary, Michael Cole (1996), introduce a crucial concept in the simultaneous co-existence of *multiple* activity systems. In a critique of Leontiev, Cole points out that objects necessarily differ in different cultural and material contexts – that an object deemed valuable in one context may be derided in another, implying the simultaneous existence of multiple activity systems (Blunden, 2010:250). Engeström considers how co-existing systems interact with one another, collaborating, clashing, overlapping and nesting within one another – as in the case of a family that exists within a community, which itself exists under local administrative authority, within a nation-state, and so on.

Through the identification of activity systems, CHAT moves from Vygotsky's conception of individual subjectification to the study of collective subject-formation and development.

2.4 CHAT in the study of collective action

Whilst activity systems have been used in the study of collectives and organisations (e.g. Virkkunen and Kuutti, 2000), CHAT has only scantly been applied to the study of antagonistic collective subjects – in the workplace or on the street. This might be explained by its "subterranean" nature; concealing its political character – its Marxism – in anglophone academia so as to avoid persecution, surviving "in the professional lives of teachers and social workers, linguists and psychologists" (Blunden, 2010:21).

The legacy of this obscurantism is visible in the existence of two distinct streams of CHAT which attempt its application to social conflict – both emerging from similar sources, composed of the same theoretical-analytic material, but seemingly independent of one another in that they make hardly any reference to each other. These streams, and their distinct adaptations of CHAT, are outlined below.

2.4.1 The Barker-Krinsky stream

From the late-1990s onwards, as briefly outlined in the previous chapter, dialogism emerged as a critique of frame analysis in Social Movement Studies (SMS), applying the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin – a contemporary of Vygotsky – to the study of meaning-making. Colin Barker and John Krinsky took this up in their studies of *strategising* within social movements, and in doing so begin their move towards introducing CHAT to SMS.

Barker used dialogism in his analysis of contention in a North Manchester public meeting regarding a proposed hospital closure, noting the continuously developing nature of discourse amongst the audience, responding to, adopting and subverting the "official" claims of the authorities (2006). Barker makes a single allusion to Vygotsky in this paper (2006:13), but provides no detail. Instead, like Steinberg as outlined in the previous chapter, he affirms the dualism of the material and the ideational, concluding that dialogue "can map a terrain of legitimate action and validate contention, [but] it can't organize networks, can't garner resources, and can't take action" – practical action, using material resources and aimed at material change, is needed for that (2006:24-5).

This ideational-material dualism can be explained by the differences between Bakhtin and Vygotsky. For Bakhtin, individual consciousness must be understood as existing in "chaotic

multiplicity", ultimately independent of (but influenced by) external material stimuli. Interactivity takes the form of *polyphony*, where a plurality of voices reflect a plurality of consciousnesses, conversing with one another but never fully merging (Eun, 2019:494-5). The unit of analysis for Bakhtin is therefore the verbal *utterance*, which exists through and acts on dialogue, responding to stimuli. Collective action, in this account, is primarily an ideational affair.

In contrast, in Vygotsky's more dialectical approach, it is precisely the merger of the ideational and the material through mediation that drives subject-development. In *activity* (contra *utterance*), ideation and action are intimately co-constituted, and there can be no insurmountable dualism between ideas and their material contexts. Per Marx and Engels: "As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce" (1970:42).

Krinsky, while also building on Steinberg's critique of framing, made explicit use of CHAT, moving away from Bakhtinian dialogism in an effort to recognise the significance of non-conversational action and material tools in subject development (Krinsky, 2008a:5). Krinsky aimed to introduce a Marxist theory of collective cognition and, therefore, of decision-making to SMS, countering claims that "structural analyses crowd out cognition, affect, and acting subjects" (2008b:205). He applied this to the study of anti-workfare organising in New York, where the claim-making and related strategy of organisers changed significantly over a period of years. CHAT provided a means for Krinsky to understand two significant changes: firstly, the shift from organisers' use of vocabulary focused on *community organising* to vocabulary appropriate to *labour organising*, necessitated by a recognition that the workfare participants viewed themselves as workers rather than welfare recipients, transforming the nature of the collective subject through the internalisation of a neoformation (2008a:9-15); and, secondly, a shift from the strategy of seeking to improve workfare to a strategy of seeking its abolition, mediated by a single conversation between anti-workfare organisers, a graduate student researcher and a lawyer; but also driven by the culmination of long-term changes in interacting activity systems, such as in the legislative context (2008a:15-21). In Krinsky's work during this period, the ideational and material-contextual interact more intimately than in Barker's.

Barker appears to adopt Krinsky's insights in two preliminary explorations of CHAT (2007a; 2007b), before both authors jointly apply CHAT to a conception of strategising, specifically

asking how unified strategy emerges out of apparent multivocality within movements (2009). In their conception, strategy must be understood as emerging from "a totality of relations", with its development driven by the iterative need to overcome predicaments, potentially re-making the very context in which a movement is strategising and acting (2009). Their contributions demonstrate the explanatory value that CHAT has to the study of collective action, providing a holistic framework which pays detailed attention to dynamic, material-ideational processes of subject formation.

2.4.2 The Blunden-De Smet stream: *projects*

Unlike Barker and Krinsky, Andy Blunden's (2010) work begins with CHAT itself, producing a thorough account the tradition. Through this, Blunden identifies a significant debt that Vygotsky owes to an often-overlooked aspect of Goethe, Hegel and Marx's thought: to the *cell-form* or *unit of analysis*. This is the "the most primitive form of the phenomenon which, through its visceral simplicity, can function as an explanatory principle; that is, the part [that] contains the whole" (Blunden, 2010:6). Identifying this cell-form in turn facilitates thorough analysis of the constitution of the whole. In Marx's analysis of capitalism, the commodity is identified as "its elementary form" at the very outset of *Capital*, from which Marx proceeds to analyse the system in its entirety (1976:125). In material science, the cell-form might be identified as the atom. The value of this concept for Blunden it its explanatory power, providing a datum on which to conduct analysis.

Building on Blunden through a close reading of Marx's method, Brecht De Smet points out that the identification of the cell-form is achieved through a double analytic movement, beginning with a broad, chaotic conception of the whole and moving *downwards*, through evermore minute abstractions based on empirical observation, until reaching the cell-form; and then moving *upwards* again, from the abstract to the concrete whole, "which this time would be not a chaotic conception of the whole but a rich totality of many determinations and relations" (2015:46; Ollman, 2003:116-8). This demonstrates the value of micro-dynamic analysis, in the case of this thesis: beginning with a broad conception of the absence of workers' collective action, moving through empirical consideration of emergent action and, hopefully, concluding with a broad explanatory framework.

For Vygotsky, the cell-form of individual subjectification is *artefact-mediated activity* as described above, but later developments in CHAT gradually abandon this notion. Most significantly, through activity systems, Engeström proposes beginning analysis with a

detailed, pre-formed framework including such mediating factors as community, rules and division of labour – a notion taken up by Barker and Krinsky. For Blunden, this is not conducive to studying the emergence of a subject in detail: it introduces foundations on which development takes place without consideration of precisely where those foundations come from – taking community, rules and division of labour as given (2010:232-3). Instead, Blunden seeks to return to the Vygotskian cell-form as a means of analysis, while also aiming to ensure that Vygotsky's model of ontogenesis can be applied to the analysis of sociogenesis. To do this, he proposes *projects* as the cell-form of human collaboration.

Projects, in Blunden's conception, are very similar to *activity systems* – they are collections of practices aimed at the same object – "the whole of which actions are part" (2010:255; 2014:7). Such practices are necessarily collaborative, taking place through artefact-mediated activity, such as through shared language (De Smet, 2015:55). The key difference between projects and activity systems, however, is that Blunden refuses the detailed internal structure which Engeström outlines. Rather than *artefacts, community, rules,* and *division of labour,* Blunden prescribes no necessary means of collaboration, leaving the researcher to identify the forms of artefact-mediated activity within the project under consideration. This is because in, Engeström's model, we find "that community is something given, along with rules, so that the individual's identity and/or their acceptance of the relevant community and norms seems to be taken for granted" (Blunden, 2014:233). The challenge for the researcher is to investigate such latent internal relations within collectives without defaulting to assumptions.

Otherwise, projects and activity systems share a great deal in common. They are both sites of human collaboration, and the building blocks of wider collaboration, given that they may nest within one another. Projects are simultaneously structural in that they provide a contextual backdrop for human activity, and agential in that they are themselves produced by human activity and are the means through which context may be transformed. This is analogous to Weeks' conception of human practices, as "both constituted by and constitutive of the structures that organize our experience" (2018:5), and of social systems as not "merely a force to which we are subjected, [but] also the product of our practices" (2018:96).

This is the basis on which De Smet develops CHAT further still, identifying the projects which constituted the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. In order to apply CHAT's wide-ranging and potentially unwieldy conceptual arsenal to an empirical instance of collective action, De Smet seeks to synthesise specific concepts with those developed by Antonio Gramsci, who acts as

a “translator” between Vygotskyan ontogenesis and the sociogenesis of antagonistic collective subjects (2015:12-13).

Deploying the double analytic movement described above, De Smet begins his empirical study with a conception of complex totality which served as the context for the Egyptian Revolution: the “*historical bloc*”, in Gramscian terms (1971:266), in which “historically developed and often contradictory relations of production, political forces, and cultural forms are united in a coherent and cohesive whole […] a cohesive and coherent unity of economic base, superstructures, and class alliances” (De Smet, 2015:131). Using CHAT, we can understand this context a macro-scale *project*, which in turn is the result of a long *prehistory* (a concept explored further in Chapter Four). In the case of capitalism itself, the commodity relation emerges from the long, violent prehistory of primitive accumulation (Marx, 1976:874); and in the case of revolutionary Egypt, De Smet moves through the deep historical lineages of colonialism, the formation of the Egyptian nation-state, Nasserism and neoliberalism to understand the historical bloc which contextualised the Mubarak regime and its antagonists in 2011.

This precedes a downwards analytic movement, identifying the meso-scale projects which constituted the “pillars” of the 2011 revolution – the civil-democratic and workers’ movements (2015:233) – and then further downward again, to the developmental processes through which these collective subjects form in the first place, with a particular focus on the Egyptian workers’ movement.

Having surveyed the use of CHAT to study collective subjects and contentious actors, in De Smet’s work we find the application of CHAT to the study of workers’ collective action specifically. The remainder of this thesis is heavily influenced by De Smet’s approach, and four key facets of it are outlined below as to demonstrate how the framework can facilitate the thorough study of workers’ collective action. Firstly, considering *multivocality* introduces CHAT’s conception of the *individual as a collaborative process*, and in turn illustrates how distinct projects collaborate with one another. Through such collaboration, the collective subject is formed in the workforce in the first place. Secondly, understanding the significance of *the immanence of resistance in the labour process* provides a conception of the move from grievance towards collective action, as workers experiment with means of resolving predicaments and, in doing so, may come to comprehend the nature of those predicaments as *collective*. Where they do not fail to do this, the collective subject becomes an antagonistic

one. Thirdly and fourthly, consideration of *leadership* from within and without the collective subject respectively helps us understand the spark which moves the actor to action, and the means by which action endures and develops.

2.4.3 Multivocality, or: collaboration between projects

Upon entry into the workplace, workers are in a "primordial" state of separation from each other, because their subjectivities have hereto developed elsewhere (De Smet, 2015:76). This initial multivocality – in Meluccian terms – is gradually undermined by experience of "the shared space of the labour process" where "individual workers have to participate in a shared activity in which ideal and material tools are deployed that organize the collaboration [needed to labour]" (2015:76). This is notably similar to Atzeni's conception of *compañerismo:* a "natural empathy" amongst workers, emerging through everyday cooperation in the workplace (2009:13). However, for De Smet *predicament* is the transformative bridge between this shared experience and collective recalcitrance, and analysis of the micro-dynamic means by which workers seek to overcome predicaments fills the gap left by Atzeni's invocation of spontaneity.

To focus on the issue of multivocality for now, CHAT approaches this *Meluccian challenge* through its conception of the individual as collaborative process, whereby individuation takes place through participation in projects, and resulting individuality is "the refraction, combination, and semi-stable crystallization of different subjectivities – i.e., the nature of the particular activities in which the person has taken part" (De Smet, 2015:34-5). In simpler terms, the individual reflects their social contexts, and those contexts are reflected through them – she exists as "an index of society in general and the specific collective subjects in which she participates (or has participated)" (2015:34-35). Such an individual is "not defined as a subject with a unitary and unifying essence, but as a 'living archaeological site' in which different levels of historical experience are 'at work'" – a project in herself (Thomas, 2009:394). Those historical experiences consist of different artefacts (such as vocabularies, knowledge of other instances of collective action, access to trade union resources) and initial different proleptic conceptions of the future (such as expectations regarding what wins are possible). Multivocality, then, can be conceived of not as simply competing ideas amongst individuals, but as the meeting, collaboration or clashing of projects represented by individuals.

But how is any kind of consensus achieved, given the potentially vast diversity of projects which may constitute and exist amongst individuals? This is through the practices that emerge during *collaboration*.

It is important, here, to understand projects not as static entities with fixed motivations, but as continuously changing through their interactions with each other, with their motivations existing not as external aims but emerging immanently from those interactions (De Smet, 2015:55). Blunden identifies three archetypal forms of collaboration: a project may seek to *colonise* other projects, encouraging reliance in pursuit of its own, distinct object; *commodification* sees an exchange between projects on ostensibly equal terms, but where one ultimately benefits more than the other; and *solidarity* sees each project orient towards mutual realisation of a shared aim (2010:284). However, it is rare to see one single form of collaboration win out absolutely, but more common to see projects constituted by "*uneven and combined development*", wherein one mode of collaboration leads and yet elements of others remain present; one project may dominate within the shared project, but others may remain nested alongside it asymmetrically; one neoformation (such as a particular strategy) may attain particular prominence, while others immanently compete with it (De Smet, 2015:127-9).

Ideally, collaboration would see productive tension, whereby agreement is reached through the combination of features from each tributary project which are most appropriate to the predicament at hand, developing new shared neoformations which allow for the overcoming of that predicament. Failure to achieve and continually develop such neoformations constitutes "pathology" in the collective subject, hindering further development (De Smet, 2015:353). For an empirical instance of this, we might look to the ultimate collapse of the alter-globalisation and Occupy movements of the 2000s and early 2010s, resulting in no small part from their failure to move beyond the tactics they initially deployed, or to resolve tensions within claims to "non-hierarchical" modes of organisation (Nunes, 2021:2; 16; 161-2.)

In its approach to multivocality, CHAT therefore responds to the first part of the Meluccian challenge discussed above, prising apart the ostensible unity of the collective subject, without collapsing into the strictly non-material account of clashing ideas proposed by Melucci. Chapters Six and Seven of this thesis will detail empirical instances of navigating multivocality in these terms.

2.4.4 The immanence of resistance in the labour process

Workers face innumerable predicaments in the workplace, ranging from struggles over health and safety to interpersonal conflict with colleagues, but ultimately these can each be traced back to the employment relationship – to the exploitation of labour-power in the production of surplus value, which necessitates the existence of the workplace in the first place (De Smet, 2015:69). In separating the working class from the means of subsistence and enforcing wage-dependency, capital produces its own potential antagonist: workers seeking to maximise their chances of survival and flourishing, contra capital's efforts to extract maximum labour-power from them for minimal cost.

The forms of struggle (or neoformations) that workers develop in response to discrete workplace predicaments shape the collective subject which emerges. Instances of misbehaviour including absenteeism, theft, cheating, quitting and so on constitute a campaign of "underground warfare" in Gramscian terms: they act as latent modes of struggle – as survival mechanisms – and are incapable of fully resolving predicament alone. But they can also act as a potential prehistory to more explicit, open resistance – such as in "wars of position" in which workers gradually but openly conduct instances of conflict (comparable to McAlevey's conceptions of "deep organising" and "structure tests" (2016:98; 34)); and in "wars of movement" which see "frontal attack" through withdrawing labour (De Smet, 2015:107-8). Per Vygotsky's conception of neoformations and De Smet's conception of uneven and combined development, elements of each of these may be present all at once, but one tends to lead.

How, then, does a subject move between these: from aiming to only survive at work – by misbehaving, by quitting, or even by complying – to all-out war of movement with the employer? The possibility of collective action is immanent within the very tension that results from entering into the employment relation – within the indeterminacy of labour-power. The reliance of the employer on the collective labour of workers imbues the latter with enormous disruptive potential (Hughes and Woodcock, 2023:71). According to CHAT, the challenge is for workers to realise and effectively harness that potential.

De Smet illustrates this move between modes of struggle using concepts deployed by Vygotsky and Gramsci. In Vygotskian terms, the developing child first encounters personal, corporeal experience before gradually – and with assistance from others – developing abstract, conceptual thought based on those experiences. The ongoing dialectical interaction

between these "everyday" and "scientific lines of development" results in "true concepts" – co-constituted practical activity and abstracted knowledge, operating seamlessly together (De Smet, 2015:93-5). In equivalent Gramscian terms, every individual practices "spontaneous philosophy" simply by responding "to certain specific problems posed by reality" in the immediate term (1971:324). This mode of thinking is "mechanically imposed by the external environment", inherited uncritically by the subject from their context – it is "common sense" (De Smet, 2015:323; 419). It tends to understand predicaments as "disjointed and episodic" (De Smet, 2015:324) and subsequently proposes solutions which may provide temporary reprieve but which pose no fundamental challenge to the overarching predicament at hand – such as misbehaviour in the workplace (Blunden, 2014:8). When failure occurs from deploying common sense efforts at resolution, the subject may enter a crisis wherein it remains "trapped in a fragmented, incoherent, and powerless condition, which constitutes another pathology", or it may build on those previous efforts at resolution, learn from them, internalise their most effective elements, and continuously undertake new activities aiming to produce more effective neoformations (De Smet, 2015:113-4). This is how, as above, instances of misbehaviour at work may operate as prehistories to more explicit forms of collective action – through the worker learning the limitations of such efforts and internalising their more effective elements.

For Gramsci, such learning is best when it results in "*philosophy proper*": the *comprehension* of problems as existing in wider context – such as placing specific workplace issues in the context of the wage relation, going beyond the fragmentary, commonsensical conception of issues as discrete. The move between spontaneous philosophy and philosophy proper begins with shared collective experience – *compañerismo* in the workplace, in Atzeni's terms. Through comprehension that such problems are collective, a "*philosophy of praxis*" emerges, in which the worker – in an instance of autoproleptic anticipating of what capacities are needed – realises that they themselves must consciously and deliberately act alongside their colleagues in order to overcome those problems (De Smet, 2015:93-7).

Other Marxists advance similar conceptions of comprehension, epitomised most famously in the move between class-in-itself and for-itself (for an overview, see: Vester, 2023). For Freire, the first stage in the transformation of conditions sees "the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through praxis commit themselves to its transformation" (2017:28). In perceiving *limit-situations* (analogous to Vygotsky's *predicaments*) not as "insurmountable barriers" but as challenges which can be overcome through deliberate action, "[h]umankind

emerge from their submersion and acquire the ability to intervene in reality as it is unveiled" (2017:82).

Weeks provides a valuable account of the way in which comprehension is necessarily based upon "common sense". In her study on feminist subjectivity, Weeks considers how "subjects so systematically constructed and well prepared to submit to the existing order of things [as women] can also collectively defy it" (2018:136). She understands this move from subjection to resistance as a move between *subject position* – subjectification as imposed, in the form of assigned womanhood – and *standpoint*: "a collective interpretation of a particular subject position […] derived from political practice, from a collective effort to *revalue and reconstitute specific practices*" (2018:136, my emphasis). This revaluation and reconstitution means that the emergence of a feminist subject is not the immediate transcending of the subjectification imposed through gender, but rather sees subjects build upon and beyond that subjectification. Weeks' standpoint theory "focuses not only on the exploitative dimensions of the gender division of labor but also on the potentially positive dimensions of women's laboring practices, on the alternative ontologies and epistemologies that these practices may be able to sustain" (2018:91). Care, in particular, is one such instance of a gendered labouring practice from which antagonistic feminist subjectivity may emerge.

In other words, the master's tools *can* be used to dismantle the master's house – indeed, they are the best tools for doing so. The conditions imposed on workers in efforts to extract surplus value are at the same time the conditions for collective resistance, outlined through an empirical example in Chapter Six and Seven. Weeks, however, adds an important corollary to this theory of immanence. While it is the case that the basis for resistance is found in existing circumstances, not every feature of those circumstances provide the best basis for action. In reality, resistance emerges from specific elements which are the most conducive to it, in a *selective* form of immanence (2018:136). This selection is not an act of mere ideation; Weeks does not "suggest that we can rummage through our collective interpretations of women's practices and simply choose an identity" (2018:137). Rather, selection occurs through practice – through attempts, failure, success, and learning. The best foundations for resistance are identified through practice – in Vygotskyan terms, through the internalisation of neoformations.

We can thus ascertain from CHAT – and, indeed, from Marxism more broadly – that the possibility of collective action exists imminently even in the fragmentary subject who is

struggling against predicament, but in order to develop it must be cultivated through a long, non-linear process of learning through practice, which is laden with potential "pathologies". An empirical instance of this process of comprehension is described in Chapter Six, where the basis for resistance is recognised in the unlikely subject of the neoliberal entrepreneur.

2.4.5 Internal leadership and articulation in context

As it takes place in shared circumstances, comprehension is necessarily a *collective* process. Yet it may be the case that it is initially expressed by single individual, who then undertakes the task of generalising it amongst a collective body, potentially sparking action – as is described in Chapter Seven. This does not contradict the strong collectivist ontology of CHAT, but reflects CHAT's conception of individuals as composites of the projects from which they emerge. Per De Smet, we can understand this with reference to Gramsci's "organic intellectuals" (or "more capable peer" in Vygotsky's equivalent terms), who emerge as "specialists" in particular functions of their class – specifically in technical production, cultural innovation, or political articulation (De Smet, 2012:144; Gramsci, 1971:6; 97). This is a conception of individual leadership "not as that which authoritatively orders a mass into a socially stable and obedient people, but as what springs forth [from that mass]" (Toscano, 2023:202).

Such individuals may be said to possess characteristics that make them particularly well-suited to identify and articulate the predicaments which they share with others, and subsequently to generalise that comprehension amongst their peers. Crucially however, such characteristics are not innate. They emerge from and rely on the reciprocal recognition of those characteristics as *appropriate* by peers, and they are proven to be appropriate through practice, when seeking to attain their object. For example, subversive humour might be recognised as an appropriate leadership trait by peers at early stages in the cohering of a collective subject, but that recognition might be withdrawn should the collective subject develop new approaches to resolving its predicament, deeming different practices appropriate, such as seriousness needed during negotiations (Kramer, 2020:158; De Smet, 2015:256; Weeks, 2018:142-3).

Reflecting the dynamic and changeable nature of context, appropriate practices may be led by different individuals at different times. In some cases, the tendency of one leader to compromise may be appropriate and may help a project endure difficult circumstances. In others, the same approach may fatally damage the collective subject, and new leaders may be

identified as more appropriate (Toscano, 2023:203). As such, De Smet's CHAT proposes a "leaderful" conception of the collective subject, in which leadership is defined not by position but by function, and different individuals may emerge as leaders depending on their appropriate practice in context (Nulman and Cole, 2023; Nunes, 2021:46-7). Here, we see Weeks' selective immanence, described above, in action. But what features of context make one approach more appropriate than another? Why should one tactic in a dispute be selected over others by workers? CHAT answers this through the *Zone of Proximal Development* (henceforth: ZPD).

Returning to Vygotsky, the ZPD denotes what neoformations a subject is capable of at any given point in its development (1978:86). For example, a one-year-old child will not be capable of coherent speech, but of semi-coherent babbling which anticipates future speech. An emergent collective worker-subject will not be able to abolish the wage system, but may be capable of escalating acts of disruption. The lower and upper boundaries of development are set by the conditions in which the subject finds itself – historical-material and cultural-ideational conditions, such as the position a particular group of workers holds in a production chain, and the extent of the social imaginary permitted in wider ideological context (Fisher, 2009; De Smet, 2015:288).

In reality of course, it is enormously difficult to identify the ZPD in-situ. Appropriateness of tactics and strategies is a matter of constant contestation within collective subjects. Both attempts to quickly surpass the upper boundaries of the ZPD and insistences that a project stick cautiously to its lower boundaries will likely see leadership damage its base (De Smet, 2015:117). Attempts to introduce advanced ideas without referencing the everyday – such as calling for a general strike when overall levels of industrial action are low – will likely fail and, if pursued, may severely damage the project. Deploying previously appropriate tactics in moments of crisis might have the same result, such as petitioning when there is demand for strike action (De Smet, 2015:102). Chapter Five explored an empirical instance of this difficulty in an analysis of strategising in an industrial dispute.

We can relate this back to the concept of *prolepsis* – to conceptions of the future. One instance of proleptic leadership might anticipate joining a union, another might anticipate participating in a violent revolution, and either may fall within a collective subject's ZPD depending on the nature of their predicament at the time. The individual who is able identify the most appropriate course of action "scaffolds" the development of their peers, encouraging

appropriate speeds and extents of movement from spontaneous philosophy to philosophy proper, from exploitation to comprehension, underground warfare to war of position, grievance to action and so on (Wald and Harland, 2022:418; De Smet, 2015:99). By adpting evermore appropriate practices, the upper limits of the ZPD are expanded (Freire, 2017:23).

This outlines the importance of "organic leaders" in the workplace and provides us with means of identifying them – not by their innate personal charisma, but by the appropriateness of their proposals. This dynamic nature of leadership is explored in detail in Chapter Seven. Contra McAlevey however, worker-activists with predeveloped political vocabularies may be precisely the leaders who are needed in some circumstances. After all, alongside developing in their immediate context, the practices which constitute an organic intellectual can also be developed through experience of prior collective action and fostered through assistance by "traditional intellectuals" (De Smet, 2015:255; 99).

2.4.6 External leadership and assistance

Alongside autoprolepsis and the development of neoformations by the subject in its immediate context, heterolepsis sees the subject guided by others who are external to itself. For Vygotsky, such external instruction is as essential as a "motor" for development; the child cannot learn without parents, siblings, teachers and so on (De Smet, 2015:52). Transposing this to sociogenesis, De Smet draws on Gramsci's conception of "traditional intellectuals" to identify figures outside of the workplace who may assist the collective-worker subject in developing towards collective action. These might include progessional trade unionists as in McAlevey's model for emergent action, but may also extend to leftist activists, other political actors (such as the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian case), academics, journalists, artists and any range of figures from beyond the workplace (2015: 257-71).

The precise configuration of external instructors is less significant than the nature of the instruction that they provide, particularly whether it is appropriate to the subject's ZPD or not, and therefore whether it is conducive to developing effective neoformations or not. Instruction that takes the form of *solidarity*, as outlined in Section 2.4.3 above, is likely to do this – as when leftist artists were able support the occupation of Tahrir Square through the ostensibly simple act of providing entertainment, which in turn helped protestors develop a conception of themselves as a revolutionary subject (2015:399). Instruction which aims at the *colonisation* of one project by another, on the other hand, is likely to encourage activities

which are inappropriate to the predicament at hand and cause "*pathology*", as in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood's attempts to subsume workers' emergent critique of capital within a nationalist paradigm, positing Egyptian workers against foreign workers, fragmenting and weakening the worker-subject (2015:276). Freire, similarly, distinguishes between *solidaristic* and *charitable* approaches to education, between struggling in tandem and bestowing knowledge from above, with the former providing the basis for development and the latter stunting it (2017:19-24). In many cases of course, instruction will see "combined and uneven development" of such tendencies. Workers will accept or reject some aspects of instruction, in turn changing the nature of the instructing subject in an act of mutual learning through struggle (De Smet, 2015:90). This dynamic, applied rank and file workers and unions, is explored in Chapter Five.

This emphasis on instruction does not contradict the need for the subject, in CHAT, to drive its own development. The question of whether workers can emancipate themselves in total isolation is, in effect, an academic thought experiment, because "[i]n any social formation, workers confront and are confronted by other collective subjects that mediate their developmental trajectory" (2015:257). Each empirical chapter of this thesis outlines instances of such confrontation, whereby workers collaborate and clash with trade unions, socialist activists, workers from other sectors and more, resulting in complex and volatile processes of mutual learning.

2.4.7 Challenges in applying CHAT

De Smet's CHAT therefore provides a rich, detailed and dynamic framework for understanding the emergence of subversive collective subjects in the workplace. Beginning from the conditions imposed by the employment relationship, the worker-subject proceeds through collaborative and contested efforts at problem solving which may result in the comprehension and exercise of that subject's disruptive power.

From this, De Smet proceeds to analyse the merger of the worker subject and civil-democratic subject within the Egyptian revolutionary project, crystalised in Tahrir Square during "a moment in which this molecular accumulation of economic strikes and protests, and political sit-ins and demonstrations was forged into a meaningful, salient, and explicit whole – into a quantitatively and qualitatively new project of revolutionary change" (2015:105). That CHAT can extend to such a large-scale collective subject points to the wide applicability of this framework. The outline in this chapter only scratches the surface of

CHAT's vocabulary, based on what is most useful to the study of emergent workers' collective action (Meshcheryakov, 2007:155-6). In order to maximise said utility in the context of this thesis, the potential pitfalls of CHAT must be identified and addressed.

Firstly, to begin at a broad level, CHAT's features necessitate a coherent theorisation of how human society functions. For example, the claim that individuals are social subjects, forged in and through context, demands a coherent conception of that context – of how totality itself functions. While not engaging with CHAT, Weeks identifies this problem in her overview of feminist systems theories' limited conceptions of totality (2018: 74-88). In CHAT's case, Marxism might be said to provide its conception of totality. But, due to its scope – its wide applicability as a potential *theory of everything* – CHAT is at near-constant risk of being detached from its Marxist roots. Ratner and Silva point out the ease with which CHAT's Marxism has been historically discarded by psychologists drawing on the tradition through piecemeal use of Vygotsky's concepts, divorcing them from their Marxist genesis; through the removal of any emancipatory political implications in CHAT's conception of subjectification; and through applying CHAT only to the psychology of individuals, making no effort to study sociogenesis (2017:8-11).

This risk demands that we wed CHAT to an explicitly Marxist theory that recognises the antinomous nature of capitalism, as De Smet attempts with his "translation" via Gramsci. While Gramscian CHAT goes some way in producing a theory that is applicable to empirical sociogenesis as above, it carries its own risk. Gramsci's emphasis on ideology risks subjectivism – a conception of culture as "disembodied idealization if it is conceived in separation from materiality", exemplified by postmodern readings of Gramsci (Omodeo, 2020:16-17). This is particularly the case when considering subjects' *comprehension* of their circumstances, where there is a risk of emphasising ideation over artefact-mediated activity. It demands a synthesis with a thoroughly and clearly dialectical materialism, in order to avoid any stark duality between the ideational and the material, and to provide a realistic conception of totality.

Secondly, the precise form of Marxism deployed in CHAT is significant. If it is not a holistic one which recognises the nature of capitalism as totality, it can result in a neglect of how the seemingly *noneconomic* features of totality are conceptualised. De Smet exemplifies in this in bemoaning the mid-20thcentury shift in Marxists' focus "away from grand actions such as mass strikes and demonstration, and reoriented towards 'everyday', 'invisible', or

'molecular' forms of resistance", and in claiming that there is value in studying workers "as members of their community, as religious believers, and so on, but it is not an analysis of class formation" (2015:73). This is an unhelpfully vulgar boundary between the micro and the macro, the social and the economic, the workplace and its outside. It can result in an insufficient analysis of empirical reality. In De Smet's account of the emergent collective subject, the worker first enters the workplace with "subjectivities [which] are subsumed under other subjectivities and acquire some stability in the shared space of the labour process" (2015:76). There is a degree of truth to this of course in that compañerismo is forged in the labour process, but in reality degrees of shared subjectivity always pre-exist workers' entry into the workplace, through the projects by which workers are produced and reproduced in the first place: through social reproduction (Bhattacharya, 2017a:1). The worker subject is not genderless, raceless, and without differentiation at any point – neither before they enter the workplace nor within it. In excluding consideration of such characteristics from the study of "class formation", De Smet falls into a trap identified by Neil Davidson, whereby some Marxists claim that capitalism could, theoretically, exist without racialising and gendering dynamics, overlooking that this has never been the case in its cultural-historical reality (2021:340-2). This has significant implications for empirical study, which this thesis will demonstrate in relation to the significance of ethno-linguistic and gendered dynamics in Chapters Six and Seven. Any Marxist theory which CHAT is wedded to for corrective purposes should understand such dynamics as essential elements of class.

The final relevant pitfall similarly focuses on CHAT's application to empirical study. While Blunden's conception of *projects* is hugely useful as a means of understanding subjects as simultaneously constituted by context and shaping context, the identification of multiple projects – interacting with, overlapping, and nested within one another – could quite simply go on forever. We might boil strike action down to constituting projects by identifying the multivocal motivations amongst participating workers, and then boil those down to individual preferences, and then boil those further down to the origins of those preferences in individuals' personal histories. Ultimately, the methodological utility of *projects* risks being clouded by the steam of evermore micro-level analysis. There is a heuristic need to identify which levels of analysis are most relevant to the matter at hand.

2.5 Class Composition Analysis

In seeking safeguards and correctives to apply to the risks and tendencies identified above, Class Composition Analysis (henceforth: CCA) is particularly appropriate. It shares a great deal of empirical and methodological ground with CHAT, and has been applied to the study of emergent workers' collective action, not least in the same sector as is analysed in the remainder of this thesis (Cant, 2019; Woodcock, 2021).

Ben Trott (2017) identifies CCA as one of the four theoretical hallmarks of *Operaismo* – a Marxist tendency which emerged in 1960s Italy. Steve Wright goes further, identifying CCA as Operaismo's "most distinctive category" (2017:3). While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a detailed outline of Operaist theory in its entirety (see the aforementioned authors for such accounts), it is necessary to contextualise CCA to some degree.

Key to Operaismo is Mario Tronti's "Copernican revolution" in approaching the analysis of capitalism: beginning not with capital's imposition of control upon the workforce and wider society, but identifying workers' struggle as "the internal motor of capitalist development" (Thoburn, 2022:289; Tronti, 2019:65; Cant, 2020:141) – a conception summarised by the publication *Notes from Below*: "Through class struggle, capitalism changes itself" (2023). This approach is contested from multiple points of view (e.g. Border, 2020; Nunes, 2021:22; Pitts, 2022; Thompson and Pitts, 2023) but, for the purposes of this thesis, it is useful in its insistence on detailed attention to workers' struggle. This utility is visible in Operaismo's resolve, given its emergence in tension with 1960s Italy's established labour movement, to "analyse the working class independently of the workers' movement" (Tronti, 2019:67) – paying attention to latent processes of emergent action.

CCA is Operaismo's effort at "analytical abstraction towards the totality of capitalist social relations" (Cant, 2020:95). It does so by analysing the compositions – or internal characteristics – of the working and employing classes. Said characteristics are conceived of as being in constant flux, continuously altered through workers' agential action and capital's response (Milburn, 2019:23). The working class is composed according to capital's organisation of work, to which it responds with subversive activity based on the indeterminacy of labour-power, only to be met by capital introducing new methods of control which, if successful, *decompose* the working class' organisational forms and subversive capacity, leading to a need for the class to *recompose* itself by finding new modes of resistance. Thus both capital and labour's capacities are developed through an immanent

unfolding: “[i]nnovations by labour led to innovations by capital, which led to further innovations by labour, which led to further innovations by capital, and so on” (Kumar, 2020:53). The concepts of class decomposition and recomposition provide an alternative to CHAT’s analogy for stagnant subject-development – “*pathology*” – one which implies far greater potential for overcoming stagnation.

2.5.1 Threefold CCA

CCA facilitates analysis of collective subject-formation by distinguishing between the “technical” and “political” composition of classes, with “social” composition being recently developed by Notes from Below (2018a). These three forms of composition – as articulated by Callum Cant (2020), Sai Englert et al. (2020), and Jamie Woodcock (2021) – act as abstractions through which we can understand the broader class project.

Technical composition refers to “the way that labour-power is organised with capital to produce a productive process” (Englert et al., 2020:134). Per Operaismo’s conception of cycles of struggle between labour and capital, Cant emphasises its dynamism given that “each individual capitalist has to [continuously] respond both to renewed forms of the refusal of work, and to the conditions in the sphere of production as a whole in order to maintain constant accumulation” (2020a:134). Technical composition is comparable to Labour Process Theory’s *labour process* then, but with a conception of workers’ agential practices as transformative. Specifically, attempts by capital to intensify control in the workplace see the opening of immanent potential for workers’ resistance. Through capital’s efforts to organise technical composition, workers are confronted with a choice between abasement – perhaps the extension of the working day, or cut in pay, for example – and resistance (2020a:138).

The initial exclusion of *social composition* in Operaismo’s original formulation of CCA indicates a neglect of feminist and anti-racist theory which only serves to impoverish the tradition, but its development by the editors of Notes from Below supersedes this. Woodcock credits this to CCA’s engagement with empirical reality, whereby social composition was conceived through “concrete engagement with workers’ struggle in the run-up to the launch of Notes from Below. We found that the way workers are socially composed, including ‘where workers live and in what kind of housing, the gendered division of labour, patterns of migration, racism, community infrastructure, and so on’ had an important impact on class composition” (2020:18). This avoids the risk, identified above in De Smet’s CHAT, of defaulting to analysis of a phantasmal genderless, raceless worker (Davidson, 2021:340-2).

Social composition is "the specific material organisation of workers into a class society through the social relations of consumption and reproduction" (Notes from Below, 2018a). Applied to the study of workplace conflict, it is used to understand precisely how "extra-productive relations influence the balance of power within production" (Cant, 2020:146). Importantly however, those extra-productive relations are not to be confused with relations which exist exclusively "outside the workplace" (though this confusion briefly appears in Notes from Below, 2023:7). Rather, as Cant details, while the relations considered in social composition do not directly produce surplus value, by producing and shaping labouring subjects they are necessarily present in the workplace, through the characteristics of workers (2020a:157-9). As such, "[t]here is no firewall between social and technical compositions", and neat separation is impossible (2020a:167).

This same conception can be found in *Social Reproduction Theory*, which refuses any analytic distinction between "two separate spaces and two separate processes of production, the economic and the social – often understood as the workplace and the home", instead seeking to understand the dynamic co-constitution of both (Bhattacharya, 2017b:75). The value of such an approach is demonstrated through contrast with two alternative theoretical approaches: *intersectionality* and *Dual-Systems Theory*. In the former, differences and oppressions are understood as "independently constituted" but at times interlocking, as outlined in David McNally's overview of such approaches (2017:96-9); and in the latter, patriarchy is understood as *distinct from* but *interacting with* capitalist exploitation, as outlined by Weeks (2018:79-81). When social order is conceived of as the combination of independent parts, the dynamic nature and consequences of the interrelation of those parts is obscured. Instead of a processual conception of reality – in which capitalism, race, and gender intertwine in ways which may mutually reinforce each other or open any of them to challenge – we find ourselves in a world of "monolithic unities centred around simplistic formulas" which bulldoze complexity (Weeks, 2018:29). There is, of course, a risk of defaulting to this duality in CCA's distinction between technical and social compositions, but that risk is taken in order to supersede the pitfall posed by the homogenous worker subject, and can be avoided through careful, thorough analysis as demonstrated by contemporary threefold CCA to-date.

Finally, *political composition* refers to the agential activity of worker subjects. Englert et al. acknowledge that "one of the challenges of workerism has always been [conceptualising] the leap from the technical to the political" (2020:139), and close reading of texts associated with

Notes from Below identifies two contrasting definitions of political composition. In the first, political composition is defined as *explicit, open confrontation with capital;* as "the self-organisation of the working class into a force for class struggle. This includes factors like the tactics employed by worker resistance, forms of worker organisation, and the expression of class struggle in politics" (Notes from Below, 2018a). It is understood as emerging through a "leap" from technical composition alone in some accounts (Notes from Below, 2018a; Woodcock, 2021:17), or from combined technical and social composition in others (Cant, 2020a:178; 210). At times, Cant identifies this as a particularly long-distance leap: a qualitative shift in the object of workers' action from immediate, everyday interests, seeking to improve condition within existing capitalist order, to wider class interests, aimed at fundamentally challenging that order – in other words, as the emergence of a *revolutionary* subject (2020a:197; 200; 119).

The second definition presents a broader conception of working class political composition, wherein "the political composition of the class concerns the organisational capacities possessed by the proletariat *at any one point in time* (and these may be best analysed through the instances of their expression in collective action)" (Cant, 2020a:204, my emphasis). Here, rather than necessarily entailing an advance to explicit confrontation or shift to revolutionary praxis, political composition may denote wider instances of "how workers are organised politically" (Notes from Below, no date) – from struggle to acquiescence, compliance, strikebreaking, or collective action for reactionary ends, such as excluding migrant workers or opposing environmentalist measures. This thesis adopts this second definition of political composition, using CCA to understand workers' activity ranging from striking to strike-breaking. In doing so, it draws on Rodrigo Nunes' insight that "there is no such thing as absence of organisation" (2021:7-8) – that the ostensible appearance of such an absence might itself act as a starting point for the analysis of collective subjects (2021:7-8); and on Barker's insight that apparent "passivity" is "itself a complex mixture of practices, impulses, and ideas" (2021:41).

2.5.2 Towards synthesis

In combination, threefold CCA and CHAT fill gaps in each other's' analytic approaches. Though there is a degree of tension between the two – indeed, Operaismo emerged partially as a critique of Gramsci, specifically interpretations of his work which they charged with "neglect[ing] the critique of material conditions in favour of matters ideological" (Wright,

2017:25; Thoburn, 2022:288) – there are also points of significant similarity. Both analyse the dynamics of emergent workers' collective action, looking to latent processes behind explicit forms (Read, 2003:14). Both emphasise *immanence*, visible for example in Tronti's declaration that "[i]n an enemy society, we cannot freely choose the means we use to fight it. And the weapons of proletarian revolt have always been taken from the bosses' arsenals" (2019:xxiii). And both recognise that, through struggle – through efforts at resolving predicament – workers' subjectivity and material conditions constantly interact in composing subversive subjects (Reed, 2003:13).

Applied carefully, CCA can provide CHAT with firmly Marxist underpinnings which prevent theoretical drift. Its threefold conception of class composition acts as heuristic abstraction, focusing analysis on three specific abstractions which constitute the worker subject (Ollman, 2003:74). This, in turn, ties CHAT to a partial conception of totality: as constituted by the three compositions in tandem. This is only *partial* because, per Weeks: "[r]ather than expect to know totality in all its plenitude, we should aspire to grasp the complexity of systematic social relations, even though, as the term suggests, reality will always be in excess of these attempts to represent it" (2018:97). Through the abstraction of technical, social and political compositions, CCA both recognises that workers' activity is shaped by "determinate conditions" (Trott, 2017:314) – which we might consider analogous to CHAT's ZPD – and that workers' activity transforms its context through agential action, shaping the nature of capitalism itself (2017:312).

In turn, CHAT can provide a means of more thoroughly conceptualising the "leap" through which workers' political activity emerges – less through a sudden movement, than through a pedagogic process of experimentation, internalisation, comprehension and activity. And it can focus CCA on analysis of the micro-dynamics through which collective subjects emerge, avoiding any risk of dissolving the specificity of everyday interactions into higher-level abstractions. The remainder of this thesis aims to develop the synthesis of these theoretical frameworks through their application to analysing real-world struggle.

2.6 Conclusion

Based on the literature review conducted in Chapter One, this chapter has introduced a theoretical framework for understanding how workers' collective action emerges, recognising the significance of interaction between ideas and material conditions – to the extent that both are co-constitutive. This framework emerges through a study of CHAT – with particular

value identified in the theory as articulated by De Smet – and use of threefold CCA to address pitfalls. Its value will be proven in proceeding chapters.

Chapter Three: Research Methods

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the analytic strategy and research methods adopted in this thesis to understand the emergence of collective action in non-unionised work. Based on the theoretical framework developed through the first two chapters, an overarching analytic approach to research was adopted: a *downward analytic movement*, described below in Section 3.2. This entails a move between macro- and micro-levels of analysis, from the wider context of emergent collective action to specific details – through an in-depth empirical case study – and back up again with greater explanatory clarity. This thesis aims to achieve this by drawing on a range of methodological practices primarily developed in ethnographic research – specifically in Michael Burawoy's *Extended Case Method*, which explicitly aims at relating micro-dynamic empirical details to macro-level theoretical insights (2009:70). Section 3.3 describes precisely how such practices were deployed in this research through participant observation, interviews, a focus group, and documentary analysis. The section concludes by considering, in light of this overall approach, issues relating to ethics, positionality, intervention, and partisanship, recognising that this research, whilst on the side of workers in conflict with capital, makes no claim to act "in service" of the struggle described herein.

3.2 Analytic strategy

In line with the theoretical framework developed in Chapter Two, the empirical chapters of this thesis undertake a *downward analytic movement*: beginning with a vague conception of the whole; studying the object in increasingly minute detail; and then ascending back to the whole having clarified its nature (De Smet: 2015:46-7). The "whole" in this case – the problem with which the thesis begins – is the ostensible absence of workers' collective action in Britain's non-unionised private sector.

A case was sought which appeared anomalous to these conditions – one where workers undertook visible, open resistance in non-unionised private sector work. This deliberate attention to anomaly serves as a means of understanding *absence* by identifying the causes of *presence* – of exploring why workers take collective action as a means of recognising why, in so many cases, they do not. This is in line with the use of anomaly to strengthen theory in the Extended Case Method (Burawoy, 2009:21; Tavory and Timmermans, 2009:250).

The food delivery platform sector is a rich site of such anomalous cases, where both union-led and wildcat strike action are remarkably common, as discussed in Section 4.3 of Chapter Four below. The Stuart Delivery dispute of December 2021 – July 2022 was ongoing as this research commenced, and provided a means of carrying out the downward movement: accessing the dispute through involvement in the union leading it; gathering data on the nature of conflict against a private sector employer without any union recognition agreement; and from there accessing workers directly as they undertook collective action as part of the dispute. Chapters Four through Seven reflect this process: beginning by considering the nature of the platform economy and workers' struggle therein; moving to an analysis of this specific dispute in Chapter Five; and descending to the level of the workplace, where collective action emerged, in Chapters Six and Seven. This is "a reconstruction of each stage in the development process: the process must be turned back to its initial stages" (De Smet, 2015:49) The thesis' Conclusion then confirms the theoretical insights derived from this process, returning to macro-level of explanatory theory.

In the Extended Case Method, a similar movement is practiced through participant observation in conjunction with theorisation (2009:xii). Burawoy advocates moving "from heaven to earth through studying the microfoundations of macroprocesess" and "from earth to heaven through studying the macrofoundations of microprocesses", avoiding the detachment of theory from empirical reality and vice versa (2009:10-11). This is achieved through case study research, whereby the researcher "collects multiple readings of a single case and aggregates them into social processes" (2009:41).

While an argument could be made for undertaking multiple, comparative case studies on various instances of emergent collective action, the use of a single case study allows for particular depth within the limited time available, accessing micro-level details through intensive immersion (Punch, 2013:120). This is invaluable given this thesis' attempt to capture both the wider context and finer, micro-level details of emergent collective action. Moreover, as outlined below, immersion in the Stuart dispute facilitated access to multiple instances of collective action involving different food delivery workers in discrete geographic locations, each under the umbrella of the dispute. Subsequently, this resulted in a practice akin to that developed in multi-sited ethnography, whereby insights from multiple sites are harmonised in a coherent account (Boccagni, 2019).

3.3 In the field: the researcher's perspective

3.3.1 Participant observation

Participant observation constituted the primary research method used for this thesis, aimed at "doing things with" with participants, accessing their relevant knowledge regarding the object of study (Burawoy, 2009:41). My research within the Stuart dispute began on the 23rd of March 2022, with a phonecall with a paid organiser from the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB). I had previously undertaken both research and voluntary work with the IWGB, and so access was not difficult to negotiate with the leadership of the union. Fieldwork commenced immediately, with participation in an IWGB-led protest at Greggs headquarters in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on the 24th of March, discussed in Section 5.3.2 of Chapter Five. That evening, I joined a socialist volunteer and striking courier from Sheffield in visiting two picket lines in the North East of England, beginning the processes of observing couriers' collective action firsthand.

From the outset of my fieldwork I was added to multiple digital chats, starting with the "Stuart Coordination" chat, launched by the IWGB to manage the campaign, as outlined in Section 5.3.1. Involvement in this chat cemented my role as one amongst several socialist volunteers within the campaign, willing to visit areas where the campaign was ongoing or emergent alongside IWGB staff members. This role involved attending frequent IWGB-run meetings regarding the campaign, at which I would usually volunteer to take minutes. This was the means by which I became a *participant* observer in the dispute, sharing a positionality similar to the other socialist volunteers described in Chapters Four and Five below – politically and practically committed to the campaign, but recognising that I was neither a courier nor a member of the IWGB and thus should avoid imposing my strategic preferences upon it. Visits to different areas were a key task undertaken by socialist volunteers, and as I participated in these I was added to additional digital chats which the IWGB had set up to integrate couriers in different areas into the Stuart campaign. From this point onwards, my research adopted elements of digital participant observation, being careful to follow the ethical guidance outlined by Barbaros and Milan (2019), most pertinently by ensuring that participants in digital chats were aware of my presence as a researcher. I kept fieldnotes from both in-person and digital observation in the same diary, producing 126,947 words of notes between March 23rd and August 31st.

As described in Chapters Four and Five, Sheffield was the site where the Stuart campaign emerged, building on the infrastructure of the IWGB Couriers Sheffield group which had been operating in the city since 2019. As this research aims to study emergent action amongst workforces without such an established organisational infrastructure, I made the deliberate choice to focus on towns and cities where the IWGB had no presence prior to the Stuart dispute. In total, I visited seven such areas between March and August across the North of England, whilst also carrying out a small amount of research in Sheffield in order to understand the campaign overall. The names of these locations are pseudonymised in order to protect the identities of participants, except in the case of Sheffield which is so well-known as the leading area in the dispute as to render pseudonymisation superfluous:

Pseudonymised location	**Number of discrete visits (note that some visits spanned several consecutive days)**
Farmbridge	10
Callbrough	5
Lenton	5
Sheffield (not pseudonymised)	4
Newborough	2
Mowbury	1
Boothshill	1
Hargrave	1

Table 01: Areas where workers' collective action was observed.

Initial visits saw me observing picket lines and offering to do menial tasks – primarily taking photographs for the IWGB to use in social media (Fieldnotes 14.03.22, Mowbury). This, however menial, was itself an intervention in the campaign, as those photographs of picket lines and meetings of couriers in carparks were used to encourage action in other areas. Gradually, the extent of my interventions increased as I visited areas where couriers were considering collective action and as I observed experienced IWGB volunteers and staff

"pitch" participation to them, as described in Chapter Five. I handed IWGB leaflets out to couriers and took minutes during meetings in carparks where couriers considered taking action. Overall, I participated in eleven such meetings, four leafletting sessions and eight picket lines.

Participating in such activities helped me gain the trust of potential participants over time, per Philip Balsiger and Alexandre Lambelet: "having one more person to stand in the cold rain and distribute pamphlets is much appreciated by small groups who have a hard time mobilizing" (2014:155). It also allowed me to have one-to-one conversations with workers – particularly whilst handing out leaflets and standing on picket lines – and to observe decision-making processes between workers during meetings. However, its most obvious limitation was that it entailed a heavy initial reliance on the union as a gatekeeper, with two particularly noteworthy consequences. First, it meant that the IWGB's leadership viewed me as a resource by which they could spread the campaign, which to some degree I was willing to lean into as a means of deepening my relationship with the campaign. In one instance of tension in this reciprocal relationship, however, whilst I was seeking to build relationships with couriers in a particular area, union staff sought to re-direct me to visit a different area where action was emerging (Fieldnotes 06.05.22, Stuart Coordination chat). Second – and perhaps more significantly given the subject of this research – it meant that workers sometimes assumed that I was an official union representative (Fieldnotes 26.03.22, Lenton; 04.04.22, Sheffield). As outlined in preceding chapters, this research deliberately aims to access workers' perspectives within and beyond the public narratives presented by unions, and this misconception presented a particular threat to achieving this. I sought to mitigate this by making clear in all interactions with participants that I was independent of the union and that I was conducting research, which was made easier by the standard practice amongst socialist volunteers of being clear that we did not belong to the IWGB, but were acting upon political initiative (Fieldnotes 07.04.22).

To some extent however, this was a persistent limitation of the research. As detailed in Chapter Seven, collective action amongst Stuart couriers had occurred with no union involvement at all prior to and concurrent with the Stuart dispute. My reliance on the IWGB – following the union's lead in attending sites where action was ongoing, had previously happened, or was emerging – meant that I was never able to witness the emergence of such wildcat action firsthand, and it meant that my fieldwork in workplaces ended when the

campaign collapsed, as described in Chapter Five. However, despite this, I was able to reconstruct the account of wildcat action which is presented in Chapter Seven through insights produced in the relationships that I built with workers.

When visiting a new area, my aim was to build relationships of sufficient depth to be welcomed into the day-to-day lives of workers (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019:4). Initially, this did not begin well. I accompanied another socialist volunteer to a McDonald's carpark in the town of Lenton on five separate occasions in March and April, as members of the IWGB's Stuart Coordination chat had identified it as a site where couriers were discontented and where action was possible. While one instance of strike action did take place in Lenton, there was a degree of tension present amongst the workforce, which was clearly and persistently divided over whether to take action or not. Given the particularly disruptive activities of one anti-strike courier, described in Section 7.4, the IWGB ended their efforts to foster action in the town and I decided not to pursue any further research there.

Nonetheless, I was able to build far stronger relationships with couriers in the towns of Callbrough and Farmbridge, visiting repeatedly with others between April and July while action was being planned and was taking place – and, having eventually established myself as a familiar face amongst the workforce, visiting alone outside of collective action. During these lone visits, I spent time with workers at the carparks in which they waited for orders; had long conversations relating to matters relevant to this research and beyond it; and witnessed the platform labour process directly. Chapters Six and Seven in particular rely on the information workers provided to me during such fieldwork.

3.3.2 Interviews

Per Brecht De Smet: "the singular person is a source of knowledge; an index of society in general and the specific collective subjects in which she participates (or has participated)" (2015:35). As such, while this research aimed primarily at understanding the emergence of *collective* subversive subject, individual participants were sources of invaluable information on this, with interviews providing a means of understanding individual participants' "micro-dynamics of commitment" to collective subjects (della Porta, 2014:231). At the same time however, "[t]he collective subject has a life process in its own right, a development as a distinct whole, which cannot be reduced to the path of a singular participant or represented as the simple aggregate of the discrete life stories of all partakers" (De Smet, 2015:36).

Subsequently, interviews were understood as supplementary to participant observation in this research, aiming to access details not immediately obvious in observation and to clarify any ambiguities which emerged during fieldwork.

I had initially planned to conduct a series of *timeline interviews* with participants, collaboratively reconstructing their prior experiences of the labour process and of collective action by co-creating a physical timeline (Adriansen, 2012). Perhaps unsurprisingly given the pace of working life as a food delivery courier discussed in Section 6.2, and the conditions of McDonald's carparks in British spring and early summer, this did not prove practical.

Instead, through the relationships that I built with couriers, opportunities arose to carry out interviews with couriers during their working day and during collective action. Those I developed the closest relationships with agreed to let me record our conversations in their cars as they delivered orders, in restaurants while they awaited orders, and on picket lines, with participants providing written consent for this based on participant information sheets. This combination of interviews and simultaneous observation, utilising the flexibility of both methods (Robson, 2011:280), led to in-depth engagement frequently lasting for several hours, producing invaluable insights into workers' experience platform food delivery, of couriers' experiences of collective action, and of their life-histories generally. In turn, this facilitated thorough analysis of the technical, social and political compositions of antagonistic collective subjects. These interviews were semi-structured, beginning with discussion of the Stuart campaign and the labour process, asking participants to recount previous, non-union instances of collective action – which was key to producing the insights presented in Chapter Six and Seven – but allowing the participant to lead on the direction of the conversation from that point onwards. Interviews while couriers were working proved easier than attempts at interviews during collective action. I conducted one recorded interview with a participant – Dimitru – as we stood together on a picket line during strike action, but this was brief as we were interrupted by other couriers. At a later date, we arranged a sit-down interview at a café as a means of supplementing for the earlier interview.

The majority of interviews with workers were, however, unrecorded – taking the form of conversations during participant observation. These were usually short conversations, captured in fieldnotes while workers went about their day and where sufficient periods of time for an in-depth, recorded interviews did not become available (for a discussion on the ethics and practicalities of unrecorded interviews, see: Rutakumwa et al., 2020). Verbatim

quotes were only occasionally noted when they struck me as particularly insightful. In such instances, it was imperative that I make my role as a researcher clear, and verbal consent was gained in accordance with the University of Manchester's Ethical Research Policy – which also included the secure storage of the data I collected.

Alongside interviews with workers, IWGB staff, officials, and socialist volunteers were interviewed as a means of obtaining a thorough understanding of the dispute as a whole, developing the insights in Chapter Five. Given that, when I entered the field in March 2022, the dispute was already underway, there was a need to reconstruct details which I had not observed directly. These interviews were one means of doing so. In particular, in order to understand the geographic spread of the dispute, I created an interactive digital map of areas where workers were reported to have taken action and shared this with participants during interviews as a prompt for discussion, asking them to confirm whether action had happened or not, how long it lasted for, and any additional details.

The gender balance of those who participated in recorded interviews in notably uneven, though this reflects the male-dominated nature of both the food delivery platform sector (Fairwork, 2023) and, based on my experience, of union organising in the sector as well. The two women who I was able to interview provided detailed insights into such gendered dynamics, as discussed in Section 7.2.2. That the couriers who participated in recorded interviews were all Romanian migrants is due to the nature of the workforce and of collective action in Callbrough and in Farmbridge, with couriers in both towns estimating that the majority of each Stuart Delivery workforce were Romanian (Fieldnotes 14.04.22; Interview with Nicolas 29.04.22). Fieldwork both within these towns and in other locations captured a far wider range of voices. Significantly however, Romanian couriers were unlikely to have experienced either strike action or trade union involvement previously, given the low levels of industrial action in Romania (Varga, 2014:10-15). Only one of the four couriers listed below had previously participated in strike action, whilst working in Germany's construction sector. Such perspectives were thus useful for understanding how workers decide to take collective action without prior involvement in union activity.

Interviewee pseudonym	Interviewee description	Interview date	Interview location
Nicolas	A male, white, Romanian Stuart Delivery courier, based in Callbrough. He took part in both wildcat and union-supported collective action and joined the IWGB during the Stuart dispute.	29.04.22	In Nicolas' car as he carried out deliveries, and in a McDonald's restaurant.
Elena	A female, white, Romanian Stuart Delivery courier, based in Callbrough. She took part in both wildcat and union-supported collective action and joined the IWGB during the Stuart dispute.	29.04.22	In Elena's car as she carried out deliveries, and in a McDonald's restaurant.
Albert	A male, white, Romanian Stuart Delivery courier, based in Callbrough. He took part in both wildcat and union-supported collective action and joined the IWGB during the Stuart dispute.	29.04.22	In Albert's car as he carried out deliveries.
Dimitru	A male, white, Romanian Stuart Delivery courier, based in Farmbridge. He took part in both wildcat and union-supported collective action but did not join the IWGB.	17.05.22; 08.06.22	First interview on a picket line in a McDonald's carpark in Farmbridge; second interview in a café in Farmbridge.

Sylvie	A female, white member of IWGB staff, employed by the Couriers and Logistic Branch.	07.09.22	Online.
Gareth	The elected President of the IWGB, employed by the union. A male, white former courier.	08.12.22	Online.
Liam	A male, white member of IWGB staff, employed as a senior organiser covering all branches of the union.	21.12.22	Online.
Michael Elms	A male, white socialist volunteer in the campaign, based in Sheffield. Heavily involved in running IWGB Couriers Sheffield as described in Chapters Four and Five.	11.10.22	At a café in Sheffield.
Lou	A male, white socialist volunteer in the campaign, based in the town of Taddlington. Heavily involved in supporting couriers' collective action in the town.	01.11.22	Online.
Seb	A male, white socialist volunteer in the campaign, based in Sheffield.	17.10.22	Online.

Table 02: Participants who took part in recorded interviews.

Related to interviews, audio-visual materials – primarily podcasts, but including one radio recording uploaded online, one YouTube video, and one documentary video, with "podcasts" being used henceforth as a shorthand means of labelling such materials – were transcribed in order to obtain information that I did not access through participant observation. These were particularly useful in accumulating knowledge regarding the early days of the campaign in Sheffield in December 2021, given the extent of press attention at the time. Three podcasts recorded and released prior to the Stuart dispute acted as sources of information regarding the IWGB's organising practice nationally and in Sheffield, and of information regarding Stuart Delivery's labour process. These materials are all in the public domain, but they are not cited in a traditional manner in order to protect the identities of pseudonymised participants who also appear elsewhere in this research.

Label	**Pseudonyms and descriptions of interviewees**
Podcast #1	Gareth, President of the IWGB.
Podcast #2	Eliza, a female Stuart Delivery courier in the North East of England and longstanding member of the IWGB.
Podcast #3	Michael Elms, a socialist volunteer in Sheffield, heavily involved in the IWGB Couriers Sheffield group.
Podcast #4	Claude, a Stuart Delivery courier in Sheffield, a member of the IWGB and heavily involved in the Stuart campaign.
Podcast #5	Moses, a Stuart Delivery courier in Sheffield, a member of the IWGB who participated in the Stuart campaign.

Podcast #6	Aziz, a Stuart Delivery courier in Sheffield, a member of the IWGB and heavily involved in the Stuart campaign.
Podcast #7	Aziz. Jason, the IWGB's Press Officer, a former courier, employed by the union.
Podcast #8	Two unnamed Stuart Delivery couriers discuss collective action while on a picket line in the Northern English town of Henssing.
Podcast #9	Michael Elms.
Podcast #10	Claude.
Podcast #11	Aziz.
Podcast #12	Saleh, a Stuart Delivery courier in Sheffield, a member of the IWGB who participated in the Stuart campaign.

Table 03: Audio-visual materials transcribed and analysed.

Finally, on December 15th 2023, marking two years since the beginning of the Stuart campaign in Sheffield, I was asked by another researcher to arrange a focus group for couriers who had participated in the dispute as a means of drawing lessons from it. This was a valuable opportunity to gather reflections in the wake of the campaign, and four Sheffield

Stuart couriers who were members of the IWGB and heavily involved in the campaign agreed to participate. Per the practice of the researcher who had initiated the focus group, it was not recorded but insights were noted in writing. This shaped my understanding of the campaign's strategy in particular, presented in Chapter Five.

3.3.3 Documentary research

Documentary research constituted the third means of gathering data in my research. I aimed to use a range of textual sources to understand Stuart's behaviour during the dispute and to understand the campaign from the perspective of the IWGB and the socialist volunteers involved in it. A huge number of sources were collected and analysed, and while it is not possible to provide a full list of the materials collected and analysed given the limited word count of this thesis, the materials cited directly are listed in the Appendix.

Per Atzeni's (2010) call to study workers' collective action in the context of their particular labour processes and wider political-economic circumstances, my first empirical chapter – Chapter Four – begins by relating Stuart Delivery's pay restructure to the platform economy. This was undertaken by combining corporate documents with insights from academic literature on the platform economy. In total I collected and analysed 39 corporate documents: five from Stuart's public-facing website; 28 from the firm's website aimed at its "partner-couriers" called "Stuart Help"; three emails from Stuart to couriers, which were made public by couriers on social media; three documents from Just Eat of relevance to the firm's partnership with Stuart; and one document from Stuart's parent company, Groupe La Poste. All of these documents were digitally archived and are analysed as they appeared in 2022. In addition, I also collected and analysed twelve instances of mainstream press coverage relating to Stuart and one investigative report which provided invaluable further detail on the nature of the firm. These textual materials were labelled with acronyms during storage to easily distinguish between them (e.g. with SH referring to "Stuart Help"; JE referring to Just Eat).

Chapter Five considers strategic practices undertaken in the dispute by workers, the IWGB, socialist volunteers, and Stuart Delivery itself. Insights for this drew on all of the above sources, but also on documents produced by the IWGB and socialist volunteers, alongside further textual information provided to the press on behalf of Stuart and other firms targeted by the campaign. The majority of these were published between September 2021 (three months prior to the Stuart campaign commencing) and October 2022 (two months after the

campaign came to an end), though some documents of particular relevance outside of this timeframe were also collected. These documents included:

- IWGB leaflets: 10 aimed at encouraging couriers in specific areas to take collective action; 4 aimed at members of the public.
- Social media posts: 177 Tweets from IWGB-managed accounts; 44 Facebook posts from IWGB-managed accounts; 46 videos included in social media posts; 86 still images included in social media posts.
- 10 letters sent by the IWGB to Stuart Delivery or other companies involved in the dispute, made public on social media.
- Text from 13 IWGB-managed webpages, some of which were press releases.
- 1 model motion for trade union branches created by the IWGB.
- Minutes from 16 meetings of the "Stuart Coordination" group between December 2021 and August 2022, described in Section 5.3.1. Permission was obtained to collect and analyse these minutes.
- 34 articles written my Michael Elms, the socialist volunteer, for the Alliance for Workers' Liberty's newspaper *Solidarity*. 17 articles written for Solidarity by other members of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. 2 model motions for trade union branches created by the political organisation, Momentum Internationalists. 14 articles written by members of the Socialist Party for their newspaper, *The Socialist*.
- 31 quotes provide by anonymous and named sources in the press on behalf of Stuart Delivery, Just Eat, DPD, Greggs, McDonalds, and Groupe La Poste.

A rich, enormous dataset was produced through the combination of documentary evidence with data from participant observation, interviews, podcasts, and the focus group described above, capturing the dispute at multiple levels of locality – from McDonald's carparks to national union-led meetings. I applied inductive thematic analysis to this dataset, guided by the research questions presented in the Introduction, identifying themes which facilitated answering those questions through the following chapters.

3.3.4 Ethics, positionality, intervention, and partisanship

In advance of entering the field, the proposed plans for this research were reviewed and approved through the University of Manchester's School of Social Sciences Postgraduate Thesis Research Ethics Approval Process. Significantly however, my commitment to ethical

practice – specifically to protecting participants from any repercussions – stemmed from my political commitment to workers' struggle, motivating me to undertake research with a constant awareness of the risks of causing damage to participants in any way, specifically through practicing transparency in the field; through the pseudonymisation of individuals and locations; and through careful data storage on encrypted devices.

As outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, this research refuses to view workers' collective action as a problem to be resolved, but instead is explicit in its support for workers in conflict with capital. This does not, however, resolve questions regarding the positionality of the individual undertaking research *on* workers, particularly when they are not participating in that research as a worker in the same workplace.

Being a white, British man working in Higher Education drew a clear difference between myself and the majority-migrant workforce carrying out platform food delivery and undertaking collective action in the sector. However, this positionality aligned well with those working or volunteering for the IWGB in the Stuart Campaign, who were largely well-educated, white members of "Generation Left" (Milburn, 2019) or, in a small number of cases, the baby boomer generation. This facilitated the development of rapport with these participants at the national level of the campaign, but it risked an embeddedness within the IWGB and amongst other socialist volunteers which could, if not managed carefully, lead to self-censorship in this research, avoiding difficult issues for having come to adopt the same perspectives as these participants. The key means of minimising this risk was practicing reflexivity at all times, and I hope that the critical account of actors involved in the Stuart campaign presented in Chapter Five demonstrates that I did this.

In combination with a partisan position, participant observation as a socialist volunteer in the dispute made intervention unavoidable, as noted above regarding my role in taking photographs at picket lines, leafletting couriers, and attending meetings. The analytic strategy described in Section 3.2 above recognises and encourages intervention as a necessary facet of qualitative research. Lev Vygotsky's means of investigating subject-formation entailed a degree of intervention on the part of the researcher, with interaction between observer and observed acting as a means of observing subject-formation directly (De Smet, 2015:49). For Burawoy, intervention is similarly a means by which to analyse empirical reality and develop theory simultaneously – "[i]t is by mutual reaction that we discover the properties of the social order", practicing simultaneous empirical research and theorisation (2009:40).

This use of intervention, however, remains focused on the objectives of the researcher. A range of traditions have developed aiming to supersede this, including but not limited to: *workers' inquiry*, conducting research within the workplace as an explicitly political project from "the perspective of workers themselves", which has been applied in the food delivery platform sector (Cant, 2020b:9); *militant ethnography*, developed in social movement research, aimed at producing "accounts and models" that are "of use to activists themselves" (Juris, 2007:164); and *anti-racist scholar activism*, aimed at rejecting *working on* oppressed communities in favour of *working with, within*, and "in service" to them (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021:2; 14). Such approaches practice a more thorough form of partisanship than can be claimed in this research.

Whilst, as outlined above, my presence within the campaign added capacity to it, I cannot claim to have produced – nor to have set out to produce – outcomes of benefit to the workers in this research, the IWGB, nor anyone else. In reality this is research produced for the (potential) attainment of an academic qualification awarded by the neoliberal university (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021:179). Per Burawoy: "As observers, no matter how we like to deceive ourselves, we are on 'our own side' […] We are in the field for ulterior reasons. Our mission may be noble – broadening social movements, promoting social justice, challenging the horizons of everyday life – but there is no escaping the elementary divergence between intellectuals, no matter how organic, and the interests of their declared constituency" (2009:57).

It is possible that insights resulting from this research contribute to struggle in some form, that analysis of the present might provide a basis for fruitful intervention in the future (Nunes, 2021:5). But the inverse risk of that possibility is that this research inadvertently intervenes on the side of employers, detailing the mechanisms by which workers and their supporters seek to undermine their authority that they might, potentially, undercut those (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019:4218-219; Wright, 2002:45). For this reason, careful pseudonymisation is undertaken and, where necessary, particularly sensitive information – with possible retributive implications for individuals – has been selectively excluded, even where it was possibly relevant to the research findings.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the analytic strategy and related research methods deployed in this thesis, aimed at combining micro-level details with theorisation. Whilst the literature review and theoretical framework developed in Chapters One and Two are presented at the beginning of the thesis, in reality they developed iteratively, through engagement with literature concurrent with the process of data collection and analysis described in this chapter. This is the practice developed through the Extended Case Method, with the collection and aggregation of "multiple readings of a single case", in conversation with theorisation (Burawoy, 2009:41). The results of this constitute the four empirical chapters of this thesis, with Chapters Four and Five focused on answering the third research question, and Chapters Six and Seven answering the second and first, following the downward analytic movement.

Chapter Four: The Prehistory of a Platform Dispute

4.1 Introduction

In 2021, the courier firm Stuart Delivery introduced "linear pay", reducing the base rate of per-delivery pay for much of its workforce from £4.50 to £3.40. This change, described in more detail below, sparked the longest known instance of sustained protest undertaken by platform workers to-date: the Stuart campaign of 2021-22. That campaign is the case study by which this thesis investigates the emergence of collective action amongst workers without an established trade union presence in Britain, and as such should be analysed in detail – not least by understanding its origins.

Per Chapter Two, the campaign against Stuart is understood as a *project*, composed of collaborative activity between actors aimed at resolving a *predicament* – in this case, at overturning a 24% cut in the base rate of workers' pay. In De Smet's CHAT, projects are shaped by their *prehistory*: by previous instances of activity which, through internalisation, result in the emergence of a new project (2015:60). Whilst such constitutive elements are necessarily altered through the process of being integrated into a new project, some of their features persist and continue to shape the development of the new project. Crucially then, analysis of a project's prehistory is not simply contextualisation, but is necessary for understanding the ongoing development of that project itself. This chapter will identify the pre-existing elements which, in combination, resulted in the Stuart dispute of 2021-22.

Such investigation faces the challenge of knowing where to begin. Understanding capitalism as totality entails identifying a potentially huge range of projects which contribute to the formation of the subject at hand, but using CCA this chapter focuses on the technical, social and political basis for the Stuart campaign. Section 4.2 will consider the platform economy as the basis on which Stuart Delivery workers in Britain, in 2021, were technically and socially composed, situating platform firms within wider capitalist employment relations, contra claims of platform novelty. Stuart's political-economic nature, its labour process, and its decision to cut couriers' pay are understood in this context through a close reading of corporate documents, as described in Section 3.3.3 of Chapter Three. The resulting account will also informs later chapters' analysis of workers' action against Stuart, responding to Maurizio Atzeni's call pay close attention to the labour process when studying emergent collective action (2010:27-8).

Having established the basis of Stuart workers' technical and social compositions, Section 4.3 turns to workers' political composition, outlining a history of food delivery platform workers' resistance in Britain. In a unique contribution to the academic literature on platform workers' struggle, the chapter provides a detailed account of how contemporary campaigns are rooted in bicycle messengers' organising efforts from the 1980s onwards. Following this, the chapter proceeds to examine waves of simultaneous, cross-location collective action undertaken by platform couriers in the 2010s and the corresponding organisational forms that developed alongside these. The struggle to merge unionisation efforts with couriers' self-organised, wildcat action is identified as characteristic of the sector – with this tension fundamentally shaping the Stuart campaign, as detailed in the remaining chapters.

4.2 The platform economy: continuity and rupture

A vast academic literature exists on both platforms generally, with a significant minority of that focused on food delivery platforms in particular (Joyce at al., 2023:150; van Doorn, 2023:161). This is unsurprising, given the rapid growth of the so-called "platform economy" throughout the 2010s and a concurrent rise in platform workers' collective action (Woodcock and Cant, 2022; Bessa et al., 2022). This thesis' primary contribution to that literature is to insist that, while the labour management practices deployed by platform firms are noteworthy – particularly in that they form part of a wider effort by capital to intensify its exploitation of labour after 2008, decomposing working class power – they are best understood in continuity with the wider history of capital accumulation, contra claims of radical technological and organisational novelty. By understanding platform labour in this way, the nature of platform workers' struggle can be better understood as resistance to capital's exploitation of labour – not least, in the case of workers' response to Stuart's pay restructure.

4.2.1 Defining platforms – defining Stuart Delivery

Despite the aforementioned academic attention, *platform* remains "a slippery term", lacking consensus over its definition (Joyce, 2020:542; Steinberg, 2022:1085; Liang et al., 2022:308; Steinberg et al., 2025:22). Scholarly definitions tend to share an emphasis on platform firms as *intermediaries*, "enabling third party transactions to take place" by connecting a range of actors, including customers, pre-existing businesses, advertisers and more (Steinberg, 2022:1072; Srnicek, 2017:48). For instance, cooked meal delivery – which is the form of platform work focused on in this thesis – sees customers connected to restaurants via the mobile or desktop app through which they place an order, which is then fulfilled by a

delivery worker contracted by the platform firm (Vandaele, 2024:27). Revenue is generated for the firm through fees charged to customers (per-order, and sometimes through a subscription scheme); commissions charged to restaurants; and the commodification of data, through advertising for example (Vandaele, 2024::23).

The conception of the *platform as intermediary* aligns with how platforms present themselves, in Stuart's case as an "on-demand logistics platform which connects businesses to a fleet of geolocalised independent couriers" (STU1). The independent contractor status of most workers who carry out platformised services is key to firms' self-identification, and is a key feature of platform labour management (Popan, 2024a:110). While platform firms' employing practices vary – often depending on national legislative context – the majority of the frontline, service-providing workforce tends to be classified as self-employed, with the firm claiming to only connect such workers with customers and third-party businesses via its technological infrastructure, as opposed to employing them directly (Ivanova et al., 2018:5; Graham, 2020:453).

In the Britain, facing challenges by workers regarding this legal classification, food delivery platform firms have responded in two ways: hoarding reserves in anticipation challenging regulatory changes (Vandaele, 2024:34); and making near-constant, volatile changes in how they manage their courier workforce, aimed at fending off claims that couriers are anything other than self-employed, independent contractors (Aloisi, 2019; van Doorn et al., 2021:715). Such dynamism has seen Stuart remove any obligation for couriers to wear their branded unforms (STUH16), do away with fixed working patterns (STUE3), and change its "General Conditions of Use" – which prospective couriers must agree to – from stating that: "[u]nder no circumstances, may a registration, Account or Login Information be shared with another individual or assigned to any other person" in 2022 (STU4), to adding "save for a Substitute (as applicable)" to the end of this sentence in later versions. The latter "substitution clauses" have been key to firms' successes in courts, whereby the contracted worker may allow another courier to make use of their account on the platform, affirming that they are legally "self-employed" (Aloisi, 2019; Cant, 2020a:282). Through these frequent changes in their labour processes, platform firms have largely succeeded in asserting themselves as "too big to control, too new to regulate, and too innovative to stifle" (Graham, 2020:453), despite legal consensus that platform firms *do* exercise degrees of control over their workforces (San Martin, 2019:51-2).

In this context, claims of the organisational novelty of platforms have proliferated (for an overview, see: Steinberg, 2022:1073), in particular based on platforms firms' ostensible ability to surpass the standard capitalist "two-sided market economy" in favour of mediating a wider range of transactional relationships (Liang et al., 2021:318). At their most extreme, such claims mirror firms' own justification of their practices, for example in Yin Liang et al.'s view that "the platform is not just a new piece of technology, it is also a new business model in its own right. This business model is usually flatter and more participatory than models that are part of the 'traditional' economy'" (2021:319). Yet the organisational reality of the platform labour process is far from flat, and sees control exercised in manners indistinguishable from instances of control in traditional employment – such as through the allocation of tasks, threat of termination, and, of course, through renumeration (Wardell, 1999:5; Kellog et al., 2020; Waters and Woodcock, 2017). Moreover, whilst platforms can be said to shape the content of such tasks as delivering a meal, they do not create entirely new instances of production or consumption, rather – in the case of geographically-tethered, localised platform work – the platform firm "takes existing forms of work that happen in particular places and reorganizes them through a digital platform", as with food delivery and ride-hailing (Woodcock and Graham, 2020:50-1).

Alongside claims of organisational novelty, academic definitions similarly tend to emphasise platform firms' use of technology, in some cases assigning novelty to their data-gathering capacities in particular (Srnicek, 2017:41). Vast amounts of data – relating to individual workers and customers, geographies, business practices and more – are collected through firms' "mediating" activities, offering a source of revenue through their commodification (Srnicek, 2017:6; Graham, 2020:453; Jones, 2021:18). In turn, this practice is one amongst several drivers of platform firms' widely recognised tendency towards monopolisation (Steinberg, 2022:1072), with a need for greater data motivating growth, and access to greater volumes of data in turn furthering the growth of the platform (Liang et al., 2021:322). Per Nick Srnicek: "the more numerous the users who use a platform, the more valuable that platform becomes for everyone else […] this generates a cycle whereby more users beget more users, which leads to platforms having a natural tendency towards monopolisation" (2017:45).

In the case of food delivery platform firms, a deliberate effort to maintain *leanness* – such as through imposing self-employed status on couriers, meaning that the firm need own no fleets of vehicles, issue no mobile phones, provide no in-person management etc. – further

facilitates the ease with which they grow, as does the replicability of their algorithmic means for receiving and distributing orders, which can be rolled out across multiple locations with little to no variation (Srnicek, 2017:45; Cant, 2020b:50). In exchange for a commission, restaurants are offered the opportunity to provide takeaway delivery without having to hire any couriers – an offer that is appealing enough that, in 2018, platform firms accounted for an estimated 80% of takeaway meal deliveries in the UK (Allen et al., 2018:31).

Through such mechanisms, platform firms are capable of establishing themselves to a point where they crowd out competition. In the UK, the 2010s saw monopolisation of the food delivery market by "three heavyweights in UK restaurant delivery" – Deliveroo, UberEats, and Just Eat (Farrell, 2018a). Multiple efforts at launching competing food delivery platform firms failed, including those backed by major capital, such as Amazon Restaurants which ceased operating in the UK in 2019 (Farrell, 2018a; Allen et al., 2018:34; Kelso, 2020).

But, in order to achieve the position of "heavyweight", the platform firm must of course start on an advantageous footing. Notoriously, platform firms have tended to be unprofitable for most of their existence (Srnicek, 2017:30), relying on "patient" venture capital "with investors tolerant of losses in the short-medium term with the prospect of monopolising rents in the long run through network effects" (Vandaele, 2024:6). In firms' promises of eventual profitability through revolutionising the industries in which they operate, we find a further motivation for volatile changes and experiments in labour management so frequently experienced by their workers.

While each of the aforementioned heavyweights of food delivery rely on venture capital, Stuart is somewhat different: it is funded by the French state. Founded in France and Spain in 2015 (O'Hear, 2015; 2016a), Stuart aimed at establishing itself in major European cities, providing "last mile delivery" of a range of products including – but not limited to – cooked meals (STU1). It grew from operating in twenty European cities at the beginning of 2018 to over 127 cities and towns at the time of the dispute, claiming over 8,000 "business clients" within those (STU1). Whilst initial seed funding came from individual capitalists (O'Hear, 2015), the state-owned French postal service, La Poste, invested €22 million in Stuart to support its launch, and acquired the firm in its entirety in 2017 as part of La Poste's effort to develop "new urban services" focused on transport logistics (LP1).

La Poste boasts of its history of developing subsidiary companies able to generate revenue in the express delivery market (LP1). In 1999 it created its subsidiary, Geopost, which become

the largest shareholder of delivery firm DPD in 2001, which in turn purchased Stuart in 2017 (LP1; Corporate Watch, 2022; O'Hear, 2015). This can be understood in the immediate term as a response to the "existential questions" posed to postal services by declining revenue from letters (Kennedy, 2022), leading La Poste to take a "gig economy gamble" (Corporate Watch, 2022). More broadly, it can be understood as an instance of states' adoption of the neoliberal insistence on the merit of private enterprise (Harvey, 2007:2; Steinberg et al., 2025:22).

Whilst Stuart is unusual in its independence from venture capital, it nonetheless operates on an overall loss as other food delivery platforms tend to – with the French state playing the role of patient investor. Stuart's UK arm maintained an operating loss of more than £7 million in 2019, and owed £46 million to its parent companies by the end of 2020 (Corporate Watch, 2022). It is speculated that La Poste's ultimate intention is to sell the firm, having established it in the sector (Corporate Watch, 2022).

At its founding, Stuart initially focused on providing deliveries for artisan merchants and non-food retailers, with only a minor focus on food delivery (LP1; O'Hear, 2016b). This, however, was transformed over time through its partnership with the "heavyweight" firm Just Eat. From 2016 in France and 2017 in the UK, Stuart was subcontracted by Just Eat to carry out meal deliveries in select locations (O'Hear, 2016b; 2017). Just Eat – amongst the oldest of the major food delivery platform firms having been founded in 2001 (JE3) – deploys subcontracting in an effort to "build economic synergies between Just Eat and partners to build a profitable offering" (JE1). Such partnerships facilitated a key change in Just Eat's own business practice, which initially provided an online ordering service for restaurants with their own couriers – but, via Stuart and others, came to provide a fleet of subcontracted, self-employed couriers (O'Hear, 2016b; Meaker, 2022). This drew such chain restaurants as Subway, KFC, Burger King and Greggs to Just Eat (Farrell, 2018a), and saw McDonalds end its exclusive delivery deal with Uber Eats in 2020 to also partner with Just Eat (Kelso, 2020). In turn, this partnership allowed Stuart to recruit couriers in increasing numbers of British cities where Just Eat operates – particularly focusing on the north of England (Farrell, 2018b). Such was the integration of both companies that prospective couriers were able purchase Just Eat branded equipment when signing up to deliver for Stuart (STUH9).

From this overview, we can begin to understand the 2021 Stuart pay cut in a context of the demand for profitability, leanness, and tendency towards monopolisation. Doing so more

fully, however, requires homing in further still on Stuart's technical composition of its workforce.

4.2.2 A labour process in denial

In Stuart's founding narrative, couriers are presented as a pre-existing workforce who are made more efficient by the technological and marketing ingenuity of tech savvy businessmen (STU2). Based on this alone, anyone might be forgiven for assuming that the company plays only a minor role in organising its courier workforce. Stuart's General Conditions of Use goes as far as to declare that "[t]he Company does not directly supervise direct or control the manner in which the Delivery of Good [sic] is carried out by an Independent Courier" and that there is no "hierarchy or any link of subordination" in their relationship with delivery workers (STU4).

Indeed, there are undeniably degrees of independence for workers as a result of this arrangement. Becoming a courier for the platform is relatively simple, with "future Stuwies" (STUH8) completing a form asking for basic personal details (STUE1), taking a quiz based on a short series of videos – which the candidate has three opportunities to pass, and can re-apply in three months if they do not pass (STUH2; STUH8) – and proving their identity and right to work. Couriers can log on to Stuart's app to work when they wish and – as Stuart insists in places – may carry out deliveries "within any timeframe" that they wish (STU4). Couriers can choose to reject orders – though this must be done within forty seconds of being offered an order and must not be done excessively (STU4; Popan, 2024a:115). And couriers, even while officially disallowed from doing so, can "multiapp" – increasing their chances of receiving orders by working for multiple platforms simultaneously, facilitated by their self-employed status (Popan, 2024b).

Nonetheless, a close reading of Stuart's corporate materials reveals multiple mechanisms of control operating in tandem with these instances of independence, akin to those found in a traditional workplace.

Amongst the most significant of these is the firm's ability to terminate workers' contracts. Couriers are responsible for providing their own equipment, but if they fail to demonstrate to the firm that the equipment meets Stuart's standards or are found to be using "branded equipment from other companies except for Just Eat" they risk "[l]osing [their] place on the platform" (STUH9; STU4). Stuart's General Conditions of Use lists requirements that couriers must comply with, including requirements regarding their behaviour, appearance,

hygiene, and the pace at which they work, despite the contradictory guidance outlined above – again reserving the right to terminate the courier should they not "respect" these requirements (STU4). Such terminations are referred to by the firm as "end[ing] partnerships", with an insistence that this will only take place following a "manual" investigation by Stuart's backoffice staff (STUH28) – contra what was discovered in an investigation sparked by the Stuart campaign, where couriers were terminated for failing to follow faulty routes dictated by Stuart's app (Livingston, 2022). This ability to bring an end to an individual's working relationship with a firm bears no resemblance to a flat network of self-employed, independent "individuals who utilize technological means to complete their work" (Schroeder et al., 2021:1), but ample resemblance to the traditional capitalist employment relationship.

Rather than a wage, Stuart refers to couriers' pay as a "fee", paid by the ordering customer to the courier, via the platform, with Stuart taking a "commission" from that payment. However, this payment from the customer does not go directly to the courier – it first enters a Stuart bank account, from which the company takes its commission and any interest which accrues, before then passing the payment to the courier in weekly instalments (STU4). Those instalments are based on the number of deliveries that a courier carried out during that week – i.e. on the labour-power deemed essential to complete the allocated tasks. In this act of cumulatively charging customers more than they pay couriers, Stuart extracts surplus value from the labouring practices of its couriers – a practice emblematic of the capitalist employment relationship, whether platformised or not (Woodcock, 2021:32; Joyce, 2020:546).

Unlike such competing firms as Deliveroo – which initially provided hourly pay (Cant, 2020b:viii) – Stuart has always practiced a per-delivery, piece-rate payment model (O'Hear, 2016a; Stewart and Stanford, 2017:421). There is a "base rate" of pay per-delivery which varies by vehicle type: bikes, motorbikes and cars, with the highest rate being for the latter (STUH21). Prior to the dispute, this base rate was £4.50 outside of London for orders undertaken using a car under 2.5 miles, going up to £7.50 after that. It was the reduction of the base payment – from £4.50 to £3.40 for orders under 0.5 miles, with an additional £0.95 after 0.5 miles – which sparked the Stuart dispute.

At times – the precise rationale for which are known only to the company (STU4) – this base rate is garnished with a "multiplier" payment, known colloquially amongst the workforce as

"the boost", described by Stuart as its "main reward system" (STUH21). The boost is explained to couriers in relation to the base payment, i.e. a boost of 1.1 would be 10% of the base payment – an additional 45p on top of the £4.50 base payment for a delivery. Whilst the precise logic of the boost is deliberately opaque, it is clearly used to encourage workers to log on at times of high customer demand (Woodcock and Graham, 2020:65). During such times, couriers who are not logged on to take deliveries receive push notifications from the Stuart app informing them of the boost and encouraging them to take advantage of it (Fieldnotes 07.04.22).

Piece-rate pay – "purchasing slivers of worker's time" (Woodcock, 2020:73) – necessarily acts as a means of intensifying work. As Cant describes in his ethnographic account of working for Deliveroo: "you had to wring every possible delivery you could out of the peak times, going from drop to drop for as long as you could, because you never knew when order volume might drop off" (Cant, 2020b:52). Ostensibly unproductive time – where drivers are waiting to receive and pick up orders, for example – is cut out of the firm's labour costs in an instance of the exploitation of unpaid labour (Vandaele, 2024:7). The "lean" nature of the platform firm is thus a commitment to austerity in pursuit of profitability.

In addition, this austere management model aims to shift as much risk as possible onto the shoulders of couriers. Orders placed through Stuart's app result in an "electronic contract" between the customer and courier, meaning that "liability relating to the Delivery of Goods rests with the Independent Courier and not the Company" (STU4). Couriers must prove to Stuart that they have arranged their own Hire and Reward insurance to be allowed to carry goods in exchange for payment, with Stuart warning that "it is a common mistake to accidentally purchase Taxi insurance", that there is a risk of "sham insurance policies, provided by non-legitimate sources" (STUH4). In the event of an accident while undertaking delivery, couriers are obliged to notify the company "promptly", but this "shall not give rise to any liability on the part of the Company" (STU4). And tax obligations are similarly the sole responsibility of the self-employed courier rather than platform firm.

Stuart therefore seeks to act as an employer while insisting that it is not one. In addition to the power to terminate contracts, control over renumeration and the allocation tasks seen throughout the platform economy, at the time of the dispute the firm practiced four more specific measures which echo management practices in non-platformised work: the appointment of Fleet Captains, the provision of Virtual Partner Hours, "slots", and the

Courier Performance Score, each of which were present in the empirical research conducted for this thesis.

In each area where Stuart operated, one courier was appointed to be a "Fleet Captain", receiving an additional payment so that they might "act as a point of contact for other Independent Couriers" (STU4). This role is opaque in Stuart's public online materials, but fieldwork for this thesis found it to be a lax attempt at in-person management, with Captains tasked with administering the local Telegram chats which Stuart insisted couriers join (STUH17; Fieldnotes 06.06.22).

Similarly, whilst denying any asymmetrical relationship between the company and couriers, Stuart provided "one-on-one sessions with Stuart team members where you can get advice about using the platform, earnings, general support, and help with solving any issues", held twice weekly on Zoom and titled "Virtual Partner Hours" (STUH20). This claim to consultation would be deployed by Stuart throughout the dispute, described in Section 5.4 of Chapter Five of this thesis.

While Stuart couriers could log in and take orders at any time of their choosing, "slots" provided periods of respite from piece-rate pay, allowing couriers to work during fixed hours for guaranteed income paid by Stuart – whilst still being classified as self-employed of course. Booked through *When I Work* – a third-party provider with its own app (STUH24; STUH27) – slots were offered to specific couriers, for whom "check-in timeframes" were opened up where they could be booked one week in advance (STUH27). When working "on-slot", regardless of how many orders a courier received, Stuart provided an hourly "minimum guarantee" payment of £8.00 for couriers using a car. Precisely why particular couriers were offered on-slot work was – as with the appointment of Captains – opaque, but Stuart's use of slots as a means of rewarding couriers was not. The firm informed couriers that "[i]f you achieve a high Client Performance Score (CPS), you may also get priority bookings to book slots in certain zones" (STUH16).

The Client Performance Score – renamed Courier Performance Score in 2021 – was a means of rewarding couriers' "contribution to the Stuart community" (STUH18). Through minimising the number of orders they reject or cancel, picking up orders and completing them as quickly as possible, and following rules when working on-slot, couriers could raise their CPS and win earlier access to slots – and hence to a guaranteed wage. Such rating mechanisms are common practice by platform firms, and ostensibly act to undermine

information asymmetries between customers and providers in the market, where a buyer and seller usually face the problem of knowing nothing about one another (Englert et al., 2021:164). Yet they are also evidently mechanisms for disciplining the workforce, fostering competition between workers, and intensifying the labour process (Ivanova et al., 2018:7), with Stuart explicitly threatening low CPS' as punishment for rejecting orders (STU4).

The image that emerges from this is of a workforce technically composed in a manner that directly contradicts the stated nature of platforms' organisational practice: self-employed and yet at risk of being sacked; able to choose their working hours and yet consistently, deliberately rushed; able to reject specific instructions and yet be punished for doing so. The firm that imposes such conditions is simultaneously a provider of opportunity for this pre-existing, entirely independent workforce, and yet in need of recruiting, organising and disciplining them; unprofitable and yet backed by vast amounts of investment, having to constantly deploy measures aimed at demonstrating potential profitability; seemingly beyond regulation, and yet itself continuously rushed to adapt the means by which it conceals control of its workforce. From this, we can understand Stuart's 2021 pay cut as a part of the firm's continuous efforts to reduce its labour costs as it angles at profitability under the direction of the French state – a dynamic innate in capitalism itself. Yet what workforce would tolerate such ostensibly contradictory conditions?

4.2.3 Platforms in the neoliberalism interregnum

Much of the critical platform literature identifies platform firms as "a quintessentially neoliberal organizational form", emerging from and reinforcing the hegemonic political-economic paradigm of the late 20th and early 21st centuries (van Doorn et al., 2021:728; Popan, 2024a:110).

In their book-length studies of the platform economy, Nick Srnicek (2017), Phil Jones (2021) and Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham (2020) each identify the genesis of platforms in the "long downturn" since the 1970s in the Global North.

For Srnicek, the basis of the platform "model" is built on the end of the postwar settlement, which saw reduced wages, increased outsourcing and attacks on workers' power; on 1990s and early 2000s digital enclosure (c.f. Bettig, 1997) and the subsequent practice of "growth before profits" aimed at monopolising the internet following the dot-com boom; and on the aftermath of the 2008 crisis establishing low interest rates, which saw investors searching for yields in riskier investments, increased hoarding, and a persistent drive to deregulation

following the crisis. In such circumstances, platform firms – with their promises of technological and organisational novelty – "offered a destination for surplus capital hoarded after the financial crisis of 2007-08" (Vandaele, 2024:6). For Jones, the key factor has been the growth of a subemployed army of labour, with insufficient jobs available to a growing global population, and stagnant growth seeing ever greater numbers of workers "pushed into ever more precarious and petty service work" (2021:18).

Woodcock and Graham similarly map a range of preconditions for platform labour onto interrelated political-economic shifts, technological developments, and changes in mass cultural attitudes (2020:19). The latter point to the significance of the cultural contexts in which platforms operate – where the nature of production and consumption interact (Gartman, 1999), with consumer culture in the Global North acting as a concession to a population experiencing declining pay and working conditions (Gilbert and Williams, 2022:23) – a culture that Stuart explicitly taps into and seeks to foster (STU1; Tali, 2016; Gregory and Maldonado, 2020:1188). Similarly, platform firms seek to embrace changes in workers' own approaches to work, specifically building on desires for fun, flexibility, and personal improvement in working life (Huws et al., 2018:116; Liang et al., 2021:322). In this context, such mechanisms of control as self-employment, piece-rate pay and the Courier Performance Score can be understood as not only as means of threatening sanctions, but of fostering "neoliberal rationalities" amongst the workforce, seeking to construct worker-subjects who willingly manage themselves (Popan, 2024a:110; Woodcock, 2020:71; 110; Davies, 2017:xvi).

Applying class composition analysis to neoliberalism, Alex Williams and Jeremy Gilbert relate the paradigm to an instance of capitalist class recomposition. They see the simultaneous and intertwined "rise of Silicon Valley and restoration of Wall Street" in the early 1980s as the moment in which entrepreneurial experimentation and finance capital are empowered in tandem, resulting in a hegemonic coalition of tech entrepreneurs and financiers (2022:22-3). This coalition is personified by Stuart's CEO at the time of the dispute, Damien Bon, who the company proudly states "started his career with Lehman Brothers in 2007" before "he dove headfirst into the startup would with Stuart" (STU1).

The social composition of Stuart's workforce could not be more far-removed from that of its leadership. Platform firms' reliance on largely migrant workforces – confirmed by qualitative studies given that firms provide little or no relevant data (van Doorn, 2023:158) – may also

be understood in relation to their neoliberal context, where the globalisation of particular methods of capital accumulation has shaped patterns of migration and hence the social composition of the working class (Scholte, 2005). Contra the image of the worker-subject as a young, white male cyclist navigating the city with ease, as presented in Stuart's advertising (STU1; STU2), Cant argues that platform firms simultaneously depend upon *and* devalue migrant labour, taking advantage of a subject that is simultaneously desired and disparaged, willing to undertake harder work for lower pay given the threat of deportation (2020a:274-9). Despite Stuart and similar firms requiring prospective couriers to prove their right to work in the UK (STUH2), aforementioned substitution clauses place the responsibility for right-to-work checks in the hands of couriers themselves, effectively facilitating undocumented migrants' access to platform work (Cant, 2020a:282; Badger, 2021:293). Yet simultaneously, the firms are known to collaborate with British border enforcement in the detention and, presumably, deportation of those same couriers – with this previously sparking worker protest (Cant, 2020b:vii). Such insecurity has led to some to categorise migrant platform workers as part of a "precariat" (Popan, 2024a:113) – a "new" class, differentiated from the "traditional working class" by its lack of access to stable employment, a lack of non-work related forms of income (particularly in relation to the welfare state) and a lack of citizenship rights, each of which is generally afforded to the traditional working class (Standing, 2011:13).

Here, however, we should recognise the deep roots of platform firms' employment practices beyond neoliberalism. Capital's reliance on the exploitation of migrant labour is not new (Du Bois, 1925) and platform firms build upon the long history of racialisation in service of capital accumulation – in the case of Stuart in the UK, drawing on colonial histories which shape the demographics of its workforce, not least through migrant workers' turn to self-employment in response to labour market exclusion (Gebrial, 2022:1179). Ronaldo Munck (2013) points out that the conception of such a workforce as a "new" precarious class overlooks the long-term experience of widespread insecurity at work amongst those in and from the Global South, while Erik Olin Wright (2015:172) and Joseph Choonara (2020:437) both identify precarity as a condition common to the proletarian class overall given the nature of the capitalist employment relationship.

Multiple accounts similarly trace platform firms' ostensibly novel practices to deeper histories, including the practice of imposing self-employed status in the British construction industry from the 1960s onwards (Cant, 2020b:79-80); the practice of large-scale data

gathering in car manufacturing and call centres (Steinberg, 2022:1077; Woodcock, 2020:73); and the practice of piece-rate pay in 19th century dock work (Woodcock and Graham, 2020:13-14; Cant, 2020b:74-75; Liang et al., 2021:315). The gendered nature of platform work – with the vast majority of food delivery workers being men (Popan, 2024a:111) – can similarly be understood in light of pre-existing structures of gendered vulnerability and violence, given the risks posed by working outdoors, at speed, during irregular hours (Christie and Ward, 2019:115; Gregory and Maldonado, 2020). These gender dynamics in turn shape the culture which couriers develop and the nature of their collective action, as explored in Chapter Seven.

Finally, alongside platform firms' roots beyond neoliberalism, we must consider the significance of their emergence in a period of possible neoliberal decline. The 2008 crash can be viewed as sparking a prolonged crisis in neoliberal order, furthered by electoral shifts in the Global North from 2016 onwards which have complicated the relationship between the British and American states and globalisation (Davies, 2017:xiii; Gilbert and Williams, 2022:6). It is subsequently difficult to say with certainty that neoliberalism continues to constitute a hegemonic "form of reason that configures all aspects of existence" (Brown, 2015:17). And yet elements of the paradigm persist, evidenced not least by platform firms' growth during this interregnum. The COVID-19 pandemic – itself a crisis within neoliberalism's long crisis – accelerated this contradictory trajectory, seeing states intervene explicitly in economic affairs on the one hand (Davis, 2020:44), and a period of vast growth and unsustainable over-recruitment for food delivery platforms on the other, with couriers declared "essential workers" in the context of anxieties regarding the circulation of food during lockdowns (van Doorn et al., 2021:718; Beacham and Willatt, 2020:73). Stuart was amongst those to benefit from the pandemic, rewarding its CEO with £2.2 million in 2020, compared to just £210,000 in 2019 (Shone, 2021).

In summary, in refusing to conceive of platform firms as entirely new business models we can see them for what they are: capitalist firms existing in complex circumstances. Drawing on the social composition of the worker-subject in neoliberalism, they aim at extracting the maximum possible labourpower from their workforce, shaped by the contradictory demands of capital accumulation – of maintaining capable workers whilst keeping labour costs low; of chasing growth while hoarding reserves; of pleasing investors, customers, workers and the state all at once. This is the context from which Stuart's 2021 pay restructure emerges.

4.3 Platform struggle

Workers' resistance has burgeoned in the conditions described above, thoroughly disproving early claims that the platform workforce is "unorganisable" (for an overview of these claims, see: Woodcock, 2021:1). Globally, this workforce has proven its willingness to take collective action and to experiment with a range of organisational forms, from traditional trade unionism to non-union collectives (Umney et al., 2024:9).

The first documented instance of food delivery workers' strike action in Britain sparked a long campaign of union organisation which would be key to the Stuart dispute. However, this ongoing effort is yet to lead to the establishment of a firm, pervasive and far-reaching trade union presence in the industry. As of 2025, no union is formally recognised by Stuart in Britain for example. Instead, alongside unionisation efforts, workers have frequently and continuously taken action independently of any union or visible representative body (Cant and Woodcock, 2022). In outlining a history of food delivery platform workers' collective action in Britain, this section considers how both union-led organising efforts and workers' wildcat action constitute two projects which have mutually shaped and re-shaped one another, resulting in a volatile industrial setting in which establishing sustainable workers' organisation is hugely challenging.

4.3.1 Prehistoric struggle: the messenger industry

In his ethnographic account of organising at Deliveroo, Cant draws a clear contrast between traditional messengers and food delivery platform workers:

> "We weren't the kind of couriers who wore odd-shaped cycling caps and rode fixed gear bikes. All the previous examples of successful organizing I knew of, such as the IWGB courier branch […] had relied on a subcultural courier community to create a sense of solidarity. Workers knew each other because they had all participated in these mad cross-city courier races, gone to the same pubs, used the same bike shops, and been part of a common social scene. But that wasn't the case for us. We were an undifferentiated mass of deskilled labour." (2020b:35-6)

Despite a difference in the social compositions of two workforces identified here, the political compositions of both organising projects are deeply intertwined.

Working in an industry that can be traced back to the 19th century, non-food delivery couriers (henceforth: *messengers* to avoid confusion) experienced technical recomposition in the

1980s, with the emergence of a spate of firms promising quick urban delivery via cyclists who were able to navigate increased traffic with ease (Hardy 2021:202; Fincham, 2004:7). The subsequent technical and political compositions of this workforce bear remarkable similarities to those of contemporary food delivery platform workers, and messengers' campaigns laid the groundwork for platform workers' unionisation efforts in the 2010s.

Competition between those new firms – alongside competition with firms which offered motorised delivery – fostered the need for a lean business model with low labour costs. Specifically, messenger firms in Britain widely imposed self-employed status and piece-rate pay on their workers (Wehr, 2006:43; Fincham, 2004:11). To account for the erratic nature of demand, companies overrecruited from a reserve army of migrant and youth labour (Fincham, 2004:2; Patchrider, 2000:3). The result saw workers seeking to carry out as many deliveries as possible, as rapidly as possible, darting between traffic – resulting in a notably high rate of messenger deaths at work (Patchrider, 2000:2; Hardy, 2021:203). This bears remarkable similarities to the technical composition of food delivery platform workers described above.

In his ethnographic account of messenger work, Jon Day describes experience of this labour process as a state of "oppressive freedom" for workers, many of whom enjoyed aspects of both self-employed status and the danger involved in messenger work (Day, 2015:66; Fincham, 2004:11). A subculture formed around this, drawing explicitly on punk aesthetics and attitudes, leaning into health and safety risks as means of asserting difference with the motorist public (Wehr, 2006:6; Fincham, 2006:221). Forms of collective organisation emerged from this subculture, initially focused on building community and fostering joy at work – such as through "alleycat" street races where fees are collated and distributed as prizes (LCEF, n.d.), and through zines which acted as means of communication between workers in different companies (LBMA, 2003; Fincham, 2004:21).

In turn, efforts at collective organisation aimed at changing the labour process emerged, in an instance of social and technical composition shaping political composition. In London, unionisation efforts took two forms: efforts by an established union to recruit, undertaken by the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) from 1985 through to the early 1990s; and campaigns by the grassroots Despatch Industry Workers' Union (DIWU) between 1989 and 1992. By most accounts, differences between the TGWU's paid bureaucracy and rank-and-file messengers proved an insurmountable challenge (Patchrider, 2000:6; Fincham,

2004:21), whereas the DIWU – with its membership and leadership consisting exclusively of messengers – was able to involve over 200 workers in its activities over the course of its existence (Patchrider, 2000:4). The DIWU undertook campaigns at several firms focused on pay and running costs. It inspired wildcat action alongside those campaigns, and drew on the external political support of anarcho-syndicalist organisations. Ultimately however, it struggled to sustain itself beyond the burnout of its leadership and high turnover of workers in the industry, declaring its dissolution in 1992 (Patchrider, 2000:23).

1994 saw an effort to launch a couriers' branch of the *Industrial Workers of the World* (IWW), with some former members of the DIWU involved, but this struggled to build a presence within the workforce (Patchrider, 2000:24; Fincham, 2004:21). Despite the existence of a cohesive and belligerent social composition, "all nascent London messenger organisations have failed to outlast the enthusiasm and energy of the handful of key organisers, fading soon after the departure of the founders" (LBMA, 2003). In response, the early 2000s saw a shift in strategic orientation, away from unionisation and towards mutual aid. The London Bicycle Messenger Association (LBMA) explicitly sought to combine messengers' subcultural community with fundraising to support injured messengers who could not work (LBMA, 2008). Whilst the LBMA would eventually suffer the same fate that it had bemoaned of earlier organising efforts – collapsing without any public declaration by 2008 – funds that it had raised were used to set up the London Courier Emergency Fund (LCEF), which continues to operate and raise funds for injured messengers as of 2025, providing "the only social security of the courier world" (Sayarer, 2016:12). Whilst, like the LBMA, LCEF does not involve itself in explicit collective action aimed at challenging employers, individual members of LCEF would draw on their experience of this project to do so.

4.3.2 The IWGB CLB: a unionisation initiative

In 2012, members of the Latin American Workers' Association – an organisation made up mostly of cleaners in London – formed the *Independent Workers Union of Great Britain* (IWGB). The history of the union's foundation is opaque, with instances of interpersonal conflict often hinted at but rarely detailed (for overviews, see: Kirkpatrick, 2014; Smith, 2021:1374; Weghmann, 2022:136). The Latin American cleaners had been members of the large general union, *Unite*, but left following increasing tensions over their willingness to use militant tactics (Lagnado, 2016). Some then joined the IWW and led its cleaners' branch,

prior to splitting in an instance of opaque tension to form the IWGB. Concurrently, outsourced cleaners at the University of London, who were members of *UNISON*, launched the *3 Cosas* campaign for sick pay, holiday and pensions – in line with the conditions of in-house staff. Following accusations that UNISON had undermined the campaign – notably, after cleaners had taken successful wildcat strike action – they left UNSION to join the newly-founded IWGB (Smith, 2021:1375; Moyer-Lee and Chango-Lopez, 2017).

Whatever the precise details of its origins, the IWGB launched a new trend in British industrial relations, sparking the formation of multiple similar "indie" unions (Però, 2020), distinguished from established trade unionism by their militancy – specifically, by their efforts to ensure worker leadership at the expense of top-down strategising in disputes, their willingness to deploy strike action as a first resort, and their use of social movement tactics in their campaigns, such as occupying corporate offices and other forms of spectacular protest (Weghmann, 2022:136-9; Joyce and Stuart, 2021:178; Adams, 2023:572).

The IWGB's militancy can be understood as deriving from multiple sources, including from migrant workers' transposed traditions of combative trade unionism (Alberti and Però, 2018:707), from political commitments (Weghmann, 2023:814), and from a lack of recognition agreements necessitating tactics beyond "traditional routes" (Carr, 2014:46). It is the contention of this thesis that the deeper prehistory of the IWGB's approach to industrial relations – running through the IWW, the Latin American Workers' Association and prior instances of militant trade unionism – is also relevant. Whilst exploring this tradition in full is beyond the scope of this chapter, it can be related to Richard Hyman's (2001) identification of a radical tradition within European trade unionism, competing – though also, frequently, overlapping – with a social democratic tradition and with an economistic tradition of "business unionism". The tactical repertoire and strategic foci of indie unions have influenced established unions, as demonstrated by Smith (2022) and Weghmann (2023), giving the IWGB and others an outsized influence on British industrial relations.

The IWGB's activity in the early 2010s drew the attention of four messengers, some of whom had been involved in LCEF (Hardy, 2021:203; Joyce et al., 2023:32). Through their embeddedness in the wider messenger community, they organised a meeting to discuss unionisation which resulted in the formation of the IWGB's *Couriers and Logistics branch* (henceforth: CLB). Based on its difficult experiences in UNISON, the IWGB deliberately granted branches a great deal of autonomy within the union, managing their own funds and

democratic procedures (Fieldnotes 31.08.22) – a features of the union which would shape the Stuart campaign, as explored in Chapter Five.

Immediately, the CLB launched an ambitious campaign for the London Living Wage at the city's most prominent messenger firms through strike action and protest – notably deploying leverage tactics by protesting at the offices of companies who contracted messenger firms for deliveries, such as The Guardian and Google (Benfield, 2018).

Concurrently, members of the branch embarked upon a series of legal cases – some of which were successful – challenging firms' designation of messengers as self-employed (Hardy, 2021:204). Since 2014, the IWGB had deployed litigation as a means of organising workers in multiple sectors – specifically aiming to turn "individual cases into collective campaigns" (Marshall and Woodcock, 2022), rather than allowing legal initiatives to substitute for organising efforts (Joyce and Stuart, 2021:183-4). Through one such case – originating outside of the IWGB, but later supported by it – Uber drivers were reclassified as "Limb (B) workers" in 2021, a classification between employment and self-employment which entitles workers to such protections as the minimum wage and statutory sick pay, but also recognises a degree of independence such that the worker may log on and off the platform when they please (Badger, 2021:45).

In leading yet another effort to unionise the messenger industry – building on the prehistoric efforts described in Section 4.3.1 – the CLB established itself as a key branch of the IWGB, which would become the infrastructure for struggle in a new sector.

4.3.3 The emergence of platform couriers' collective action: a wildcat project

In July 2016, the restaurant chain Byron Burgers collaborated with the UK Border Agency in carrying out a documentation check amongst their staff, resulting in the detention of around twenty restaurant workers (Cant, 2020b:vii). This resulted in protests outside Byron Burgers outlets and a consumer boycott. In the first documented instance of collective action amongst platform food delivery workers in Britain, Deliveroo workers began refusing orders from Byron Burgers – utilising their ability to do so by virtue of their self-employed status, encouraging each other to do the same through digital and in-person networks (Waters and Woodcock, 2017; Woodcock, 2016b).

Just two weeks later, Deliveroo announced that it was changing its payment model in London, moving from an hourly wage of £7 plus £1 per delivery to a piece-rate system with a

base rate of £3.75 per delivery, notably in the context of a competitor – Uber Eats – launching in Britain (Woodcock, 2016a). This saw London's Deliveroo couriers respond with seven days of sustained strike action and protest at the company's headquarters. The self-employed status imposed by platform firms was conducive to collective action, given that self-employed workers do not have to comply with British legislation regulating strike action. The 2016 Deliveroo strike is described in detail by Woodcock (2016a; 2016b) and Adam Badger (2021, 269-278), but for the purpose of this section, the assistance provided by the IWGB CLB to the workers' wildcat project is most relevant.

On the second day of Deliveroo workers' protest, IWGB members from outside of the workforce attended and participated in meetings that the drivers had been holding. These trade union activists made explicit reference to the successes won by messengers through the CLB in encouraging Deliveroo workers to join the IWGB (Woodcock, 2016a) – per Badger: "The Union's successful campaigns at other [messenger] courier firms in London provided the necessary expertise to build mutual trust and understanding" (2021:273). The IWGB also launched a digital fundraising drive, from which it would provide strike pay to couriers who joined the union, to supplement lost wages (2021:279). Whilst this only saw a relatively small number of Deliveroo couriers join the union, those who did would go on to lead a more sustained campaign.

Shortly after this, workers for the newly-launched Uber Eats launched their own wildcat strike following the firm removing high rates of pay that it had used to entice workers onto the platform (Butler, 2016). Again the IWGB were quick to intervene by organising a demonstration (Woodcock 2016b; Badger, 2021:272). A new site of workers' struggle had dramatically emerged in the space of six weeks, initially driven by workers with no union support, but with the IWGB CLB quickly attaching itself to the workers' project.

4.3.4 Two projects struggle to merge: wildcat action and unionisation initiatives

From 2016, a complicated dynamic began between efforts at unionisation and persistent upswells of wildcat action. In London, the IWGB launched a campaign in a single Deliveroo "zone" – a geographic unit designated by the firm, with a "zone centre" in which couriers were mandated to await orders – aiming to recruit 10% of the zone's workforce to force a recognition agreement through the Central Arbitration Committee (Badger, 2021:279-94). The ultimate failure of this initiative would see Deliveroo roll out a myriad of changes to its labour process in an effort to prove that couriers were self-employed and thus exempt from

statutory union recognition, making couriers' work "radically flexible in ways that benefitted some and harmed others" (Badger, 2021:295). Despite not succeeding in its immediate aims, this campaign saw an influx of platform couriers to the CLB in London, beginning a process that would ultimately see messengers displaced as the largest workforce represented in the branch.

In 2017, local unionisation initiatives would begin to emerge outside of London. In Brighton, this was led by members of the IWGB as recounted in detail by Cant (2020b:103-129). In Bristol, those responsible for providing in-person training for Deliveroo cyclists took one day of strike action in January 2017 over pay and joined the IWW (Anonymous, 2017). From February onwards, the IWW also led organising efforts in Leeds, organising a "critical mass" of cyclists – a form of protest which can partially traced back to messenger subcultures, and which would be deployed in multiple forms during couriers' struggle in proceeding years (Plan C, 2017; LBMA, 2003; Joyce and Stuart, 2021:184). Couriers launched the *Rebel Roo* publication, aimed at gathering and disseminating information within the workforce in different localities (Cant, 2020b:109-112), supported by both the IWW and the IWGB as well as by the political organisation *Plan C*, producing nine issues between November 2016 and July 2018 (Notes from Below, 2018b). This echoed messengers' 1980s and 90s use of zines as a means of building collective cohesion within the workforce, with that echo going as far as to reflect messengers' belligerent, punk imagery (Cant, 2020b:107-8).

At the beginning of 2018, having established a presence in courier workforce in Bristol, Leeds and elsewhere, the IWW founded its *Couriers Network* – the second such effort, given the short-lived 1994 IWW couriers' branch, as described above. This saw activists from outside of the workplace – typically motivated by anarcho-syndicalist politics – work with militant couriers in attempting to build a distinctive organisational structure, whereby workers would not have to join the union in order to participate in its Couriers Network, "turning the logic of the gig economy against itself" (Davies, 2020). This contrasted with the CLB's system of paying membership. As an organisational form, however, this would prove far less sustainable than the CLB.

On October 4th 2018, members of the *Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union* launched simultaneous strike action at branches of McDonald's, Wetherspoon and TGI Fridays (see: Cant and Woodcock, 2020). Seeing an opportunity for coordinated action, the IWW Couriers Network announced their participation with a focus on couriers' pay, with limited support

from the IWGB. This saw the first deliberately coordinated, multi-location strike in the industry, involving "an estimated 1000 riders in 10 UK cities" (Davies, 2020). But, in the account of a key non-courier organiser, it also irrevocably damaged the Couriers Network. The intense efforts needed to organise the action exhausted both non-courier IWW activists and the small number of militant couriers who had joined the IWW, while the wider striking workforce – expecting results from a strike that had been widely promoted in multiple locations – became disillusioned when none materialised (Davies, 2020). The Couriers Network gradually collapsed through 2019 and early 2020. In an account published immediately after the strike, Achille Marotta wrote that: "[f]uture strikes will be an opportunity for the IWW Couriers Network to fuse itself with the self-organisation of the workers and become a more permanent and widespread vehicle of struggle" (2018). This diagnoses a problem that, in the view of this thesis, defines efforts to organise in this industry: the struggle to merge wildcat and union projects.

IWGB efforts to build a functioning local group of couriers in Brighton had collapsed by the summer of 2017, with a hiring freeze – won through collective action – seeing couriers taking more orders and having less time to organise, while others left the workforce (Cant, 2020b:121). This was, nonetheless, not the end of workers' collective action in the city, which would later take place without union assistance (Cant, 2020b:126).

Gradually, and with local variation, a similar pattern would repeat across Britain. The 2021 version of the CLB constitution states that ten members may constitute themselves as a local *group*, receiving a small amount of financial support from the CLB, which would increase when the group reached twenty members. Between 2017 and 2021 – concurrent with the decline of the IWW Couriers Network – such groups would emerge and collapse in Bristol, Nottingham, Berkshire (focused in Reading), Scotland (focused in Edinburgh) and South Wales. By late 2021, just two groups continued to function outside of the IWGB's London core: York and Sheffield, detailed below.

Concurrent with these efforts at establishing structured, sustainable organisational forms, instances of couriers' protest frequently erupted without any connection to the IWGB, the IWW or any other formal grouping. Early examples of this included Uber Eats strikes in Plymouth and Southampton in July 2018 (Anonymous, 2018a; Anonymous, 2018b), whereas September 2019 saw an uncoordinated wave of strikes in sixteen localities, largely in the South of England. This wave responded to a series of changes in Deliveroo's labour

processes including the ending of a system of shifts, the prioritisation of motorised vehicles over cyclists, and the continuing decline in pay (Cant, 2019). The means by which such action emerges without any union involvement is explored in Chapters Six and Seven of this thesis.

The state of struggle in this industry has thus been uneven and complex, which is reflected in the absence of major victories beyond temporary and small wins (Badger, 2021:252; Woodcock and Cant, 2022:232). Whilst the IWGB established itself quickly amongst London's courier workforce from 2016 onwards, it never built a sustainable, nationwide structure capable of unionising large numbers of platform couriers. In 2022, taking advantage of this void in an instance "a classic strategy for a company to use to avoid having to recognise a union it dislikes" (Pitt, 2024:792), Deliveroo entered a voluntary recognition agreement with the large general union, GMB. In exchange for union representation over individual grievances, two weeks of annual sick pay, a one-off grant for new parents and other small wins – with nothing relating to pay as such or to employment status – Deliveroo were able to present themselves as union-friendly and GMB were able to triumphantly declare that "Deliveroo riders now have a trade union", over six years after the IWGB began organising in the industry (GMB, 2023). This occurred during fieldwork for this thesis, with an IWGB CLB staff member stating that the branch had no idea this voluntary agreement was coming (Fieldnotes 12.05.22). It has, however, not seen an end to either wildcat action or efforts at unionisation in the industry by the IWGB and other, independent actors.

4.3.5 Platform courier organising in Sheffield

In building their local groups, the CLB had relied on two types of organisers: worker militants from within the workforce and, as with the IWW Couriers Network, activists from beyond the workforce driven by political commitment, providing assistance to the workers' project (Davies, 2020). In Sheffield, the latter figure was personified by Michael Elms, a member of the Trotskyist organisation: the *Alliance for Workers' Liberty* (AWL).

In April 2019, the AWL's Sheffield branch hosted a public meeting, inviting the then-Chair of the CLB to discuss the contemporary labour movement. There, the IWGB provided AWL members with copies of *Puncture* – an IWGB publication akin to *Rebel Roo*, but which only saw three issues published, each in 2019. Activists then took it upon themselves to distribute these amongst couriers while they waited for orders in Sheffield city centre. This was the beginning of a long organising project which would go through several cycles, seeing dozens

of couriers involved over four years, with different workers taking leading roles in different periods, but with Michael and the AWL always acting as an infrastructural backdrop, sustaining the Sheffield group through periods of burnout and turnover. Initially called the South Yorkshire Couriers Network, it would later change its name to IWGB Couriers Sheffield (Interview with Michael, 11.10.22).

In yet another echo of messenger organising efforts in preceding decades, the AWL's direct predecessor – Socialist Organiser (Kelly, 2018b:64) – had sought to intervene in the messenger industry in the 1980s, resulting in an acrimonious relationship between the organisation and the anarchist-oriented DIWU (Patchrider, 2000:7). In Sheffield from 2019 onwards however, the relationship between the AWL and the courier workforce was far more conducive. Alongside other members of the AWL and other socialist organisations, Michael designed, printed and distributed leaflets advertising meetings and protests, booked rooms for couriers' meetings in Sheffield Trades and Labour Club, and built a group that would surpass York in size, despite having formed later (interview with Michael, 11.10.22).

Such relationships between political and workers' project are nothing new. Omar Manky (2018) identified the crucial role of Communist Party activist in organising mineworkers in the difficult context of post-democratisation Chile in the early 2000s, recognising that external activists preserved crucial channels of communication, supplied informational resources to workers which helped coordinate actions between mines, and built national networks. The IWGB had long made use of non-worker support during its campaigns, such as through student demonstrations during the *3 Cosas* campaign (Chakrabortty, 2014). Using CHAT, these can be understood as instances of *solidarity*, through "the freely chosen submission of the provider of assistance to the beneficiary, in order to increase the agency of the other" (De Smet, 2015:56). It risks taking other forms however, as De Smet noted in the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and Mahalla strikers (2015:276), or with attempts by non-worker socialist activists to develop the workers' project at a pace beyond its Zone of Proximal Development (2015:277-8).

The relationship between non-worker activists and couriers during the Stuart campaign is further examined in Chapter Five, but for the purposes of this chapter a specific contribution by IWGB Couriers Sheffield to the CLB's overall tactical repertoire is noteworthy. Boycotts of specific restaurants had been a tactic within couriers' struggle since the first documented collective action – against Byron Burgers in 2016. Deliveroo couriers in Bristol boycotted

orders from the chain restaurant Wagamama in October 2019, complaining of long, unpaid waiting times while picking up orders (Gogarty, 2019). Drawing on couriers' knowledge of which restaurants received the most orders and were thus most lucrative for platform firms, IWGB Couriers Sheffield deployed this tactic as part of a concerted campaign over pay, coordinating with their sister group in York on February 14th 2020 in a boycott of Wagamama orders, seeking to exert secondary pressure on Deliveroo via their client. During the boycott, couriers would continue to take deliveries from other restaurants – making money which they would otherwise lose in a typical strike – while supporters protested at Wagamama outlets, leafletting the public and asking couriers who came to pick up orders to consider cancelling them. The boycott tactic would become a key part of the Stuart dispute, as described in Chapter Five.

4.3.6 The struggle at Stuart

In the above account, Deliveroo and Uber Eats appear as the primary sites of organisation and struggle amongst couriers. Michael explains why this was the case in Sheffield:

> "Stuart was always the best paid and they didn't start over-hiring until quite late in the game. So Stuart was quite strong, in HR terms, because they had a group of slightly older drivers who'd been in the game for a long time, and they'd been able to remain in the game on Stuart for a long time because the pay was relatively good, and because the workforce was kept quite small […] The drivers were loyal, they thought they had a good thing going and they didn't want to get involved with the union, which they saw – rightly or wrongly – as jeopardising the sweet gig that they had." (Interview with Michael, 11.10.22)

Nonetheless, there is a prehistory of struggle amongst Stuart couriers. In 2017, a former Stuart Delivery courier with no affiliation to any organisation brought a complaint to an employment tribunal, alleging that he had been wrongly categorised as self-employed. In 2019, an appeals tribunal concluded that this had been the case – specifically while the courier was working "on slot" – and this was affirmed again when Stuart's legal appeal was dismissed in 2021. The courier, declared the courts, had been a Limb (B) worker, and was owed compensation for unpaid minimum wage, holiday pay and so on. The IWGB was quick to take advantage of this, encouraging members who worked for Stuart to join a collective claim for the same compensation.

Concurrently, by the beginning of the Stuart dispute in December 2021, the CLB had won two significant victories related to Stuart. Firstly, in the union's 2020-21 pandemic-era "#ClappedAndScrapped" campaign against automated terminations of platform workers, Stuart was the only platform to introduce an appeal process for terminated couriers, announcing this in early November 2021. Secondly, IWGB Couriers Sheffield had won a successful campaign against Just Eat's plan to end its outsourcing relationship with Stuart in Sheffield, proposing to instead employ drivers through the Randstad employment agency, colloquially known as Just Eat's "Soober" model. Couriers had worried that they would not be automatically transferred from Stuart to Randstad, potentially losing their jobs, and that employment by Randstad would reduce the flexibility that drivers valued in their independent contractor relationship with Stuart, such as by limiting their working hours, dictating their schedules and removing their ability to reject orders (Gareth letter to Just Eat CEO, 24.09.21). The campaign against this consisted of regular meetings for Stuart drivers in the Trades and Labour Club, a petition, door-knocking by volunteers to build community support, and heavy use of political pressure through local MPs who the union had been building relationships with for a number of years (Elms article #9, 26.10.21). In October, the CEO of Just Eat informed the union that there were no longer plans to end their partnership with Stuart in Sheffield, which the IWGB immediately claimed as a victory. This final case indicates the complex relationship between platform couriers' flexibility and job security, given that Michael had previously celebrated the introduction of the Scoober model as a move away from self-employed status in the industry, before campaigning against its local roll out less than a year later (Elms article #5, 05.01.21).

The result of each of these victories was the further integration of Sheffield's Stuart couriers into the CLB given previous scepticism, and a sense of confidence and conviction – amongst Sheffield drivers and the IWGB overall – that Stuart was a promising target for other potential victories. In this context, Stuart introduced its pay restructure to Sheffield.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has undertaken an examination of the prehistory of the Stuart Delivery dispute. Through an analysis of the platform economy, it has argued that Stuart's 2021 pay restructure can be understood as part of the firm's efforts to attain profitability in difficult circumstances, technically and socially composing a heavily exploited workforce in the process. Through an account of the emergence of platform couriers' struggle, it has identified two projects whose

interplay has characterised workers' collective action in the sector: an older project focused on unionisation, rooted in the history of messenger organising from which the IWGB CLB emerged, and a newer project of platform couriers' wildcat action. The difficult relationship between these would shape the conflict led by Stuart couriers in Sheffield, whose organisational infrastructure was overviewed above.

Chapter Five: The Struggle over Strategy in "the UK's longest gig economy strike"

5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the 2021-22 Stuart Delivery dispute through analysis of *strategising* – primarily as undertaken by the campaign led by workers and trade unionists, but with consideration of the firm's strategising efforts as well. In applying the theoretical framework developed in Chapter Two to empirical findings around strategy and tactics, a set of analytical principles about the internal, constitutive elements of the campaign – or nested *projects* – are identified: relationships between those projects are key to the crystallisation and upscaling of an overall strategic approach, after initial organising; yet it is the nature and level of integration of projects which also helps explain the campaign's eventual collapse, with insufficient coordination between them leading to *drift* and *fragmentation*.

The chapter begins by briefly reviewing some standard conceptions of strategy in workplace-focused literature, using these to present a model for understanding strategy based on the theoretical framework of this thesis: one which analyses the internal life of a campaign, identifying the projects which nest within it, and understanding tactics and overall strategy as resulting from collaboration between those projects. Section 5.3 then applies this approach, using an account of the Stuart campaign to identify five projects which, in tandem, constituted the Stuart campaign as a whole. One of those constitutive projects – "Carpark Meetings" – is subject of Chapters Six and Seven of this thesis. Section 5.4 then details how three key features of the campaign – *the boycott tactic, geographic spread*, *and the use of a strike fund* – resulted from collaboration between its nested, constitutive projects, and how tensions between those led to crises. Finally, Section 5.5 considers the strategy deployed by Stuart Delivery throughout the dispute, identifying the firm's ability to *wait out* the campaign – while it suffered internal crises – as key to the campaign's ultimate defeat.

5.2 Understanding strategy as struggle

Consideration of strategy in workplace-focused literature has often been in imprecise terms, in some cases drawing on crude definitions offered in management studies (Mintzberg et al., 2009:9). In his entry on trade union strategy in the *SAGE Handbook of Industrial Relations*, Peter Boxall identifies the relation between the organisation and its environment as the crux of strategy (2008:209). Drawing on the early work of the management scholar Henry

Mintzberg – specifically on Mintzberg's definition of strategy as "the set of consistent behaviors by which the organization establishes for a time its place in its environment" (1978:941) – Boxall conceives of strategy as "the pattern of critical choices about ends and means that we see unfolding in an organization's behavior" (2008:209).

In their respective recognition of "consistent behaviors" and "critical choices", both Mintzberg and Boxall provide space for agency – or "some element of discretion in the hands of leaders and other actors" (Boxall, 2008:210) – when strategising, but their emphasis is firmly on the interaction of the organisation with its external context, with limited consideration of the role of intra-organisational dynamics in shaping strategy. This risks imbuing the single organisation with an authoritative decision-making capacity which bulldozes its internal complexity, leaving us with insufficient understanding of the significance of a strategising body's internal life.

Furthermore, in emphasising consistency and patterns, Mintzberg and Boxall helpfully identify *scale* and *longevity* as features of strategy, but give little consideration to *transformation* – other than through instances where strategising bodies take opportunities provided by their environments or opponents (Boxall, 2008:217). Yet in the dispute described below, significant moments of transformation in the Stuart campaign's strategy often emerged from within the campaign itself. This more closely resembles Karen Beckwith's emphasis on "*hinges*" in the formation and practice of strategy: moments where practice is transformed through experimentation over time, deploying new tactics which actors may then incorporate into their overall, longer-term strategies if they perceive them as having been effective (2000:180-181).

In contrast to Boxall and Mintzberg's tendency towards reification, Richard Hyman identifies a need to "get beneath the blank abstraction of such labels as 'the union'" by recognising unions as sites of contested, dynamic internal decision-making, which shape their strategising practices (1975:66-67). Two innate features of trade unions subject their internal decision-making processes to particular pressure: their potential to "disrupt the normal workings of a capitalist economic system" in their contestation of employers' control, leading to efforts from without to influence their decision-making and curtail their militancy, such as through legislation (1975:67); and their nature as combinations of members from diverse backgrounds and with varying perspectives, all of whom seek to exert power within and through the union, often resulting in intense internal tension (1975:73). At the same time, unions' strength is

derived from those same sources: from their disruptive potential, and from "the networks of social relationships among the individuals who constitute the (actual or potential) membership", the quality of which "gives the union its human face and ultimately its capacity to act" (2007:204).

In line with the *Meluccian challenge* considered in Chapter One, Hyman can be read as calling for the analytic deconstruction of ostensible unity in order to more thoroughly understand strategising processes. The theoretical framework developed in Chapter Two provides a means of carrying out such deconstructive analysis. A *predicament* acts as the impetus for the development of a collective subject, which sets about seeking to resolve that through collaborative activity. Such activity can be understood as a *project*: a subject aimed at a goal. In experimenting with different forms of activity, the project identifies the appropriate practices and internalises those as it continues to pursue its object (De Smet, 2015:54-55; 383). That process – of experimentation and internalisation towards an end – is *strategising*.

However, the participants involved in this striving project have not come from nowhere. They emerge from pre-existing projects, each with their own additional goals and artefacts – such as different vocabularies, material resources, practices, memories, and social compositions – which they introduce to the new project. The coherence of those pre-existing projects may be such that – even within the new, overall project – they continue to exist as constituent elements, brought together by a shared object, but differentiated by their other, secondary objects and by their distinct artefacts (Blunden, 2016:6). Even while striving towards a shared primary object, these constitutive sections may exist in tension with one another. Their different prehistoric experiences may entail different proleptic conceptions of what is possible, and subsequent differing conception of which activities are the most appropriate for obtaining their shared object. As such they may pull in different strategic directions, struggling to fuse their most appropriate features for the predicament at hand (Blunden, 2010:2).

Opponents of antagonistic collective subjects exist as a separate projects, aimed at the polar opposite object. In the case of the Stuart campaign, that opponent was the firm, seeking to attain profitability, not least through keeping labour costs low, as outlined in Chapter Four. In seeking this object against opposition, it practices its own strategising (De Smet, 2015:334).

In order to understand strategising in the dispute at hand, then, we must excavate the constituent elements whose collaborative practices brought it into existence and drove its development.

5.3 The internal life of the Stuart campaign

Through empirical research on the Stuart campaign, five constitutive projects can be identified as nesting within the overall campaign. They are detailed in Subsection 5.3.1 and 5.3.2 below, but as heuristic shorthands they are referred to as: Sheffield Monday Meetings; Socialist Volunteers; The IWGB Central Apparatus; The CLB Committee; and Carpark Meetings.

The table below summarises these projects and the distinctions between them, with the following subsections outlining their formation and interaction in two phases: the emergence of the campaign between October and December 2021; and developments in the campaign's strategy between January and May 2022. Section 5.4 then identifies how interactions and tensions between the constitutive projects both forged key tactics and led to crises.

Project	**Description**	**Secondary objects**	**Distinguishing artefacts**
Sheffield Monday Meetings	Unionised food delivery platform couriers in Sheffield. Formed through the merger of two projects: the pre-existing IWGB Couriers Sheffield group; and Claude's "Fight For What's Right" WhatsApp chat, described below. Whilst precarious – lacking, for example, any recognition agreements with platform firms – this project had an established union presence, as	Wage-maximisation by means other than overturning the pay restructure, e.g. by ending over-recruitment.	Relationships with couriers who did not join the union, through day-to-day workplace interactions and the "Fight For What's Right" WhatsApp chat. Knowledge of the labour process.

	outlined in Section 4.3.5 of Chapter Four. Members of the IWGB. Met weekly in the Sheffield Trades and Labour Club, which was booked by Socialist Volunteers.		Memories and experience of earlier organising efforts. Social composition: majority people of colour; significant number of migrants; heavily male; varying levels of education.
Socialist Volunteers	A nationwide collection of non-courier activists who supported the campaign to varying degrees. Individuals within this did not always act as a wholly unified project, but they shared socialist political goals and possessed many of the same artefacts.	Wider political ambitions – advocating socialism. Sustaining and growing their political organisations, e.g. the Alliance for Workers Liberty; the Socialist Party.	Experience of prior campaigns. Connections with other activists, campaigns and trade unions. Banner-making and leaflet design skills. Newspapers from their respective organisations – a means of political intervention, soliciting donations and recruiting more volunteers (Fieldnotes 14.03.22).

			Social composition: wide geographic spread; entirely white, British-born, male, and well-educated.
The IWGB Central Apparatus	Figures in the dispute who were employed by the IWGB at a national level. At least two had begun their work with the IWGB as socialist volunteers, supporting IWGB cleaners' campaigns at universities while they were students (Fieldnotes 14.03.22; interview with Sylvie, 07.09.22).	The maintenance of the union. The growth of the union – in terms of membership and finances. Maintaining the livelihoods of those employed by the union.	Direct access to the material resources of the IWGB: money; staff time; social media. Experience of prior campaigns. Contact with platform couriers who were members of the IWGB across Britain. Social composition: entirely concentrated in London; entirely white and British-born.
The CLB Committee	Elected IWGB Couriers and Logistics Branch Officers at a national level, all of whom	The maintenance of the branch and the union.	Access to the IWGB's material resources listed

	were current couriers, but who largely shared a different social composition to the couriers who featured most prominently in this dispute. Unpaid, unlike the IWGB Central Apparatus.		above, mediated by the IWGB Central Apparatus. For example, whilst a member of IWGB staff was employed to work solely for the CLB, her line manager was located in the Central Apparatus, outside of the CLB. Experience of prior campaigns. Social composition: largely concentrated in London; majority white, British-born and well-educated.
Carpark Meetings	A shorthand for couriers' projects outside of Sheffield which took action as part of the campaign. Largely not members of the IWGB. Distinguished from Sheffield Monday Meetings by the	Wage-maximisation by means other than overturning the pay restructure, e.g. by ending over-recruitment.	Relationships with other couriers through day-to-day workplace interactions. Knowledge of the labour process. Social composition: majority people of

	absence of any established union presence.		colour; significant number of migrants; varying levels of education.

Table 04: Nested projects within the Stuart campaign.

5.3.1 The formation of the Stuart campaign, October – December 2021

In October 2021, Stuart announced that it would be introducing linear pay in Sheffield, as described in Chapter Four. Couriers learnt of this in emails or in Virtual Partner Hours, where discussion of pay was often shut down by the firm's staff (Fieldnotes 04.04.22). Beyond Sheffield, however, the pay restructure as a predicament had already emerged prior to this. Since at least April 2021, Stuart had been rolling it out gradually, on an area-by-area basis. As Sylvie, a member of staff working for the IWGB, explained:

> "I think it started around April of 2021, I think in Nottingham first of all. And we kind of heard this from union members – there were all these rumours about when it was going to hit each place." (Interview with Sylvie, 07.09.22)

Whilst the IWGB previously had an organised presence in Nottingham through a local CLB group, this had ceased functioning by the time the pay restructure was introduced. Nonetheless, the rollout was met with resistance, with couriers' undertaking a work stoppage in protest without any union involvement (Fieldnotes 31.08.22). Similar wildcat strikes would take place in Kent and, in the Summer of 2021, in Manchester – again with the IWGB having some awareness of these through networked connections with workers, but lacking sufficient connections with workforces in each area to intervene (Stuart Coordination meeting minutes #10, 10.12.21). Without being cohered into a wider project, such instances of early wildcat action appear to have been short lived.

Stuart's Sheffield announcement changed everything. As described in Sections 4.3.5 and 4.3.6 of Chapter Four, by October 2021 IWGB Couriers Sheffield was one of only two local IWGB CLB groups active outside of London, and had very recently won a campaign against Just Eat ending its contract with Stuart in Sheffield.

Initially however, the campaign in Sheffield began with two distinct efforts – one within the union and one outside of it. Claude, a young Stuart courier, describes these:

> "So [Stuart] gave us a Zoom call – me and a few other drivers. Like, not me specifically on this Zoom call, but more of them was like: 'We're gonna strike' and all that, like: 'It's not right'. And then they actually postponed it […] which then gave me enough time to build up a WhatsApp, you know, just adding every driver that's on the Stuart platform, getting us together, trynna build up…' (Claude, Podcast #10)

Here Claude is describing the first two projects to form in Sheffield in opposition to the pay restructure in October 2021: the coordination of couriers to attend and intervene in Stuart's Virtual Partner Hours, arranged through IWGB Couriers Sheffield's existing infrastructure; and a WhatsApp chat named *Fight For What's Right*, created by Claude initially without union involvement, which would act as a site for discussion and organisation amongst Sheffield's Stuart couriers throughout the dispute (Focus Group, 15.12.23).

By taking the initiative in creating the aforementioned WhatsApp chat, Claude "kicked things off" and affirmed his status as "the leader" of a wide section of Sheffield's Stuart couriers beyond the IWGB. Despite being a member of the IWGB, Claude "saw this as something he had to mobilise the drivers to resolve, and maybe didn't see the union as the vehicle for that initially" (Interview with Sylvie, 07.09.22). He had proven his ability to reach a wide section of the local Stuart workforce.

Seeing the potential in Claude's non-union organising efforts, Michael Elms – the socialist volunteer who had been key to sustaining the IWGB group in Sheffield, introduced in Section 4.3.5 – set about seeking to merge both projects by encouraging Claude's involvement in the union and developing his confidence as a figurehead. Michael took Claude to visit the picket lines of striking refuse collection workers in the city and recorded a video of Claude expressing support for them for use in IWGB social media (Elms article #11, 16.11.21). With the election of Claude as Chair of IWGB Couriers Sheffield, this merger was affirmed – Claude's WhatsApp chat and the IWGB Couriers Sheffield group would now work seamlessly together in the struggle against the pay restructure. This combined project is referred as the "Monday Meetings" going forward, because the weekly IWGB Couriers Sheffield meetings, held on Mondays in the Trades and Labour Club, were its formal site of strategising, where unionised couriers would debate and vote on decisions (Fieldnotes 04.04.22).

By intervening in Virtual Partner Hours, couriers succeeded in getting Stuart to postpone the roll-out of the restructure in Sheffield by late October in order to "clarify why we are

introducing these changes and what they mean for you" (quoted in IWGB Couriers Sheffield letter to Stuart CEO, 01.11.21). The Monday Meetings then voted to insist that Stuart drop the restructure entirely and instead meet an ambitious set of demands, reflecting the perception of Stuart as a potentially fruitful target:

- For a £6 base rate for drops, plus mileage (alongside multipliers);
- For waiting time to be paid after the first 10 minutes, at a rate of £15 per hour;
- For a hiring freeze in Sheffield;
- For the system glitch that is resulting in incorrect insurance-related suspensions to be resolved.

(IWGB Couriers Sheffield letter to Stuart CEO, 01.11.21)

The extent of this ambition is captured in in the slogan used throughout the dispute: "Pay Rise, Not Pay Cut!" – demanding not only the reversal of the predicament, but that it be superseded entirely by a pay increase.

Socialist volunteers consistently played a key role in launching and fostering the Stuart campaign. As outlined in Chapter Four, Michael was effectively the founder and facilitator of IWGB Couriers Sheffield, despite having never been a courier himself. Other volunteers had played roles in the Sheffield group over its three-year history, and two volunteers would become particularly prominent in this campaign: Richard, a member of the Socialist Party who would become a regular presence on couriers' picket lines and who, like Michael, would document the dispute for his organisation's newspaper; and Seb, an independent socialist activist who would take minutes during the Monday meetings and support couriers through casework over issues like account deactivation. By virtue of being self-employed, retired, and a student respectively, Michael, Richard, and Seb had time to devote to the campaign.

These volunteers – including similar figures who would later emerge in other geographic areas – can be understood as an independent but collaborative project in CHAT's terms, motivated by broader political commitment rather than by any threat that the pay restructure posed to their livelihoods. Their project collaborated closely with both the IWGB and Sheffield Monday Meetings. Socialist volunteers remained in continuous contact with official IWGB representatives regarding their activities in local areas. They contributed to couriers' meetings, encouraging particular decisions, but, importantly, volunteers would not vote on decisions in meetings, as only IWGB members could do so per the union's rules. Using CHAT, this collaboration can be understood as one of "assistance" and "instruction" by

external leaders (see Section 2.4.6 of Chapter Two) – in this case, by experienced activists from outside of the proletarian subject in question, willingly dedicating their capacities to promoting the self-emancipation of the workers' project from its predicament (De Smet, 2015:11; 57).

When, in late November, it became clear that Stuart were intent on imposing the pay restructure and ignoring the demands set out by the Monday Meetings above, IWGB Couriers Sheffield organised a protest, driving through the city in a convoy – deploying tactics developed by the group in past disputes (Fieldnotes 19.04.22) – demonstrating with supporters outside the Town Hall, and marching to a McDonald's restaurant where they rallied outside. On December 6th – the day that the pay restructure was eventually imposed – the group launched its indefinite daily boycott of McDonald's orders between 5pm and 10pm, utilising couriers' knowledge of this as one of the busiest sources of deliveries during these peak times. The boycott would act as the signature tactic of the campaign, though it would be referred to as a "strike" throughout. After just five days of action, Liam – an IWGB staff member – described this as "possibly the longest continuous gig economy strike in UK", without anticipating that it would continue for a further five months (Tweet #40, 10.12.21).

Alongside Socialist Volunteers, two other projects interacted closely with the Monday Meetings from the outset of the campaign. Both of these had long histories within the IWGB. Firstly, the "IWGB Central Apparatus" consisted of those who were employed by the union: the elected President, Gareth – a former medical courier with experience in the messenger social scene – and the unelected members of staff whose income depended on the union: Sylvie who was employed to organise with the CLB, Liam who worked as a senior organiser covering the entire union, and Jason who worked as the IWGB's Press Officer. Whilst this project shared the aim of resolving the predicament faced by IWGB members in Sheffield – reversing Stuart's pay cut – it was simultaneously motivated by the need to maintain and grow the IWGB's membership, finances, and functionality, with the livelihoods of the individuals within this project depending on this.

Secondly, the "CLB Committee" project consisted of platform couriers who had been elected as unpaid Branch Officers within the IWGB nationwide couriers' branch. While the individuals in this project came from within the wider platform workforce, they shared a notably different social composition to the majority of couriers who would participate in the Stuart campaign, being largely white, well-educated, and concentrated in London. As with the

IWGB Central Apparatus, the CLB Committee were motivated to ensure the survival of the CLB branch – an object not always shared by the Stuart couriers who had little involvement in running the branch.

Both IWGB-affiliated projects were in close collaboration with one another because they both existed within the union. A case could be made to draw no distinction between them, but Hyman insists that scholars recognise the difference between unions' employed bureaucracy – whose livelihoods depend on sustaining the union – and their elected leaders drawn from the rank-and-file who, in the IWGB's case, receive no wage and whose interests may more closely resemble those of the general membership (1975:60; 160-163). This potential difference between the two projects only occasionally appeared visible in empirical research, such as on the small number of occasions when members of the CLB Committee appeared to struggle to keep up with the extent of activity expected of them by the Central Apparatus (Fieldnotes 05.04.22). Nonetheless, this distinction between the two intra-union projects is drawn based on a critical understanding of the nature of British trade unionism, per Hyman.

Both IWGB-affiliated projects collaborated with the Monday Meetings in multiple ways. The CLB's constitution conferred legitimacy on IWGB Couriers Sheffield as a local group within the union, and its members took part in efforts to spread the campaign to new towns and cities. The IWGB Central Apparatus played the leading role in managing the campaign's Strike Fund, sustaining the boycotts by providing couriers with picket pay, detailed below. It also deliberately sought to create space for collaboration between the campaign's constitutive projects, setting up the "Stuart Coordination" WhatsApp chat, which included socialist volunteers, IWGB staff, CLB Committee members, and leading drivers from Sheffield. The chat was used for the management of the campaign at a national level, such as for discussions on press coverage, and to arrange weekly planning meetings for chat participants on Tuesday mornings over Zoom (Fieldnotes 14.03.22).

Finally, alongside the Sheffield-focused campaign, instances of collective action would frequently emerge in other towns and cities as Stuart rolled out its pay restructure – as had been the case in Nottingham and elsewhere from April 2021. In the emergent period of the; campaign in Sheffield, couriers became aware of an all-out strike in the nearby town of Taddlington

> "So we heard about [Taddlington] quite early on. And they were going hard and, like, shutting down [Taddlington] for… they did it for a day… I think the first time we

> heard about it they'd done it for two days already, and their plan was to just continue doing it daily. But I think, at that point, they felt like they were fighting hard enough that something had to change very quickly and it didn't unfortunately, so they got quite tired quite quickly. But that was amazing. And then, I think, when they started getting tired we tried to bring them in and get them on-board with the Sheffield strategy [of boycotting]" (Interview with Sylvie, 07.09.22)

This integration of the Taddlington and Sheffield projects was carried out by inviting Taddlington couriers to one of the Monday Meetings, by sending leading Sheffield strikers to picket lines in Taddlington in turn, and by connecting the group to a local socialist volunteer who had contacted the IWGB through Taddlington's Trades Union Council. Alongside one leading Taddlington courier who joined the IWGB, that volunteer would act a contact between the town's couriers and the union going forward (Fieldnotes 31.08.22).

Three other towns would see action before Christmas 2021, and – following their integration of Taddlington – the Stuart campaign sought to integrate each of these into their overarching project, encouraging their workforces to adopt Sheffield's boycott tactic. In the one instance, the IWGB learnt of wildcat action through local press coverage and sent a volunteer and a leading Sheffield courier to speak to the strikers and integrate them into the dispute:

> "[Fardale] was one where we actually came across an article, where they'd taken action against the pay cut and they'd done a strike – and we desperately tried to find some links to the drivers who'd been involved in the strike so we could then go chat to them and be like: 'That was amazing. What do you think of what we're doing [in Sheffield]? Do you wanna jump on it and help amplify this action?'" (Interview with Gareth, 08.12.22)

Finding links within local workforces did not prove difficult. The nature of the labour process meant that, while "Zone Centres" – described above in Section 4.3.4 – had been abolished across the industry prior to this dispute, couriers nonetheless waited together near popular restaurants in anticipation of orders. As Michael explained:

> "… if you rock up at a McDonald's near you, there's a table that's normally marked out called a drivers area […] it is a situation where you can just walk out and agitate a group of workers by yourself" (Fieldnotes 10.05.22)

In another instance of action prior to Christmas, the CLB's BAME Officer, Ayden, had contacts in a town's courier workforce and had heard of disquiet regarding Stuart's pay restructure. He arranged to visit the town with the IWGB's senior organiser, Liam. This saw a model developed which would be deployed in future instances of spreading the campaign, as Liam explained:

> "… basically the approach that we followed was: try and call a big meeting, get as many [couriers] there as possible, tell them about what's going on in other cities, talk to them – see if they have the same demands; if they do, or if they have similar ones and a similar target, see if they're up for taking action, and then plan out that action with them. So it's quite simple. Basically the idea was – the politicisation will come from seeing other people already fighting for it, and a sense that they're part of snowballing it." (Interview with Liam, 21.12.22)

And in the final instance of action spreading before Christmas 2021, an existing IWGB member contacted the union in the hope of organising a strike in his town, which saw Liam travel there and help organise a couriers' meeting, which then voted to boycott McDonald's orders from December 18th.

In his 1954 study of a wildcat strike in the US, Alvin Gouldner asserts that wildcat action occurs when "formally dominant union officials have lost power consonant with their positions to other persons in the union" (1965:95). Yet in this dispute, strikes organised by non-unionised couriers were viewed as an opportunity by union officials – as means of spreading the campaign across the country in an effort to scale-up the pressure on Stuart. Later efforts to continue this spread were taken up by and managed through the Stuart Coordination WhatsApp chat, creating the fifth and most internally-complex, unruly project that made up this campaign: "Carpark Meetings", labelled as such because meetings in McDonalds carparks were generally the space in which decisions were discussed and voted on by non-unionised, striking couriers outside of Sheffield. In reality, this is a shorthand label for a range of projects in different areas, though each contributed similarly to the wider campaign.

Integrating the Carpark Meetings project into the campaign was a difficult task. Based on the IWGB's history – particularly on its break from established mainstream unions, as described in Section 4.3.2 – the union's leadership were conscious of the need to involve couriers in decision-making regarding the campaign, even when those couriers did not join the IWGB, as

was usually the case outside of Sheffield (Interview with Liam, 21.12.22). With this aim in mind, the IWGB Central Apparatus created a Telegram channel – the app which Stuart obliged its couriers to use – that any drivers involved in the campaign could join. This, however, would be abandoned due to frequent, disruptive messages sent by participants opposed to action (Interview with Gareth, 08.12.22).

Image 01: A meeting of couriers discusses the campaign in a McDonald's carpark in Farmbridge, a town in the North East of England, 12.05.22.

As evidence of this aforementioned difficulty, only two couriers from outside of Sheffield became directly involved in the Stuart Coordination WhatsApp chat – both of whom joined the union. This indicates the challenge that the IWGB faced in its efforts to establish strong relationships with couriers in areas where the union did not have an existing presence. The decisions and activities undertaken in the Carpark Meetings project were largely reported to the chat by union officials, staff, and volunteers who acted as go-between for couriers in the areas that they would visit. Plans for a nationwide, in-person gathering of Stuart couriers came to nothing due to low capacity (Stuart Coordination meeting minutes #10). As described

in Section 5.4.2 below, the drift of this project from the others over time would ultimately pose significant problems for the campaign.

This section has described the means by which five distinct projects came to constitute a cohesive whole in the form of the Stuart campaign, whilst maintaining disticntions between them. The dynamic relationships these constitutive projects and their co-creation of a strategic orientation – developing the boycott as its signature tactic and aiming to merge wildcat efforts into existing structures, increasing the pressure on Stuart – set the scene for the ongoing development of the campaign.

5.3.2 Strategy-development, January – March 2022

Having established itself, the development of the campaign's strategy can be understood – per Beckwith (2000) – as a learning process, responding to challenges through attempts at change, and drawing on lessons internalised within the collective memory of the project from previous experiences (see Section 2.2 of Chapter Two for a discussion of this conception of subject-formation based on CHAT).

The boycott tactic – which the campaign sought to generalise amongst couriers beyond Sheffield – aligned with the technical composition of the workforce, whose piece-rate pay meant that they were able to continue working and earning whilst causing financial damage to a specific target, whereas all-out strike action would see couriers lose their entire wage. Placing targeted pressure on Stuart's clients – hoping that this pressure would then be felt, in turn, by Stuart – would form the overarching strategy of the campaign for its duration, drawing on the history of the IWGB described in Section 4.3.2. However, the *secondary* nature of that pressure complicated the strategy. Restaurants paid to enter into partnership with Just Eat, who would in turn outsource their deliveries to Stuart, creating a set of intermediary relationship between couriers and the firm in the process of realising profit. In the case of McDonald's, the restaurant may be owned and operated either entirely by McDonald's itself or by a franchisee, adding an additional mediating layer. The strategy relied on restaurant management experiencing financial or reputational pressure from the boycott, passing that on to Just Eat, who would in turn pass that on to Stuart.

McDonald's status as a significant source of deliveries for Just Eat/Stuart also meant that it was a lucrative source of income for couriers. By late December couriers outside of the IWGB in Sheffield were complaining of the impact of the boycott. Boycotting hours were reduced from 5pm–10pm to 5pm–8pm, before a temporary pause to the boycott was

announced over Christmas (Fieldnotes 13.04.22). Greggs had been identified as another potential target and, officially, had been boycotted alongside McDonald's by the Sheffield couriers since mid-December (Tweet #47, 15.12.21), but in a meeting on January 24th, IWGB Couriers Sheffield voted to end the McDonald's boycott and instead target deliveries from Greggs during the "lunchtime peak hours" of midday to 3pm (Gareth letter to Greggs CEO, 05.02.22). This tactical transformation in the nature of Monday Meetings was an effort to prolong the campaign in Sheffield so that it might act as an exemplary beacon, encouraging Stuart workforces in other cities and towns to join the action being taken by Sheffield couriers, as detailed in Section 5.4.2 below.

The boycott tactic continued throughout the dispute, undertaken daily in Sheffield between December 6th 2021 and April 23rd 2022 ,with the exception of the Christmas break. It was, however, never the sole tactic deployed. Others sought to confront Stuart directly, such as through the interventions in Virtual Partner Hours with which IWGB Couriers Sheffield had launched their campaign. Similarly, in late January, IWGB Couriers Sheffield learnt of Stuart's plans to invite "selected riders to closed-door meetings on pay which excluded all unionised workers" – itself taken as a sign that the camping was having an impact. Unionised couriers and supporters found the venue of the meeting through leaked information from the wider workforce and protested outside, leading to the meeting being prematurely ended by Stuart (IWGB Webpage #5, 10.01.22). Other moments of direct contact between the campaign and Stuart included a letter signed by twelve Sheffield-based businesses urging Stuart and Just Eat to reverse the pay restructure (Tweet #74, 13.01.22); a public email-writing campaign targeting Stuart's CEO (IWGB Webpage #6); letters written by politicians to Stuart; and a meeting between the Labour Party's Shadow Minister for Employment Rights and Stuart's UK General Manager, in which Stuart sought to justify the restructure (Fiedlnotes 30.03.22). None of these, however, would have any clear, demonstrable impact upon Stuart's pay restructure.

Outside of Sheffield, couriers in Taddlington and elsewhere deployed a tactic traditionally used in this sector: the all-out strike, or "full shutdown" in which an entire workforce in a particular area was called upon to down tools for a day or more. This frequently appeared as couriers' go-to tactic, prior to union intervention, with the reasons for this discussed in Chapter Seven. In contrast to the boycott, this entailed forfeiting all income for the duration of the strike. Outside of Sheffield, this would recur several times during the dispute – usually driven by particularly militant courier-leaders – but it was discouraged by the IWGB Central

Apparatus and CLB Committee as high-risk, with the potential for demoralisation of couriers following the loss of pay and, in cases where there were unionised couriers involved, as costly to the Strike Fund. Instead, they encouraged couriers to adopt the boycott tactic universally.

There is little clear evidence that financial pressure from the boycotts and strikes was ever felt by Stuart, though Michael claimed several times, throughout the dispute, that the manager of a Sheffield McDonald's had told him in January that the boycott of evening deliveries had cost his restaurant "something in the region of a million quid" (Interview with Michael, 11.10.22; Fieldnotes 26.03.22). In addition to these core tactics however, the campaign sought to cause "noise, stress and political difficulties" – i.e., non-financial reputational damage (Fieldnotes 31.08.22) – and came to deploy tactics focused on this more frequently as the dispute wore on. Spectacular, disruptive protests were one tactic focused on such symbolic damage. As a counterweight to the de-escalation implied by moving the boycott to Greggs, the Sheffield Monday Meetings developed what would come to be termed "Sunday Specials", where couriers and supporters would use their vehicles to blockade the drive-thru of a single restaurant and then leave once they learnt that the police were on their way. The dispute saw three instances of this tactic being used in Sheffield, with efforts to deploy it in other areas – that is, to introduce it to the tactical arsenal of Carpark Meetings – collapsing due to the reluctance of couriers to risk arrest or being banned from the restaurants (Fieldnotes 01.05.22).

A similar tactic which made use of direct action was deployed by the campaign shortly after the first Sunday Special. This consisted of couriers and supporters invading the premises of firms linked to Stuart – a tactic deployed by the IWGB CLB since its early years, as discussed in Section 4.3.2. Stuart owned no property in the UK and instead operated out of rented WeWork offices, necessitating the targeting of other, related companies. These included a DPD depot in London, with DPD being the parent company of Stuart; Just Eat's London headquarters; a WeWork office in London known to be used by Stuart employees; and Greggs' premises in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where couriers from Sheffield and the North Eastern town of Callbrough participated alongside supporters and IWGB activists.

That invasion of Greggs' headquarters and distribution centre in late March – noteworthy for the involvement of couriers from multiple areas – provided a confidence boost to the Monday Meetings project and became well-known in local Carpark Meetings as an impressive

spectacle. It preceded – and may have led to – one of the most significant moments in the dispute, when the General Manager of Stuart in the UK offered to meet with Claude the day after the invasion. While this meeting in-itself did not result in any positive outcome, it was taken as a sign by the that Stuart were feeling the pressure and that the campaign should continue (Fieldnotes 31.03.22).

The development of strategy in this period was therefore driven by the increasingly apparent challenge of exerting pressure on Stuart through the boycott tactic. In other words, the perception amongst participants in the campaign that their initial tactics were not working led to efforts at innovation. This saw a wide range of supplementary tactics develop, aimed more at causing reputational than financial damage to targets. Ultimately however, the struggle for efficacy indicated the wider difficulty the campaign had in sustaining itself, described below through three specific examples.

Image 02: Couriers and supporters protest outside a Greggs distribution centre, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 24.03.22

5.4 Points of productive and destructive interaction between projects

The above identification of nested, constitutive projects does not simply provide an illustrative outline of the Stuart campaign, but is key to understanding precisely how it strategised – how its internal relations shaped the development of its tactics (Beckwith, 2000:180-181; Hyman, 2007:204). This section explores this by focusing on three key features of the campaign: the boycott tactic; spread; and the Strike Fund. Each of these are

found to have both cohered and sustained the campaign, while crises within each – in the form of drift between the constitutive projects – help understand the reason the campaign ultimately came to an end without the pay restructure being reversed.

5.4.1 Collaboration and drift: the development, early success, and crisis of the boycott tactic

As described above, the boycott tactic consisted of couriers rejecting orders from particular restaurants during specified timeframes in an effort to exert upward pressure. It was therefore more spatially and temporally targeted than the all-out strikes common in the sector (Badger, 2021:45), with couriers able to take orders from other restaurants during the boycott, and even to take orders from the targeted restaurant outside of boycotting hours. Whilst the tactic had a longer history in platform couriers' struggle (see: Section 4.3.3 of Chapter Four), its development in Sheffield responded explicitly to the tendency of "full shutdown" strikes to leave couriers demoralised without pay, meaning such strikes would tend to be unsustainable and sporadic (Fieldnotes 15.04.22; 31.08.22).

In Sheffield, the Socialist Volunteers project sustained the memory of a boycott of Wagamama by Deliveroo couriers in 2020 and introduced it to later IWGB Couriers Sheffield meetings, whereas couriers' knowledge of the most lucrative restaurants and busiest hours provided targets. These insights were combined in Monday Meetings:

> "a lot of the early discussions about 'do strikes work?' kind of led to questions about strategy and, like, if an all-out, all-company strike has proven difficult to hold down, what strategic changes can we make to take into account the challenges of organising in the gig economy, where there's like a limitless workforce and people are really low paid and it's difficult to get them to commit to striking for a long time? So that was kind of the idea behind having this compromise of just doing 5pm - 10pm – it would allow people to work for the rest of the day and, also, to get into a rhythm" (Interview with Sylvie, 07.09.22)

The popularity of this tactic amongst couriers was precarious given, firstly, the extent of their anger towards Stuart – with Claude initially calling for all-out strike action before being convinced of the merits of the targeted boycott by a fellow courier (Focus Group, 15.12.23); and, secondly, the significance of McDonald's as a source of per-delivery income. Subsequently, sustaining the tactic required sensitivity. As outlined above, complaints from the wider workforce beyond Monday Meetings drove the shift from McDonald's to Greggs,

demonstrating the extent to which the Monday Meetings project was able to draw on insights from the non-unionised Sheffield workforce in its strategising practices. Greggs would act as the primary target of action in Sheffield for almost five months – forming the "leading activity" of the campaign (De Smet, 2015:241).

It was not an entirely self-sustaining tactic, however. In an effort to ensure that the wider workforce respected the boycott, couriers involved in the Monday Meetings would picket the targeted restaurants, appealing to couriers to cancel orders as they approached (Fieldnotes 13.04.22). Socialist Volunteers would join these pickets – in some cases, even outnumbering picketing couriers (Fieldnotes 13.04.22) – with student activists providing a number of hand-painted banners through the duration of the campaign (Interview with Seb, 17.10.22). Specifically, given the aforementioned spatial and temporal bounding, pickets were able to ask couriers to take orders from other restaurants instead (Fieldnotes 14.03.22), or to return to the targeted restaurant outside of boycotting hours (Fieldnotes 29.04.22). In lieu of their own lost wages, picketing couriers were provided with hourly "picket pay" by the Strike Fund managed by the IWGB Central Apparatus and CLB Committee, provided they were members of the union, as detailed below.

Image 03: A picket outside a Sheffield Greggs, 13.04.22.

In combination, this collaboration between the Monday Meetings, Socialist Volunteers and both IWGB projects was key to the endurance of the campaign over six months and saw Sheffield provide an example of tactics that would be deployed in other cities and towns (Stuart Coordination meeting minutes #2.3, 12.12.21). As Michael put it, in stark terms:

> "The superior organisation of drivers in Sheffield means that they are the leaders of the entire national movement of delivery workers" (Elms article #13, 30.11.21)

Sheffield's importance to the campaign was such that the rate of picket pay for its unionised couriers was raised above that offered to couriers in other towns, to ensure the longevity of action in the city (Fieldnotes 19.04.22). That longevity provided a frame for the IWGB Central Apparatus to attract media attention with the spectacle of the "UK's longest gig economy pay strike" (IWGB Webpage #5, 10.01.22), and with the call on Stuart to "END THE STRIKE" (IWGB Webpage #6, 11.01.22). Longevity also provided the IWGB projects and Socialist Volunteers with more time in which to visit other workforces and seek to convince them to take action.

That same longevity, however, would also act as a source of crisis. Concerns emerged amongst couriers in the Monday Meetings project that Greggs was not passing pressure upwards to Stuart, as expressed by Claude: "If we do this for another 100 days, is Stuart gonna talk to us?" (Fieldnotes 19.04.22). The switch to Greggs at lunchtime – with a far lower rate of demand for deliveries than McDonald's in the evening – had empowered strike-breaking couriers: as orders piled up during the boycott, it would only take one courier to come and undertake multiple deliveries at once, clearing the backlog (Fieldnotes 04.04.22). This proved an appealing prospect to couriers faced with an emergent cost of living crisis, and pickets became increasingly "leaky" over time (Stuart Coordination minutes #6, 29.03.22). Whilst providing a beacon of action encouraging Stuart couriers elsewhere to join the campaign, Sheffield's longevity also provided a vocabulary for couriers in Sheffield to undermine it:

> "I used to support you guys like five month, which is… we had no result on that. It was 'keep fighting, keep fighting'… then I saw there was no result, so I stopped. […] We didn't get no response from Stuart, so…" (A Sheffield Stuart driver while crossing a picket line, Fieldnotes 30.03.22)

In relying on unionised couriers to picket – given that these were the only couriers who the IWGB would allow to claim picket pay – the tactic additionally served to gradually detach

the militant core of couriers in the Monday Meetings project from the wider Sheffield workforce. In a late-April meeting at the Trades and Labour Club, a courier asked why the *Fight For What's Right* WhatsApp chat had been especially quiet, to which Claude replied that there was no need to update the wider workforce when tactics hadn't changed for weeks (Fieldnotes 19.04.22). This tactical stasis, experienced as boredom by some in the picketing core (Fieldnotes 04.04.22), can be partially explained by the Socialist Volunteers and IWGB projects focusing their attention on spreading the campaign beyond Sheffield, described below.

The crisis in longevity came to the fore as Ramadan approached in late March. The campaign contemplated a break in the boycott akin to that at Christmas time. On the one hand, this would allow Sheffield's militant core to rest and for the IWGB to raise further funds for picket pay (Fieldnotes 19.04.22). On the other hand, the risks were, firstly, that the Monday Meetings project was too disconnected from the wider workforce to return to effective action after a break – "long breaks lose drivers" as one courier put it (Fieldnotes 19.04.22); and, secondly, that there would no longer be a beacon of action to point to when seeking to inspire couriers beyond Sheffield (Stuart Coordination meeting minutes #9, 12.04.22). On April 19th, in a meeting called with a sense of urgency over low morale in Sheffield, the Monday Meetings project voted in favour of a break in the boycott between the 25th of April and 3rd of May. This plan would, however, be interrupted with the abrupt end of picket pay on April 23rd – detailed in Section 5.4.3 below – which saw the end of the daily boycott in Sheffield.

The crisis in Sheffield caused tension between the campaign's nested projects. In the first Monday Meeting since the end of the boycott, Claude's call to launch an all-out one-day strike as a means of reviving the dispute came into direct tension with Michael's concern that this would only lead to further demoralisation, leading Claude to claim that Michael was undermining his leadership of the Monday Meetings project (Fieldnotes 25.04.22). With this rift between key figures in the Monday Meetings and Socialist Volunteers projects, the drift of the Monday Meetings from the wider Sheffield workforce, and of the IWGB projects from Monday Meetings due to a lack of tactical innovation and the end of picket pay, the campaign entered a period of gradual but severe decomposition. One solution – proposed by Michael since early April (Fieldnotes, 04.04.22) – was to seek to find a new centre for the campaign, in a different city or town.

5.4.2 Spread: Tactical diffusion, upscaling, and fragmentation

From its outset, the campaign sought to encourage action by Stuart couriers beyond Sheffield (Stuart Coordination meeting minutes #1.2, 10.12.21). This provided a potential means to increase upward financial pressure on the firm, to demonstrate that a large section of the workforce opposed the pay restructure, and to draw further press attention (Stuart Coordination meeting minutes #7, 31.03.22). It also acted as a means of tactical diffusion, snowballing spread: encouraging couriers in yet more areas to take action by demonstrating that they were not alone in doing so – nine of the ten IWGB leaflets aimed at couriers collected for this research list other areas where couriers were taking action.

As outlined when introducing the Carpark Meetings project above, a range of methods were used to reach couriers in other locations – from pre-existing networked connections between workers, to contact with IWGB members, to following leads regarding rumours of wildcat action. For the purpose of this overview, the interactions between nested projects aiming to spread the campaign are of particular significance.

Members of staff from the IWGB Central Apparatus, elected officials on the CLB Committee, Socialist Volunteers and leading couriers from the Monday Meetings project were all – in various combinations – involved in visiting workforces across England during the dispute. Based on the IWGB's long experience of organising couriers, scripts were developed to identify grievances, encourage action, and specifically encourage couriers to apply the boycott tactic (Stuart Coordination meeting minutes #2.1, 11.12.21). Upon arrival visitors would set up digital chats specifically focused on the Stuart pay restructure, and add couriers who seemed enthusiastic to those, rather than seeking to enter existing chats within the workforce (Fieldnotes 14.04.22). This was, as Sylvie would explain, directly based on the example of Claude's *Fight For What's Right* WhatsApp chat in Sheffield (Fieldnotes 16.06.22). Drawing on couriers' knowledge of local working patterns through those chats – and through one-to-one phonecalls with their participants – visitors would then set a date to return and participate in a meeting in a McDonald's carpark, where collective action would be discussed and voted on. Volunteer-made banners from Sheffield and IWGB flags would be brought to these actions as a means of portraying the campaign as a single, coherent project in media. Socialist Volunteers, using their pre-existing networks and publications, would ask local socialist activists to attend actions and to provide assistance to the project as it developed (Elms article #14, 07.12.21). Through methods such as these, a total of twenty-one

courier workforces in discrete locations would take action related to the campaign at various points in its duration.

Whilst the boycott tactic was encouraged, it was never imposed. As discussed in Chapter Four, the IWGB maintained a commitment to bottom-up organising. While IWGB Couriers Sheffield had voted on four aims, Carpark Meetings were encouraged to articulate their own grievances – alongside that of reversing the pay restructure – and to pick targets and times which best suited their local circumstances (Fieldnotes 26.03.22). This saw, for example, workforces in some areas continue to target McDonald's while IWGB Couriers Sheffield had shifted to targeting Greggs (Fieldnotes 14.03.22).

Image 04: Couriers and supporters picket a McDonald's in Boothshill, while IWGB Couriers Sheffield had shifted to targeting Greggs, 24.03.22.

This extent of local autonomy and variation, whilst allowing couriers to take part in action on their own terms, saw Carpark Meetings become the nested project with the greatest distance from the other projects in the campaign. Without the prehistory of Sheffield's Monday Meetings, the boycott tactic came less naturally to couriers in other areas who, in some cases,

mistook it as a call for all-out strike action (Fieldnotes 01.04.22). Local autonomy saw such diverse tactical approaches as multiple one-day "full shutdown" strikes (Fieldnotes 27.03.22, Taddlington); daily two-hour strikes targeting not just Stuart, but all food delivery platforms, as a means of maintaining unity within the entire local workforce (Fieldnotes 28.04.22, Farmbridge); and demands regarding over-recruitment couched in racialised terms, discussed in Chapter Six (Fieldnotes 09.05.22, Hargrave). A leading courier in Farmbridge came to recognise this as a key weakness, bemoaning the IWGB's refusal to impose a single tactic in all areas:

> "To be honest with you, everything it's about not people, not the drivers – everything, it's about the union. Because a lot of people, they need someone to control them. You know what I talking about? [The union should] [j]ust ask, to the people, if they want to do [the union's strategy]. But, if the strategy is good, and the union going to explain to the drivers – properly, everything – the plan, it's working." (Second interview with Dimitru, 08.06.22)

This extent of local autonomy fostered confusion as the other projects within the campaign struggled to keep track of what action was happening in each location (Fieldnotes 29.04.22). As the dispute continued, this confusion fed into a sense of declining capacity amongst the IWGB projects and Socialist Volunteers, who struggled to continue "running after, catching up, integrating drivers into the movement" (Michael, Fieldnotes 24.03.22). The campaign's later months saw its capacity further complicated as the IWGB and CLB were distracted by emergent struggles in the IWGB's cleaners' and foster carers' branches, strife in London's courier workforce unrelated to the Stuart dispute, and GMB's unexpected recognition agreement with Deliveroo.

In a small number of cases, as visitors from the IWGB or CLB Committee burnt out, contact was lost with entire workforces (Fieldnotes 05.04.22). Elsewhere there were claims that workforces were awaiting visits from IWGB representatives before taking action (Fieldnotes 14.04.22). Where strong connections had been built and couriers in Carpark Meetings had joined the IWGB – thus being able to claim picket pay – the crisis in the Strike Fund, described below, saw key figures become frustrated with the IWGB, dropping out of activity and leaving digital chats (Fieldnotes 12.05.22).

Spread, however, did not come to an end at the same time as the Sheffield boycott did. Plans were made for visits to areas where there were rumours of discontent prior to the crisis in

Sheffield, and they were carried out. Subsequently two new locations saw action as part of the campaign in early May, and their enthusiasm sparked hope that the campaign could be sustained even while action in Sheffield collapsed. The IWGB Central Apparatus drew up plans to visit ten locations in early summer, building towards coordinated action in August (Stuart Coordination meeting minutes #14, 31.05.22). Unsurprisingly given the overall state of the dispute at this stage, those plans did not come to fruition. One attempt saw an IWGB staff member take a leading courier from a newly-participating workforce to visit a different town, whereupon the courier realised the extent of work needed to build towards effective, nationwide action and subsequently dropped out of activity (Fieldnotes 28.06.22). Ultimately, conscious of the extent of demoralisation throughout the campaign and the cost of further activity to the union, the IWGB's President called an end to the plans for further visits by early July, effectively bringing the entire campaign to an end (Stuart Coordination meeting minutes #16, 05.07.22).

From the above, whilst collaboration between nested projects was key to the geographical spread of Stuart campaign, the drift and eventual fracturing of connections between those projects was the source of its ultimate fragmentation.

5.4.3 The Strike Fund: collaboration and collapse

Since the first known strike amongst food delivery platform couriers in 2016, the IWGB had raised strike funds as a means of supporting couriers and recruiting them to the union by supplementing wages lost during action (Badger, 2021:279). Alongside the boycott tactic and the extent of geographic spread, the longevity of the Stuart campaign was sustained through fundraising. The IWGB set up an online crowdfunder which would attract £33,812 in individual donations by the end of the dispute. It did this in collaboration with the Labour Party-based organisation *Momentum*, using the IWGB's centrally-managed account on the *Action Network* campaigning website to accept donations. In addition, donations were received from bodies ranging from trade unions to Labour Party branches (Momentum Internationalists motion #1, 08.12.21) to local football clubs (Tweet #56, 19.12.21). Such varied activities as benefit concerts and sponsored livestreams of Dungeons & Dragons games solicited additional funds (Fieldnotes 20.04.22). Socialist Volunteers, through their networks and publications, would call for donations from others on the left (Socialist Party article #2, 15.12.21). In total, over £55,000 was raised and spent by the IWGB over the course of the campaign (Fieldnotes 20.04.22).

The funds were used for a variety of activities during the dispute – such as compensating union members' travel expenses to events – but their most significant use was picket pay. As with the collection of donations, the administration of picket pay was a collaborative effort between the campaigns' nested projects: while the IWGB Central Apparatus would manage the funds, individual couriers on the ground were tasked with keeping track of which unionised couriers had been picketing during boycotts or strikes, reporting their claims to the IWGB, after which the CLB Committee's treasurer would issue picket pay (Fieldnotes 13.04.22). Management of the Strike Fund was thus a collaborative task, though ultimate control rested with the IWGB Central Apparatus who held the funds.

As described above, picket pay was key to sustaining the boycott tactic, and was used to encourage couriers in Carpark Meetings to join the IWGB (Fieldnotes 14.03.22). As in both cases however, crisis emerged immanently within the activity. As a form of supplementary income, picket pay contributed to the boycott tactic's tendency to distance unionised couriers from the wider workforce, providing a more stable and regular source of income for them than platform delivery, distinguishing them from their working colleagues. Amongst these unionised couriers, it fostered a sense of the union as a *service* rather than participatory body, providing assistance from above, as exemplified in one courier's conception of unions:

> "They need to get the people's support. It need to be what to do for the people. Show the people: 'I help you. What I do for you?' The people think a union is just another organisation that gets money, you know? That's it. But if you go to these people and show: 'Bro, what do you need? Let me help you. Tell me your problem and I'm sorting.' It's a different way." (Interview with Albert, Stuart courier and IWGB member in Callbrough, 29.04.22)

The Strike Fund could run low quickly, with one-off spectacular actions – such as an all-day strike in Taddlington, where a significant number of couriers had joined the IWGB – costing up to £1000 per day (Stuart Coordination meeting minutes #8, 05.05.22). And it exacerbated pre-existing tensions between projects. A lack of regular reporting from the IWGB projects responsible for the funds created a sense of opacity, criticised by Socialist Volunteers and individual couriers in Sheffield's Monday Meetings (Fieldnotes 25.04.22). Such was this opacity that, whilst there was widespread awareness that funds were running low, picket pay was ultimately brought to an end by the IWGB Central Apparatus with less than one day's

notice in late April, creating a particularly abrupt crisis with daily pickets coming to an immediate end (Fieldnotes 23.04.22).

In retrospect, individuals within the IWGB Central Apparatus reflected on how they had not expected the dispute to last as long as it did; that they had initially expected the pay to be used for a brief, intense period; and that it had been framed in overly transactional terms in an effort to prolong action (Fieldnotes 31.08.22). Ultimately, as with the boycott tactic and spread, its crisis can be understood as the result of the insufficient cohering of constitutive projects.

Taken together, the three features of the Stuart campaign outlined above each demonstrate that strategy can result from collaboration between nested projects – while a failure to sufficiently cohere and merge those projects can result in crises in strategising and in the decomposition of the overall project.

5.5 The struggle over strategy and the opening for Stuart

An account of the dispute would be incomplete without consideration of the firm's own strategising efforts in imposing the pay restructure and fending off the campaign's efforts to challenge it. Through fieldwork and an analysis of documentary materials – described in Chapter Three – a number of discrete tactics can be identified. From the outset, Stuart's gradual, area-by-area rollout of the pay restructure served to create temporal gaps between workers' responses, and in some cases the firm would increase the rate of per-delivery "boost" bonuses in an area while reducing the base rate of pay, ensuring that workers' felt its financial impact less immediately (Fieldnotes 05.04.22). It is entirely possible that the firm had internalised lessons from previous explosions of couriers' resistance in response to past pay restructures undertaken by other platform firms, as described in Chapter Four.

In the first three months of the campaign, two of IWGB Couriers Sheffield's four demands were addressed: a glitch in Stuart's app where couriers would upload insurance documents was resolved (Tweet #71, 12.01.22); and Stuart announced that couriers would be paid while awaiting orders in restaurants – though at a rate of 17p per minute after fifteen minutes of waiting, far below that demanded by the Sheffield group (Fieldnotes 26.03.22). The IWGB sought to present these as minor victories in their social media (Tweet #81, 19.01.22) and in visits to Carpark Meetings (Fieldnotes 07.04.22), but couriers would often deride them as insufficient (Fieldnotes 25.04.22).

Such small concessions were accompanied by a degree of opacity characteristic of platform firms, who never attributed them to the campaign. In the context of rising fuel costs, Stuart offered a "free Shell fuel card" to its couriers, which saw the campaign debate whether this was a concession or not (Fieldnotes 13.04.22). This same opacity was visible in another tactic: Stuart's use of data – which only the firm had access to – to discredit the campaign. In statements to the press, the firm claimed that 96% of deliveries in Sheffield were unaffected by the cut in the base rate of pay (Stuart Press Comment #2, 24.11.21); that "the implementation of linear pay has shown an overall neutral-to-positive impact on courier pay in Sheffield" and in other cities and towns (Stuart Press Comment #16, 16.03.22); and that only a "small number" of couriers had taken action (Stuart Press Comment #11, 31.01.22). The campaign responded with personal narratives from couriers in the press and social media, detailing their experiences contra Stuart's claims.

Stuart, however, also made some use of couriers' voice through consultation, hosting occasional and secretive "roundtables" for selected couriers in areas where there had been action (Stuart Press Comment #9, 17.01.22). In the only instance where such consultation deliberately included the campaign, Stuart's UK General Manager invited Claude to an in-person meeting, on the condition that Claude would not bring any other couriers or union representatives – a clear effort to distance him from the campaign (Fieldnotes 26.03.22,). This saw the General Manager offer no concessions, insisting that the pay restructure would never be reversed (Fieldnotes 30.03.22). It was speculated by members of the Stuart Coordiantion chat that this instance of ostensible consultation was, in fact, an effort to demoralise the campaign.

Ultimately given the campaign's internal tensions, Stuart's most effective tactic was to hold firm on its decisions and *wait*, while the couriers' project struggled to maintain its internal coherence. The capitalist firm, funded by the French state, was well equipped to do this, as Salar Mohandesi notes when considering the relationships between states and antagonistic collective subjects: "Resting on its superior resources, the state can simply wait it out, patiently holding the line until this articulated unity collapses on its own" (2020).

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the internal life of the Stuart Delivery dispute and, in doing so, demonstrated that strategising is a process of collaboration between the nested projects which form a unified body. Through solidaristic collaboration, knowledge- and resource-sharing,

the campaign against Stuart's pay structure was able to endure for over six months in total – an unprecedented period in a sector without far-reaching, established union presence. The campaign's ultimate defeat, however, can be understood as a failure to deepen and sustain that collaboration, seeing its internal elements drift apart under the strain of the dispute's intensity, fragmenting the unified project. The ultimate inability to close gaps between its constitutive projects can be understood as the campaign's fatal flaw. Whilst consistently punching above its weight – a refrain frequently applied the IWGB (e.g. Oldham, 2017) – the campaign found itself spread thin. In this context, Stuart Delivery was able to impose its pay restructure.

One of the nested projects identified in this chapter – Carpark Meetings, where collective action emerged amongst workforces with no established union presence – is the subject of the next two chapters.

Chapter Six: On Class Struggle in Carparks

"When numerous workers work together side by side in accordance with a plan, whether in the same process, or in different but connected processes, this form of labour is called co-operation. Just as the offensive power of a squadron of cavalry, or the defensive power of an infantry regiment, is essentially different from the sum of the offensive or defensive powers of the individual soldiers taken separately, so the sum total of the mechanical forces exerted by isolated workers differs from the social force that is developed when many hands co-operate in the same undivided operation, such as raising a heavy weight, turning a winch or getting an obstacle out of the way. In such cases the effect of the combined labour could either not be produced at all by isolated individual labour, or it could be produced only by a great expenditure of time, or on a very dwarf -like scale. Not only do we have here an increase in the productive power of the individual, by means of co-operation, but the creation of a new productive power, which is intrinsically a collective one."

- Marx (1976:443)

6.1 Introduction

Alongside motorways, airport lounges and supermarket aisles, carparks have been used as examples of Marc Augé's *non-places*: sites which "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (Augé, 2008:63; Colangelo, 2007:33). Each of these examples, however, is a site of potential encounter between people, where interactions are shaped by historical relations and can, in turn, shape subjectivities in dramatic ways – not least because each of these is also a *workplace.* Most of the insights in this chapter are developed through observation in carparks, where food delivery platform couriers waited for orders, gathered for meetings, and decided to take collective action. In the majority of cases, these were carparks adjacent to McDonald's restaurants, given that those were the most frequent source of orders for Stuart Delivery couriers.

While chapters Four and Five analysed the formation and nature of the Stuart dispute, this chapter begins to home in on the wildcat actions which occurred prior to, alongside, and within it. It details three processes which couriers experienced and enacted in their working lives, and which were conducive to the emergence of collective action. The move from these processes to action is detailed in Chapter Seven. These are: the formation and development of workers' communities, in collaboration and in tension with one another; the formation and

generalisation of grievances, specifically through the clash between material reality and the ideology which Stuart sought to foster within its workforce; and practices of workplace misbehaviour and compliance which acted as a prehistory of strike action. These three processes, whilst distinguished here for the sake of presentation, were always temporally overlapping. Though they emerged from the conditions imposed by the platform labour process, they saw workers act upon those circumstances in ways which – per the framework developed in Chapter Two – constituted latent, fragmented, *common sense* modes of struggle (Gramsci, 1971:323). In turn, these contained the potential for open, collective confrontation between workers and their employer, described in Chapter Seven.

As outlined in Chapter Three, these insights are drawn from empirical research in multiple discrete locations in the North of England over a six-month period. There were variations between each of these sites, but there were also remarkable similarities, which are composited below.

6.2 Workers' communities of collaboration and tension

The labour process of platform food delivery is characterised by periods of intense haste, interspersed with periods of static waiting. During busy hours – largely at lunchtimes and in evenings – couriers can find themselves carrying out back-to-back deliveries as they seek to maximise their piece-rate pay, rushing between customers and restaurants at high speed. Between such periods, however, couriers experience a markedly different temporality when waiting for orders. In the carparks adjacent to the most lucrative restaurants, couriers sit in their cars, in forecourts, and inside the restaurants, awaiting the ping notification from smartphones which indicates that an order has been assigned to them.

Waiting time can be experienced in isolation – couriers used it to phone family members, pray, and produce music, for example (interview with Elena, 29.04.22; Fieldnotes 30.04.22) – but the spatiality of the labour process necessitated a degree of proximity. The carparks surrounding restaurants did not tend to be large, with couriers parking as closely as possible to the entrance in anticipation of rushing to collect orders (Fieldnotes 24.03.22). Often, the layout of McDonald's restaurants deliberately designated spaces for couriers to wait for their order number to appear on the screens above counters, aiming to separate couriers from customers (Fieldnotes 30.04.22; 08.08.22), and couriers could easily identify one another by

their insulated delivery bags. In this spatial proximity and in the slower temporality of waiting time, relationships between colleagues flourished.

The labour process acted as the basis of those relationships and shaped their nature. In particular, the austere form of management practiced by Stuart – as detailed in Section 4.2.2 of Chapter Four – fostered a need for co-producing knowledge. Couriers taught one another to navigate self-employed platform work, helping each other access important emails from the firm, discussing pension plans, sharing advice on vehicle repairs, and supporting one another with tax returns and applications for state welfare benefits, for example (Fieldnotes 29.04.22; 30.04.22). Related to this knowledge-production, couriers speculated about the nature of platform labour management given the opacity practiced by the firms, discussing the rationale behind the delivery routes dictated to them by Stuart's app and, significantly, comparing their earnings based on the in-app summaries provided by the firm (Fieldnotes 30.04.22).

Through such mutually supportive, pedagogic practices within the workplace, deep affective ties emerged. In a carpark in the Northern English town of Farmbridge, those ties were symbolised by a backgammon set which was passed amongst the workforce and played whilst awaiting orders, chosen because "it is a game that everyone can understand" (Daniel, Farmbdige Stuart courier, Fieldnotes 01.05.22). The strength of those ties were such that, in one instance, couriers gave money to a homeless colleague so that he could buy food and other necessities (Fieldnotes 17.05.22). These relationships constitute *compañerismo* as described by Maurizio Atzeni, whereby workers' "need to cooperate in the production process and the search for […] support helped to create friendly relations with the majority of colleagues at work" (2010:97):

> "Sometime, when you're working hard, sometime you need the time when all drivers has been meeting in some place and talking and joking. I think it's the best moment for me." (Saleh, Sheffield Stuart Courier, Podcast #12)

Alongside these in-person interactions, couriers' continued their collaborative practices in digital chats, where they would warn each other of the locations of speed cameras and sell each other second-hand delivery bags, for example (Fieldnotes 01.05.22; 10.06.22). Stuart Delivery created Telegram channels for couriers in particular areas to join, managed by

backoffice staff and local Captains (STUH17; Fieldnotes 06.06.22), but the majority of chats were created and run by couriers themselves, without the firm's knowledge.

Unofficial, courier-run digital chats, however, would often include only particular sections of the workforce. Concurrent with the labour process, relations emerging from outside of the workplace also shaped those which developed within it. In particular, ethno-linguistic clusters within the workforce were notable in almost every area visited during research for this thesis, as explicitly outlined by couriers in different areas:

> "Fieldnotes 26.03.22, at Lenton, first IWGB-supported meeting of couriers: One courier is introduced to me as 'representing the Romanians'"

> "Fieldnotes 14.04.22, Farmbridge, in the car with Albert: We talk about issues of division within driver communities; he says that he is good at talking to other Romanian drivers, but not to Pakistani or English drivers."

> "60% is Romanian, there are a few Pakistanis, one African… two from time to time. There's an Albanian man who comes time to time. But the main drivers are Romanian." (Interview with Nicolas 29.04.22, discussing the demographics of the workforce in Callbrough)

Such clusters emerged and sustained themselves through linguistic exclusivity, with couriers from other backgrounds excluded from monolingual conversations (Fieldnotes 01.05.22); through the creation of digital chats for specific clusters (Fieldnotes 28.04.22); through distinct religious spaces and practices (Fieldnotes 17.05.22); and through frequently acting as a point of entry into food delivery work, integrating new couriers into the clusters as soon as they entered the workforce. Two couriers recounted this latter mechanism when asked how they began working for Stuart, identifying the significance of pre-existing relationships from within the Romanian diaspora specifically:

> "Another friend was did this job before, and him was share with me, like, how is the job, and I decide to join, to try – [to see] if it's working or not." (Second interview with Dimitru, 08.06.22)

> "[My friend] helped me with the Uber [Eats]. And I didn't have the courage to start, and then one day he was coming in front of my door and said: 'I am out, come on.' I

> said: 'No way, you go!'. [He said] 'No no, you come now.' And I was going with him in his car to see how it works" (Interview with Elena, 29.04.22)

While functioning as mechanisms for co-constructing knowledge and providing mutual support, as in the wider workforce, the exclusive nature of ethno-linguistic clusters could foster divisions which limited *compañerismo.* Couriers who, in many cases, had experienced racial discrimination at work and in life more broadly, would themselves practice discrimination within the workforce. Romani couriers were frequently the target of this. One Romanian participant, having earlier recounted being told to "go back where you come from" by a man in a park, went on to complain that:

> "Look, for example, [there] are many Gypsies – because in Romania are many Gypsies – and they come and make things [worse] everywhere in the world… […] And the English people see them, [and say]: 'From where you are?' 'From Romania'. They put in their mind that all Romanians are the same, and put me in the same plate with them. […] [people say] 'You are Romanian? Oh, Gypsy.' I am not a gypsy. I am an honest woman" (Interview with Elena, Stuart courier in Callbrough, 29.04.22)

In the town of Hargrave, Romani couriers were the frequent target of ire amongst the wider workforce, which was itself largely made up of Pakistani migrants. Couriers who were "all related to one another" were accused of "cheating" by using multiple accounts for a single platform at the same time, on different phones and in other people's names, to maximise the number of orders they received (Fieldnotes 09.05.22). Such was the extent of anger that "no more rogue drivers" would be made the leading call of an instance of nascent collective action in the town (Fieldnotes 10.05.22).

Satnam Virdee argues that such instances of racial division "from below", whilst aiming to strengthen the internal coherence of *sections* of the working class, simultaneously function "as a power container, limiting the political imagination of even most of those who were representatives of the exploited and oppressed" (2014:5). As a reactionary form of political composition, such practices served to fracture the collective subject and set sections in pursuit of secondary objects even when there was an overall, shared predicament facing the entire workforce, as outlined below. At the same time however, shared, simultaneous experiences of racial discrimination in the labour process also led directly to instances of mutual defence:

> "Fieldnotes 30.04.22, Callbrough: In the car, passing the McDonald's, Nicolas angrily recounts a particularly bad case, raising his voice and speaking without hesitation or interruption for some time: once, the McDonald's staff called the police on a driver, Ali, because he asked for his order after waiting for 30 minutes. The police came, and an officer was telling Ali to 'just get out of here'. They told him that he was banned from the McDonald's. Nicolas intervened and challenged the police officer, who asked 'Why are you getting involved mate?'. Nicolas recalls his reply: 'Because that's my colleague!' (emphatically, shouting). He asked if the police realised that they are not just banning some teenagers, but they are banning a worker from his workplace. He said that the police were being 'very racist' – Ali is a Bulgarian driver. He recounted to me how he got his English girlfriend to find the email address for McDonald's HQ and email them about the situation."

Communities like those described here feature prominently in analyses of collective action. Ambalavaner Sivanandan wrote of local ties amongst the Black "underclass" in Britain prefiguring explicit struggles in the 1970s and '80s, designating as "communities of resistance" those formations which shared meals, created "informal community centres" and came together "through hearsay and common hurt, over a deportation here or death in custody there" (1990:52). Writing of the experience of work in the mid-20th Century USA, Stan Weir noted the significance of "informal work groups" emerging through "the socialization necessary to the performance of the job", developing through "fun socialization" before coming to act as mechanisms for workers' "mutual protection" against the interests of employers (2004:28). In McDonald's carparks both forms of community co-existed, overlapping and shaping one another, with the workforce's technical and pre-existing social compositions interacting in ways that would shape its potential for collective action.

6.3 The formation and generalisation of grievances

Ideology is a *material* phenomenon in both its origins and effects. It aims to shape the proleptic desires and subsequent behaviour of subjects according to the needs of particular modes of production, enacting material affirmations for those who comply and material sanctions upon those who do not (Therborn, 1980:55; 34). Yet, simultaneously, tensions within hegemonic ideologies – for example, between the desires they seek to foster and material reality – can produce grievances, where the affirmations promised to those who

comply with ideological expectations do not materialise (Therborn, 1980:62-4). This creates the potential for non-compliant, subversive subjectivities to emerge.

Jason Read identifies two ideological-material mechanisms aimed at producing a compliant worker-subject: *the wage*, presented as "a just and equal exchange between buyer and seller"; and *the contract*, which "takes the worker as an isolated individual free to dispose of his or her labor power, thereby excluding the material and social conditions that constrain and force this exchange" (2003:99-100). Both of these were notably reflected in Stuart's labour process.

The wage takes on a "cardinal" significance in capitalism, being essential for survival given the separation of the proletarian from the means of subsistence (Lordon, 2014:9). In addition, in taking the form of money as the means of obtaining goods, wages allow for the emergence of additional needs beyond survival – specifically, needs relating to possessing evermore goods: "Needs related to the possession of goods can increase infinitely: no other need imposes limits on their growth. Since possession is detached from use and from immediate enjoyment (the role of enjoyment is taken over by possession itself), the increase in needs is quantitative in character. I cannot possess so much as to not want to possess still move" (Heller, 1999:52). In such circumstances, *wage maximisation* becomes the primary, defining predicament for workers in capitalist society.

As described above in Section 4.2.2, Stuart couriers' wages consisted of a *base rate* of payment per-delivery, garnished by a bonus – the *multiplier*, or *boost* – at the discretion of the firm. Given that the base rate was just £3.40 for short-distance deliveries following Stuart's pay restructure and £4.50 before that, the boost took on noteworthy significance for couriers. A boost of 1.8 – the highest rate witnessed during research for this thesis (Fieldnotes 02.05.22) – meant payment of £6.12 rather than £3.40 for a delivery. Setting higher rates at peak times was a material means of compelling couriers to log on and take orders when Stuart wanted them to do so, "rewarding" them with "increases in your delivery fees" (STUH21). In ideological terms, this served to shape how couriers comprehended their wages and subsequently to shape their behaviour. In one clear instance of this during collective action, a strike-breaking courier explicitly justified his refusal to participate in collective action through the incentive to work that a higher-than-usual boost provided (Fieldnotes 07.04.22). When asked what his primary hope for the strike was, another courier, who had

long been embedded in the IWGB's campaign targeting not the boost but the base rate, replied:

> "I think mine – personally, mine – has been [the] multiplier, I'm not bothered about that fixed pay […] if they put like, at least [on] weekends, 1.5, that will do for me! You make easy money faster." (Interview with Nicolas, Stuart courier in Callbrough, 29.04.22)

By visibly fluctuating, the boost came to represent the most obvious, common sense means of wage maximisation for couriers – more than the base rate of pay did. In doing so, however, it also proved to couriers that the firm could increase their pay when it wished to do so. The opacity and unpredictability by which boosts were set were the source of regular speculation in carparks when couriers compared their incomes. Longstanding couriers fondly recalled periods of high boost rates, as with one discussing starting work with Stuart in 2019:

> "was less jobs, but was good multiplier. So, I'd start 11 o'clock [in the morning], till 11 o'clock in the night time. […] But it was easy, because 14 jobs was like £120, and now look [shows me his app, which shows his earnings]. I already have 21 jobs and £106." (Interview with Albert, Stuart courier in Callbrough, 29.04.22).

Such memories – not just from previous years, but from more recent instances when the boost rate was higher – would arise while couriers experienced periods with low or no boosts, and would be shared through the knowledge-producing communities described above (Fieldnotes 30.04.22). The resulting awareness that things could be better would be conducive to grievance and – as described in Chapter Seven – to dissent, emerging immanently from within a mechanism designed to intensify the extraction of labour-power from workers.

The experience of low boost rates was exacerbated by a range of other conditions which produced additional grievances to that of low pay, though each could be traced back to the wage predicament. Couriers complained of the hours they had to work to make enough money to survive and support their families:

> "I am working seven days now, and sometimes I'm working 70 hours. All about how can manage to get what I need. Sometimes I do not get day off." (Saleh, Sheffield Stuart Courier, Podcast #12)

Fieldwork for this thesis began during Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and so the rising cost of fuel arose repeatedly:

> "I don't have any problem when I do Stuart, my CPS is like 5.5, everything is fine you know? But Stuart [should] keep [wages] at the level of inflation. Basically, me, I was spending like £45, £50 a week on the diesel, now I spend £90 on diesel. My insurance is like £100 more. Rent is start to rising, electricity, gas, everything is rising […] How am I supposed to survive?" (Interview with Albert, Stuart courier in Callbrough, 29.04.22)

And couriers feared receipt of "a random email" from Stuart terminating them and cutting off their access to wages as a result of errors on the app or complaints against them from customers, restaurant staff, or colleagues (Fieldnotes 04.04.22; 09.05.22).

Such grievances as these, whilst each inextricable from the wage predicament, were also exacerbated by contractual self-employed status, described in Section 4.2.2. This saw couriers made responsible for their own working hours, vehicle costs, and able to be terminated with little due process. As well as being a cost-saving mechanism for Stuart, this contractual status served an ideological function: to construct a worker-subject which would recognise themselves as an *independent contractor*, conceiving of their labour as their own, being put to use for their own ends rather than the firm's (Popan, 2024a:110; Fisher, 2009:34). This subjectivity manifested firstly in couriers' experiences of self-employment as *freedom*, and secondly in the prevalence of *entrepreneurialism* amongst workers.

> "This job is good, actually, because we free all the time. I don't want to change this job because I got small children and I can choose when I go to work and when I stay with my children and take care about them. I am free all the time, when I have any problems, to fix them." (Second interview with Dimitru, Start Courier in Farmbridge 08.06.22)

> "Why don't [I] go back to [work at] the Tesco, for example? No, you know why? Because I like to be free. I don't like to have a boss, no way." (Interview with Elena, Stuart courier in Callbrough, 29.04.22)

The sense of freedom articulated by Dimitru and Elena is no less real for having been constructed by Stuart's imposition of self-employed status for the firm's benefit, nor for

being heavily constrained by the pressures that the labour process can exert. The experiences of temporal flexibility and the absence of in-person management were both real, material features of the labour process, while also serving Stuart's efforts to practice managerial austerity, offload risk, and produce a self-managing, "completely independent" "courier partner" (STU4; STUH17). In its independence from the company, the ideal "courier partner" subject is more akin to an *entrepreneur* than the traditional employee – an individual seeking "to pursue their interest by drawing on a limited notion of agency that locates itself in an imaginary economic universe independent of institutions, broad social contexts, and identity considerations" (Caliskan and Lounsbury, 2022:47). In efforts to act within this imagined economic universe – a meritocratic market – the entrepreneur seeks success through an intense, self-directed work ethic (Gilbert and Williams, 2022:129-30; Lordon, 2014:13; Rosa, 2013:xxxviii).

In Stuart's workforce, the existence of this enterprising subject was evidenced by some couriers' derision of those perceived as working less hard than themselves (Fieldnotes 08.06.22); by the proposal – made twice, by two different couriers, during separate instances of fieldwork – that an effective response to Stuart's pay restructure might be to start a competing platform firm to challenge them on the market (Fieldnotes 19.04.22; 29.04.22); and by the range of self-employed jobs couriers undertook alongside delivery work. Fieldwork found couriers who respectively owned a garage, an independent clothing brand, a bicycle repair shop, an accountancy firm, one who was a landlord, and others who had previously owned restaurants and worked as self-employed plumbers, roofers and more (e.g. Fieldnotes 24.03.22; 25.04.22; 08.06.22). In several cases, these individuals were struggling to maintain their independent businesses and so took to platform work as a means of supplementing their income whilst remaining wholly self-employed:

> "I'm an evening driver, I run a business in the morning but that business doesn't make profit yet, I've just opened a garage, I have employees, and that sort of just maintains itself but doesn't make any money. I continue to deliver in the evenings to provide for my family" (Aziz, Sheffield Stuart courier, Podcast #7)

Such a subject might be expected to ask little of the firm, driven by self-interest, personal responsibility, and independent spirit – yet it was notable that each courier with the aforementioned experience of self-employed work was committed to collective action, as were those above who expressed their appreciation of the job's *freedom*.

Entrepreneurialism acted as an obvious limit on collective action in just two cases witnessed during research. In one, a strike-breaking courier justified continuing to work with reference to his past as a businessman (Fieldnotes 01.05.22); and in the other, a socialist volunteer in Sheffield claimed that "the most notorious scabs" displayed notably individualistic, self-interested attitudes (Interview with Seb, 17.10.22). Yet, in other cases, entrepreneurialism appeared conducive to a willingness to defy the platform firm, with leading figures in strike action frequently displaying entrepreneurial tendencies:

> "Fieldnotes 12, 25.04.22 IWGB Couriers Sheffield meeting: Before leaving, [Claude] gives me the details of his clothing brand, encouraging me to place an order."

This can be explained by the clash between the ideological function of entrepreneurialism and the material reality imposed by Stuart's labour process. No shortage of features of platform courier work clash with the designation of couriers as self-employed, as outlined above in Section 4.2.2. Stuart couriers expressed this in relation to particular grievances, such as unpaid waiting times:

> "If I text them – just cancel my job because I don't want to do this job – take long waiting time, just cancel, they said to me like [mimicking] 'Oh sorry, we cannot cancel you have to wait five minutes'. How? I am self-employed or not? Why you keep me prisoner five minutes, you know?" (First interview with Dimitru, 17.05.22)

While the flexibility of the labour process was a source of the sense of freedom discussed above, its intensity at peak times clashed with that:

> "Fieldnotes 16.06.22, Newborough: A driver is complaining of a lack of time between orders – 'no time to shit' – and saying that he does not feel self-employed because of this."

And couriers complained of poor support from the platform firm, indicating a recognition that the platform firm held responsibility akin to a traditional employer:

> "I told you about the, uh, my friend him got, uh… him fall down, on his way to coming to work, him fall down on the floor, him broke his arm […] and no one help him with nothing. […] Maybe I fall down, tomorrow, you know, I broke my arm or

> my leg, and nobody, uh, help me with nothing […] and they not pay me – they not help me with nothing." (First interview with Dimitru, 17.05.22)

In combination with such instances of tension between the ideological and material nature of self-employed status, couriers' prior or ongoing experiences of founding and running their own businesses induced feelings of pride in hard work:

> "Fieldnotes 08.06.22, Farmbridge: Matouš says that he has worked as a plumber and roofer here previously, doing big jobs before he became ill. I note that he has had a lot of independence in his jobs, and he says that he has always preferred to working without a boss, even in communist Czechoslovakia. He then complains about people on disability benefit, specifically on Universal Credit, saying that he knows someone who, when given the covid uplift, threw his hands in the air and said 'Yupee! Majorca!', but this money was not meant to be spent on Majorca."

This pride was conducive to a sense of *deserving better* in exchange for one's labour – a proleptic anticipation of ample reward in exchange for one's individual enterprising practices. Given the timing of the Stuart dispute, couriers would often express this by relating Stuart's pay restructure to their work during Covid-19 lockdowns, which were lucrative periods of high orders for couriers, whilst also being a period of severe risk:

> "Basically, we keep Stuart app going all through the Covid period, you know? We sacrifice, you know? We go to the people – I swear, sometimes people [would] come to the door [and say:] 'I have Covid.' I got Covid two times, nobody paid me anything" (Interview with Albert, 29.04.22).

> "We had a coronavirus – Covid-19, we had a pandemic, people that – like myself, *essential* – worked through that to help people survive, delivering food, products, etc. And we actually earned Stuart a double profit within them times […] And then they chose to give us a pay cut which didn't make sense." (Claude, Sheffield Stuart courier, Podcast #10)

With the collision between entrepreneurial attitudes and the reality of exploitation by a capitalist firm, *deserving better* could be transformed into *demanding better* of one's employer. Through such intra-ideological tensions – between freedom and compulsion, between self-employed status and practices of employer control – the kernel of recalcitrance

once again emerged from within efforts to foster compliance. Per Mark Fisher: "Capitalist realism can only be threatened if its is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's ostensible 'realism' turns out to be nothing of the sort" (2009:16).

6.4 Misbehaviour, compliance, and underground warfare

With the need for wage maximisation, the knowledge that the company could provide higher pay, and the confidence to seek that out, couriers developed a range of mechanisms aimed at increasing their wages, beyond simply logging on when high boosts encouraged them to do so. In the slower timespace of waiting time, such practices were shared through the communities of *compañerismo* that flourished within the workforce. Five such practices are described below: rejecting low-paying orders; working across multiple towns and cities; multiapping; "cheating"; and reporting colleagues to the firm. Four of these defied instructions from the company in some way, though they did not all disrupt Stuart's profit-making endeavours.

Couriers developed a collective practice of refusing low-paying orders, based on their ability to "reject" orders allocated to them on the app within forty seconds of receiving them (STU4). This practice was especially prominent during Covid-19 lockdowns, when rates of orders were high:

> "On Stuart, if you decline a job, they give you another job. If you decline it, they give you another job. If you decline it, decline, decline, decline, decline. On the moment that the app don't give you another job, that means that it gives you all the jobs in the system so is going to take a while until it's going to start give you jobs again. If you log out and log on again, it starts from the beginning [to] give you the jobs that are in the system. So how I was doing that – on the pandemic, I was taking just the better paid jobs." (Interview with Elena, 29.04.22)

Beginning as individual practice, this refusal of requests from Stuart came to be expected of other couriers within the community, as a means of protesting low pay:

> "our colleague, oh my God that colleague, I want to beat him! So if he receive a order, with three pounds twenty, he will take it and go, doesn't matter if it's far away. Look, I said: 'Do you think a little bit? Do you look where is this order? How long is from here to there? And from there where you have to go? For three pounds twenty, do you

> think how much you spend and how much you remain with?'" (Interview with Elena, 29.04.22)

Whilst rejecting orders was permitted given couriers' self-employed status, other mechanisms of wage maximisations undermined Stuart's authority more directly. The firm's guidance for couriers expressly stated that "you can not [sic] work in multiple cities at the same time. However, you can request to change cities if you are moving there!" (STUH12) – yet couriers would frequently work across multiple towns and cities. In some cases they did so by "requesting to change cities" without actually moving permanently to the new location, while in others couriers simply logged onto the app while being in a different area – a practice which was clearly not prevented by Stuart's digital infrastructure (Fieldnotes 24.03.22). These practices provided a means for couriers to chase higher boosts across different locations, and to work for the firm even when it ceased recruiting in their area:

> "It was a Stuart mistake – they stopped hiring drivers when they have [a certain] amount. But they don't stop transferring drivers from other places to [Callbrough]. So somebody very smart discovered that, opened an account in [Farmbridge] and transferred it here." (Interview with Nicolas, 29.04.22)

Alongside providing a means for wage maximisation, this practice facilitated the wider spread of other insubordinate activates – including strike action – as couriers shared knowledge of those to other areas they worked in:

> "Fieldnotes 24.03.22, Farmbridge: Dimitru and I talk […] I ask him how his recent trip to Durham went for work, and he talks of his efforts to spread the strike there. He says: 'it's fifty-fifty', half are for it, have are struggling too much financially to strike."

At the same time however, this practice exacerbated issues of over-hiring by allowing for increased numbers of couriers to work in a given area, reducing potential earnings by spreading orders between a greater number of couriers:

> "Fieldnotes 18.05.22, Stuart Coordination chat: Jason says that [Hargarve] drivers seem annoyed at [Callbrough] drivers, as this is where the cheating drivers seem to be coming from. Liam says that he did speak to drivers who had travelled over from [Callbrough] to work [in Hargrave] yesterday."

And in several cases, the ability to work across multiple locations undermined strike action, with couriers from other areas travelling to take orders from areas with striking workforces upon hearing that boosts were high:

> "Fieldnotes 24.03.22, picket line in Boothshill: Couriers keep arriving. One has come from Leeds city centre, one from Bradford, one from Wakefield.."

Multiapping – the practice of simultaneously taking orders from multiple platform firms alongside Stuart, primarily Deliveroo and Uber Eats – was also forbidden in Stuart's guidance and, unlike working in multiple locations, was listed as grounds for termination. This was because of its tendency to cause "unnecessary detours rather than going straight to the pick-up (PU) and then the drop-off (DO)" while the courier simultaneously delivered orders placed on different apps (STUH28). Nonetheless, it became common for couriers to have "all" the apps, as a means of increasing the number of orders they received, reducing repeat returns to restaurants, saving on fuel costs, and cutting working time (Fieldnotes 06.06.22). Dimitru, for example, took up the practice at the end of Covid-19 lockdowns, as the rate of orders began to fall and the urgency of wage maximisation increased (Second interview, 08.06.22).

Despite its pervasiveness, multiapping was not an easy practice. It demanded the development of intricate approaches to managing simultaneous orders, for example: carrying out Stuart orders first because the firm was known to be harsher than others in penalising couriers for multiapping (Fieldnotes 02.05.22); using GPS Spoofer apps to manipulate the live location presented to the firms (STU28); and often using multiple smartphones with different apps on them at the same time (Interview with Elena, 29.04.22). Through their communities, couriers would explicitly share the skills needed to do this with one another (Fieldnotes 29.04.22).

While it was a means of wage maximisation for workers, a case could be made that multiapping caused little damage to the platforms beyond the occasional customer complaint, contributing as it did to the temporal intensity of the labour process (Popan, 2024b:813). Moreover, refusing to share advice on how to multiapp acted as way to exclude individuals from workforce communities, leading to resentful sentiment amongst the minority who did not multiapp towards those who did, undermining *compañerismo* (Fieldnotes 01.05.22).

Finally, "cheating" – as it was referred to by couriers – played a similar role but was far more divisive within workforces. This was the practice of one individual using multiple Stuart accounts, some set up using the details of family members or friends (Fieldnotes 14.04.22), and some purchased or "rented" from others (STU28). It served to maximise the orders received by those who deployed it. As with multiapping, knowledge of how to do this was shared through communities

> "it's enough [for] one [driver] to know, and after that, that one tell everybody." (Interview with Elena, discussing cheating, 29.04.22)

But communities also functioned as sites where stark opposition to this practice could be generalised, given that it resulted in fewer orders for non-cheating couriers and was perceived as clashing with the spirit of hard work within a meritocratic market outlined above:

> "That is the problem, because from everything I do I have to pay 20% taxes, my insurance is 90p per hour, so it doesn't matter if I make orders, I receive orders or not – I have to pay it. Now I stay here, but I pay it. They don't, because they have fake accounts. Okay? They told me: 'Let me teach you how to do it.' But I say no thank you. You know why? Because I like everything… I don't like to have headaches when I don't have reason, you know? So if the police stop me, I don't have any problem. Or if I may have accident, I don't have any problem, you know? So… But they work differently. And when you don't have to pay taxes and insurance, it doesn't matter for you, you know?" (Interview with Elena, 29.04.22)

Couriers opposed to the practice deployed their own counter-practices aimed at stemming it. "Cheating" drivers were identified by being "back and forth picking up orders" while other couriers sat waiting for orders in their cars (Elena, Fieldnotes 14.04.22), and by using Stuart's in-app map which showed how many couriers were logged on and where they were:

> "Cos they are greedy workers. You know why? Basically, you see me, I don't have shame, you know, for anybody? So, me, when I come in the morning I see two cars and I see like six drivers on the app, I just [go] to car and say: 'Mate, switch off all four or fuck off.' Because I have just one app, you have freaking two – it's not right. So I have to speak. Before I say: 'Look, I get a picture, I know your car – you have two apps. Switch off one. If I catch you second time, I go straight to Stuart and report you.' And they shut him down." (Interview with Albert, 29.04.22)

It was not uncommon for couriers to report one another to the platform firm for cheating, and this would frequently lead to terminations (First interview with Dimitru, 17.05.22).

As with multiapping, whilst the practice of simultaneously using multiple Stuart accounts provided a means of wage maximisation for workers, it also did not challenge the firms attempts at profit-making, instead facilitating the delivery of orders. The counter-practice of reporting, however, also posed no threat to Stuart, allowing it to assert its authority over the workforce through terminations. In Hargrave, some couriers' anger at their Romani colleagues alleged "cheating" even saw them threatening to involve the police in an effort to end the practice (Fieldnotes 23.05.22, Stuart Coordination Chat). Yet, while reporting was effectively a form of bottom-up *compliance* with the firm's official procedures, couriers who practiced this were also frequently willing to defy the firm by taking collective action. Reporting acted as a means for non-cheating couriers to build confidence and assert influence within the workforce, as described by Dimitru when asked why he felt strike action was strong in Farmbridge:

> "Here it's a big point about scare each other. Uh... for example many people scare about me, because I'm older on this company, and I know many things. And they know me, I was reporting many people, you know? Because I like everything to be fair. And I hear the people who try to, hiding, or do something… something that is not right. I was fighting with them, what was right. (First interview with Dimitru, 17.05.22)

In the terms developed in Chapter Two, practices such as those examined above constitute "underground warfare" within the employment relationship, with workers pursuing wage maximisation through "common sense" means – that is, means which could provide immediate benefits, acting as coping mechanisms, but which did little to challenge the underlying nature of the issue: the employer's control of pay. While attempting to maximise wages, these practices could simultaneously be conducive to the firm's profit-seeking endeavours, and could contribute to the decomposition of the collective subject by fragmenting it. However, per Gramsci, common sense can contain within it kernels of good sense. The subversive potential of the above practices lay in how they fostered workers' willingness to practice agency – usually, in defiance of the company – over time. Chapter Seven will outline a potential result of such cumulative practice in the form of collective action.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined three processes comprised of both the conditions imposed upon workers, and of workers' own agential activities within those conditions. These resulted in internally complex modes of collectivity. Couriers' carpark- and digital-based communities acted as sites of mutual pedagogy and practical support, as well as sites of ethno-linguistic exclusion and fragmentation. The imposition of piece-rate pay, bonuses, and self-employed status fostered entrepreneurial, hardworking sentiments amongst couriers who enjoyed their "freedom", alongside defiant ones when the promised results of those sentiments did not materialise. And practices of wage maximisation were developed which both defied the company and contributed to its profit-making endeavours, but left workers with a sense that their agential practices could have effects. The most effective, appropriate features of these processes – such as collective pedagogy and accountability, forming grievances, and practicing defiance – could potentially be deployed in collective action. The difficulty, of course, was activating this potential.

Chapter Seven: The Emergence and Endurance of Collective Action

"The first attempt of workers to associate among themselves always takes place in the form of combinations. Large-scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. Competition divides their interests. But the maintenance of wages, this common interest which they have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance – combination. Thus combination always has a double aim, that of stopping competition among the workers, so that they can carry on general competition with the capitalist."

- Marx (1999:79)

7.1 Introduction

During efforts to spread the Stuart strike to new areas, representatives of the IWGB were often met with variations of the same phrase: "We've done this before and it didn't work" (Stuart courier in Lenton, Fieldnotes 25.03.22). Chapters Four and Five identified such instances of couriers' wildcat strike action – with no union involvement – as a prevailing feature of the Stuart Delivery dispute and of conflict in the platform economy more widely. This chapter details the micro-dynamic processes by which such collective action emerged, building on the features of couriers' working lives described in Chapter Six.

Section 7.2 examines the process of comprehension and decision-making by which the idea of withdrawing labour was introduced to the workforce, usually by an individual courier. The section demonstrates that the justification for collective action was already immanent within the very logic of Stuart's labour process – specifically, in the "boost" bonus system, which facilitated couriers' comprehension of the indeterminacy of their labour-power as grievances accumulated. The result was a proposed withdrawal of labour aimed at forcing an increase in Stuart's bonus, termed a *boost strike* in this thesis. The fact that a single, individual courier was usually deemed by colleagues to have led this comprehension is understood through CHAT's conception of the individual as a composite of projects.

Section 7.3 details the precise means deployed by couriers to generalise comprehension of their predicament amongst colleagues, and to articulate collective action as a response. These drew on the processes described in Chapter Six, beginning with workers' closest affective ties and their ethno-linguistic clusters, before spreading outwards to the wider workforce.

Drawing on terminology developed in feminist consciousness raising practice, "kernel stories" are identified as the means by which a shared justification for action was developed, while the threat of reporting, introduced above in Section 6.4, was used as a coercive means of enforcing participation.

Finally, Section 7.4 examines efforts to sustain action while it was underway. Whilst boost strikes tended to succeed – temporarily increasing the bonus rate provided by Stuart – the lack of total unity within the workforce would prove severely damaging to couriers' morale, resulting in a decomposition of the antagonistic collective subject. These actions had, however, laid the groundwork for the re-emergence of the antagonistic actor and its recomposition – away from a focus on the bonus, to more fundamental issues of employer power. Union intervention was the most obvious trigger for this.

As with Chapter Six, the insights developed in this chapter are drawn from multiple discrete locations with differences between them – for example some saw strike action sustained over a period of weeks, while others saw it collapse quickly; some saw a number of couriers join the IWGB, while others saw none do so. Research in the town of Farmbridge proved particularly rich. Whilst, as described in Chapter Three, this research did not capture the emergence of action entirely independent of union involvement, through the combination of data from multiple sites – and interviews with couriers recounting previous experiences – an account of the process by which this happened can be constructed.

7.2 Introducing the idea of collective action

In five discrete locations, fieldwork discovered evidence of previous strikes – prior to or concurrent with the Stuart campaign – which the IWGB had no knowledge of. When introducing the memory of these earlier wildcat strikes to outsiders, couriers would frequently name an individual colleague who they viewed as having initiated that action. In Sheffield, for workers uninvolved in the IWGB's local group, this was Claude through his *Fight For What's Right* WhatsApp chat:

> "It was [Claude]. He just said enough was enough. He looked at it and he just said: 'Nah, this is…' I won't use the word on here, but, you know… 'this is nonsense, we're not doing it.' And yeah, he started talking to some drivers and just gauging the feel for people [to strike]" (Aziz, Podcast #7)

In Farmbridge, two couriers separately confirmed that Dimitru had "led" a wildcat strike and that it was "his idea", respectively (Fieldnotes 02.05.22; 17.05.22). And in Callbrough:

> "Fieldnotes 30.04.22, with Elena: We go back inside to collect her next order, which has come through almost immediately. She introduces me to two waiting drivers […] One nods and smiles at me, the second (a taller man) is more awkward at first, looking back and forth at Elena and then me. I say that I am writing about Stuart and ask how work has been for them. There is a moment of silence and the two exchange glances before the taller man says that it used to be better, but now it's a lot worse […] He also says that, before the current strike, he once organised a strike here. Elena intervenes to acknowledge that this was his initiative."

Both the prevalence of wildcat action and this repeated claim – that a single courier had the idea of taking collective action – can be understood as the culmination of two overlapping processes: the comprehension of shared predicament, and the development of individuals capable of articulating that comprehension.

7.2.1 Comprehending the predicament

Sometime in February 2022, the Stuart workforce in Farmbridge worked for the unusually long period of three days with a boost rate of 0.0 – i.e. with no bonus added to their base rate of per-delivery pay. In an interview with Dimitru on a picket line, the courier explained how, despite having no prior experience of strike action, this led to him leading a wildcat strike amongst the town's Stuart workforce:

> "I was thinking, if – was on my mind, I was thinking – we… we stop working, and they doesn't have drivers, does mean they have to do something, not uh, not keep going with no boost many times, with no boost at all, driving for £3.40. And I was not really happy, you know? Because, I counting my fuel, my time, my vehicle, you know? And uh, my insurance – shit, it was, yeah… dropping too much." (First interview, 17.05.22)

Here, Dimitru is describing an accumulation of grievances regarding wage maximisation, and a simultaneous comprehension of this as imposed by the platform firm; of the platform firm as reliant on its workforce; and of the withdrawal of workers' labour as a potentially disruptive force. This comprehension is the move – as described in Section 2.4.5 – from

common sense towards *philosophy of praxis* (De Smet, 2015:93-7); between an imposed *subject position* (being a worker) and a reinterpretation of that position, recognising a need to "revalue and reconstitute specific practices" – to withdraw one's labour in order to force change (Weeks, 2018:136;).

The lack of any boost for days was key to this. In the failure of the default means of wage maximisation, concurrent with rising costs which undermined the efficacy of misbehaviour-based practices, space opened for an alternative. The logic underlying the boost – that couriers would be rewarded for logging onto the app when the platform firm needed them to do so – lent itself to workers recognising the reliance of the firm on their labour: the fewer couriers logged on, the higher the boost might go. Subsequently, if couriers coordinated to log off simultaneously, the boost might increase. This was expressed multiple times during fieldwork:

> "Fieldnotes 07.04.22, at Lenton: a Polish driver […] talks about working in areas with a tight workforce and only one McDonald's, specifically in [a Northern town], where drivers were able to effectively control orders when they felt that boosts were not high enough."

> "Fieldnotes 30.04.22, Callbrough: [A courier] says that he suggested that, when there is no boost on Uber Eats, all drivers should go offline for up to one hour, to increase demand for drivers. Within the first twenty minutes of trying this, a boost had been put on."

> "It was really strong and helpful, because, after our strike, they was never with no boost – small boost, but they put boost every day. It's small, but we realised the difference – because before was many hours with no boost, and after the strike was every time boost. Small, but was." (Second interview with Dimitru, 08.06.22)

This coordinated, simultaneous, and brief logging off – termed a *boost strike* in this thesis due to its exclusive focus on the bonus rate – resulted from workers' comprehending the indeterminacy of their labour-power through the very logic built into the platform labour process. As expressed by Nicolas, a striking Stuart courier in Callbrough: "it's no deliveries without the drivers" (Interview 29.04.22).

The expression of this as an *idea*, or as *thinking*, is the culmination of a longer process whose origins are described in Chapter Six: of learning to navigate the labour process with assistance from colleagues; of comprehending that pay could be – and had previously been – better; and of experimenting with such practices as rejecting low-paying orders, developing a willingness to defy company instructions and becoming familiar with the means of doing so. In feminist consciousness raising practices, such a culmination is referred to as "the click": a "revolutionary moment of transformation" in which the subject relates their own experiences to their structural causes, contra common sense perceptions of grievances as fragmented and resolvable through individual activity (Firth and Robinson, 2016:354). Section 2.4.5 of Chapter Two describes this with reference to CHAT.

7.2.2 The individual articulating comprehension

That this "click" was so frequently attributed to a single individual can be understood through CHAT's conception of the *individual as collaborative process*, as outlined in Section 2.4.4, whereby the individual is a reflection of the multiple collaborative projects that they have participated in (De Smet, 2015:34-5). To illustrate this, an individual's willingness to articulate the idea of striking indicated a *confidence* which could be developed through a range of prior experiences within and outside of the workplace. Dimitru attributed his confidence, firstly, to his cumulative experience of reporting "cheating" couriers in the interest of fairness (first interview, 17.05.22); and, secondly, to his previous experience of holding managerial positions within factory work in Romania and in Britain, facilitating an ability to learn quickly and to direct others (Second interview, 08.06.22). In Callbrough, one striking courier attributed his confidence to having travelled widely and gained a strong sense of self-reliance (Interview with Nicolas, 29.04.22); while another described his confidence as resulting from experiences of challenging McDonald's staff over being forced to wait outside the restaurant during lockdowns, and from the extent of his networked connections within the workforce's community – akin to the ability to command respect which characterises Jane McAlevey's *organic leader* (2015:424):

> "But people less likely to give me problems because everybody know me, everyone's afraid of me, because they know […] I know everybody, so they don't want to have problem with me" (Interview with Albert, 29.04.22)

This expression of confidence as an ability to inspire fear, articulated by both Albert and Dimitru separately, indicated the significance of social composition – in this case with confidence developing through a gendered, macho reliance on *threat*. It is noteworthy that all those identified as having articulated the idea of strike action were men. In fieldwork, women couriers – a small minority of the workforce – frequently appeared to be somewhat excluded from workers' communities, specifically due to concerns around safety which saw women couriers avoid particular areas and working hours (Fieldnotes 29.04.22; 30.04.22), or through the use of sexist language by colleagues (Fieldnotes 16.06.22). As a site of both the imposition and reproduction of gendered vulnerability, studies have found platform food delivery work to be notably male-dominated (e.g. Fairwork, 2023:18-19). Nonetheless, women participated in strike action and were often key to sustaining it. In Callbrough for example, during the Stuart campaign proper, Elena took responsibility for facilitating local picket pay with the IWGB (Fieldnotes 02.05.22). This responsibility – specifically keeping track of who was picketing and who was not – led to accusation of bossiness by male colleagues, and to Elena feeling that others viewed her as "crazy" (Fieldnotes 14.04.22; Interview with Elena, 29.04.22). Nonetheless, Elena described her confidence as emerging immanently from within gendered experience, specifically from escaping an abusive relationship:

> "Fieldnotes 30.04.22, in the car with Elena in Callbrough: she talks unprompted about how she developed her confidence. She says that, in her household in Romania when she was married, she barely ever left the house, 'I was in a cage'. She had to learn how to speak with others. When she realised 'what the world is like', she became more confident. Her confidence grew even more on moving to the UK, where she got a job within three days of arriving. […] She says that leaving her husband was key to the development of her confidence and she believes that God intended for her to come to England."

Through such experiences, interactions and relationships – in couriers' lives within and beyond the workplace – some individuals developed greater propensity to articulate an idea that was latent within the workforce, fostered by the nature of the labour process itself. Rather than understanding such individuals as possessing innate personal charisma, their actions are better understood as instances of *leadership as event*, whereby particular behaviours are especially appropriate in particular circumstances, described above in Section

2.4.5. When occurring at an appropriate time, this event – the declaration of an idea – could serve "to orient attention and action in a certain direction; to introduce a polarisation in the environment that was not there before; to introduce a modulation of collective behaviour that propagates across a group" (Nunes, 2021:180).

7.3 Generalising comprehension within the workforce

Describing the atmosphere prior to a boost strike in Farmbridge, Dimitru noted that:

> "They talking about it. Everyone thinking they can do nothing. This is the general problem – in many cities, for many drivers, they thinking: 'We can do nothing'. But this is totally wrong, because all the power is on the drivers hands, you know? But a lot of people, they not understand this. If we all together, like, all the drivers, together we can fix it, we can push them to change everything." (Second interview, 08.06.22)

The task facing the individual courier who had undertaken "the click", then, was to articulate this proposal to others in a way which convinced them to take action – to bring about a shift from grievance to subversion. For Dimitru, this began with his networked connections within the community, testing his idea with his colleague and close friend, Matouš:

> "was every thing like straight away – I was planning, I was coming on my mind: let's do the strike. I was talking with [Matouš], you know? […] I tell him: '[Matouš], look, I planning, I thinking we need to do the strike, to change something on this company. We need to try – maybe it's working maybe not, but I want to try'. Him say to me: 'okay, if you wanted, I going with you'." (First interview with Dimitru, 17.05.22)

Workforce *compañerismo* was thus crucial, with particularly strong affective ties between colleagues providing a starting point:

> "it's kind of like a snowball – you're starting off really small, you're starting off with a couple of people who recognise the problem, trynna convince a lot of people" (Aziz, Podcast #11)

After confirming Matouš' support for his idea, Dimitru formulated a proposed strategy – logging off for a particular length of time. He then sought to propose this amongst the section of the workforce in which he was most embedded – Farmbridge's ethno-linguistic cluster of

Romanian couriers, the majority of the town's Stuart workforce – specifically through the cluster's digital chat:

> "And just I posted on Telegram – our group… […] Romanian group. And I posted: please, tomorrow, two 'till five nobody working." (First interview with Dimitru, 17.05.22)

Alongside this, Dimitru and Matouš took it upon themselves to speak with colleagues who they met in-person during the working day, attempting generalisation beyond the Romanian cluster:

> "I was sharing with every single one – like, talk with every single one who I see about it." (Second interview with Dimitru, 08.06.22)

The methods used by Dimitru and Matouš in such conversations took two forms: appeal and threat. In appealing to colleagues, they developed "kernel stories" – to once again borrow a phrase from feminist consciousness raising practice – constructing narratives which made "brief references to core themes that had occurred in [colleagues'] previous accounts" of their experiences at work (Firth and Robinson, 2016:353). That is, through their embeddedness in Farmrbdige's workforce, Dimitru and Matouš were able to identify experiences and sentiments which were universally shared within the workforce and to base their call for collective action on those. This cohered workers around a shared focus on the most commonly-experienced features of their predicament, sidestepping such issues as cheating, self-employed status, and other matters of multivocal difference within the workforce, though individual couriers might still raise such issues when taking action over pay (Fieldnotes 17.05.22).

Two closely related kernel stories were identified in research for this thesis: one based on wage maximisation, and another on the indeterminacy of couriers' labour-power. In the first instance, these focused on the universal difficulties couriers were experiencing in maximising their wages, regardless of particular differences in their experiences of the labour process, such as which types of vehicles couriers they used and the ethno-linguistic clusters they belonged to:

> "Fieldnotes 26.05.22, Farmbridge: Pawel interjects, comparing the difficulty he has going long distances as a cyclist compared to motorists. He says that this takes more

> time [to deliver orders]. […] Pawel continues: 'I know I have no costs, like insurance…' Dimitru interrupts: 'But it's about your time, you know? […] you stay here many times for full days and you make £20. It's ridiculous, you know? We are talking about money'."
>
> "Fieldnotes 28.04.22, Farmbridge: I observed a conversation with a Brazilian courier […] [Gary] joked to [Dimitru]: 'Are you feeling brave? Then go and talk to him', suggesting this was someone who may have broken the strike previously. Four drivers went to talk to the Brazilian […] They appealed to him about the current rise in the cost of living, which he agreed with, saying that he was now paying over £300 per month on insurance. They repeatedly appealed to potential collective gain, with [Gary] saying: 'This is for all drivers'. The Brazilian driver said that he would tell others about the strike and he would respect it, but he was unsure if others would."
>
> "there's a lot of people in, like, different races, from everywhere on this one job – Black, white, Arab, Yemen, like, names I can't even say – and just to get everyone together, you just gotta speak the truth, you know? I guess it's just the truth […] it's the truth, and people will follow" (Claude, Podcast#10)

As part of this kernel story, long-serving couriers used their knowledge of higher pay in previous years to emphasise that wages could be better – tapping into the sense of *deserving better* described in Chapter Six:

> "Fieldnotes 26.05.22, Farmbridge: [Matouš] says that new drivers are particularly difficult to convince, and will work for very low fees. He says that we need older members to tell new drivers what it used to be like, to show proof that it was better so they won't be dismissive. He says that he does this, showing new drivers his stats [on the Stuart app]."

Having drawn attention to wage maximisation as a universally shared predicament, the second form of kernel story aimed at drawing out workers' latent conception of their labour-power as indeterminant, and of their ability to force change by collectively withdrawing their labour – an idea already fostered by the boost system, as described above. This took the form of emphasising the firm's reliance on couriers' labour, and of building on the affective ties which couriers had already developed through communal practices of mutual pedagogy and support:

> "Fieldnotes 06.06.22, Farmbridge: [Dimitru] speaks to a driver in Romanian […] He explains the conversation that he has been having: "I tell him, without drivers they [Stuart] are nothing'."

> "if don't was thousands of drivers in this country driving around to bring that money to the company, that company don't even exist in that moment in time, you know what I mean?" (Interview with Nicolas, 29.04.22)

> "I explain to them, they know exactly [that] it's not for me, it's for everybody" (Interview with Elena, 29.04.22)

> "Fieldnotes 03.05.22, on the morning of a strike in Farmbridge, Dimitru posts in the couriers' chat: 'we are a strong community we can destroy everything'."

In some towns, couriers used their knowledge of boost strikes that had occurred elsewhere – often gained through the illicit practice of working simultaneously in different towns and cities, described in Chapter Six – to provide real examples of labour withdrawal leading to wage maximisation:

> "Stuart boost was going down. So I just come to say: 'Look, uh, do you know the guys in [Farmbridge], last week they do the strike for one day, and they already get better multiplier on the app'." (Interview with Albert, Callbrough, 29.04.22)

Alongside appeals based on common experiences and sentiments, some efforts at convincing others took a more extreme form:

> "Morgan: So how did you convince all the drivers to respect the strike, the people you didn't know?
>
> Dimitru: Actually, was little bit strategy [laughs]. Was the strategy like, just I posted on the group […] I was write: 'Who doesn't want to respect the strike, they gonna be reported because everyone do everything what they like, you know, but not support the strike, maybe on the future him going to be reported.' [Laughs]" (Second interview, 08.06.22).

Here, the practice of reporting cheating couriers – which Dimitru viewed himself as particularly adept at, having worked on the Stuart platform for almost four years – acted as a

brute-force means of overcoming any opposition to collective action. Given the severe financial implications of being deactivated – losing a significant section if not the entirety of one's livelihood – this can be considered a digitised version of the threats of violence against strike-breaking workers historically seen in labour disputes (Beckwith, 2000:193).

Through this combination of appeal and threat, the idea of collective action was disseminated through large sections the workforce, convincing others of its potential and cohering a collective subversive subject. In Farmbridge, such was the success of Dimitru and Matouš' efforts that an estimated 90% of the town's Stuart workforce participated in the February 2022 boost strike (First interview with Dimitru, 17.05.22). It must be emphasised, however, that the justification for collective action was already latent within the workforce prior to Dimitru undertaking "the click" – in *compañerismo*; in the boost system; in the grievances produced in clashes between ideology and reality; and in the illicit practices of wage maximisation which couriers had already developed; as outlined in Chapter Six. Given this, collective action appeared as an obvious solution for some:

> "Fieldnotes 17.05.22, Farmbridge: [Daniel] is confident that [the strike] will be strong, as it is just the usual minority of drivers taking orders. I say that the unity is strong amongst drivers here, and [Daniel] replies: 'No, I don't think we have unity to be honest, it's common sense – we decided to help each other, all of us together. It's just common sense'."

7.4 The struggle to sustain action

For couriers who had decided to take action, the next stage was maximising its efficacy by maximising participation. This was especially important in boost strikes, where the aim was to force an increase the bonus rate by limiting the amount of labour-power available to the platform firm. Later strikes – over issues other than the boost – would draw on the practices developed in boost strikes.

7.4.1 Sustaining the boost strike

Picketing at lucrative restaurants – or, as some couriers described it prior to the introduction of trade unionist vocabulary by the IWGB, "protesting" – served to discourage other couriers from taking orders (Fieldnotes 14.04.22). Without such materials as posters, leaflets, and

flags provided by the IWGB during the Stuart campaign, pickets could look almost identical to workers awaiting orders in carparks:

> "Fieldnotes 29.04.22, the morning of the first union-supported Farmbridge strike: on arrival I immediately see three drivers who were at the meeting gathered outside the McDonald's, leaning against the railings"

> "Fieldnotes 02.05.22, Farmbridge strike day three: around six Romanian drivers have moved their picket inside the restaurant, sitting near the entrance and taking it in turns to play backgammon."

> "Fieldnotes 14.04.22, Callbrough: [Albert] says that picketing is quite easy – he often just sits in his car, and when drivers see him they cancel their orders."

In such cases, the practices and communities already developed within workforces directly shaped the nature of action.

Image 05: Striking couriers play backgammon inside a McDonald's restaurant in Farmbridge while picketing 02.05.22.

Couriers arriving to take orders would be told of the strike and encouraged to join it, with appeals echoing the methods described above:

> "Fieldnotes 14.03.22, at a picket in Boothshill: A young courier is caught coming out of McDonald's. One of the young strikers speak to him: 'you might have other sources of pay, you might be selling drugs on the side, I don't care about that, but these men do it full-time' [gestures to the men wearing shalwar kameez]. He mentions fuel costs when making his case. The young courier promises to make this his last order. 'Don't come back!' a driver shouts as he leaves."

Supportive colleagues were frequently added to digital chats as a means of keeping them informed going forward (Interview with Elena, 29.04.22). In those same digital chats, courier administrators would remove colleagues who expressed anti-strike sentiment, ostracising them from a key feature of couriers' communities (Fieldnotes 05.05.22). Those who refused appeals on the picket lines to reject orders would also frequently be photographed and shamed within chats – a practice which proved controversial, with some couriers arguing that this constituted bullying (Fieldnotes 03.05.22).

As means of fostering collective confidence in the action, screenshots were circulated of long waiting times at popular restaurants, used as proof that the strike was impacting businesses.

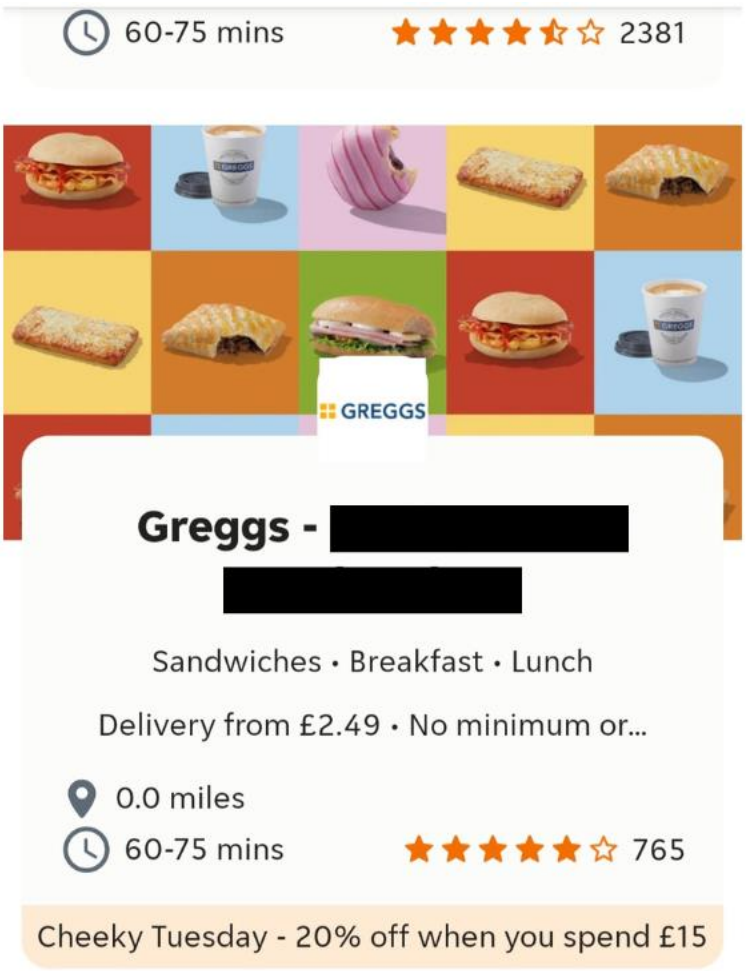

Image 06: Author's screenshot from Just Eat's customer app during strike action in Farmbridge, showing a waiting time of 60-75 minutes for orders while stood 0.0 miles away from the restaurant. The precise location of the restaurant has been redacted. 17.05.22.

Other means of increasing the efficacy of action included using Stuarts in-app map, described above, to find drivers who were working, and travelling to appeal to them to log off (Fieldnotes 04.04.22, Sheffield) and asking the managers of restaurants to switch off the apps through which restaurants received orders (Fieldnotes 01.04.22, Lenton). In some cases, couriers had developed particularly close relationships with service staff in restaurants, and asked them to discourage drivers from picking up orders within the restaurants themselves (Fieldnotes 02.05.22, Farmbridge). Whilst restaurant staff and couriers frequently experienced their relationship as one of tension – with couriers complaining of long waiting times directly to rushed front-of-house staff – in some instances knowledge co-production, affective ties, and ethno-linguistic communities developed between these two workforces whose labour processes overlapped, sometimes manifesting in acts of solidaristic collaboration:

> "Fieldnotes 14.03.22, at a picket in Boothshill: A member of McDonald's staff comes out to say that there are three couriers waiting inside. He speaks the same language as the strikers. He tells them (later relayed to me) that the long wait for orders is because they are making the food as couriers arrive, otherwise it will go to waste because drivers are cancelling upon talking to the picketers."

> "Fieldnotes 02.05.22, Callbrough: a member of McDonald's staff interrupts our conversation [Elena] greets her as [Marie]. [Marie] says that she had a lift home with a courier yesterday – at first she does not remember his name, "tall", "the one that does the music". [Elena] confirms that this was [Nicolas]. [Marie] says that [Nicolas] asked for the name of a manager who threatened to withhold orders from drivers when they were asking how long the orders would take. [Marie] says "We call her Britney" and tells [Elena] to please pass this on to [Nicolas]. [Marie] says that [Nicolas] wanted to complain to a higher-ranking manager. [Elena] confirms this, saying that drivers were so angry that some wanted to turn off all of their apps and speak to Britney. [Marie] says you wouldn't talk to a customer like that, so why drivers?"

Despite these measures, couriers' emergent antagonistic projects were always precarious and at risk of collapse, even in areas where the majority of the workforce participated in action. Small minorities of strike-breaking couriers – just three or four in Farmbdige's February 2022 boost strike – could have huge impact on morale (First interview with Dimitru, 17.05.22). In Lenton, one individual proved especially disruptive, persistently undermining action by using multiple WhatsApp and Telegram profiles – under different names and on separate phones – to avoid being removed from digital chats, at one point posting over 1,000 copies of the same meme, making the chat unusable (Fieldnotes 03.07.22). In Farmbridge, a different individual repeatedly promised to join the strike if different strategic decisions were made – such as striking for a whole day rather than for set hours – leading striking couriers to repeatedly try to convince him to participate in the action, and finding themselves demoralised when he repeatedly did not (Fieldnotes 01.05.22; 12.05.22). In other cases, multipapping acted as a means of undermining action, with couriers crossing picket lines by saying that they were going to pick up orders placed on Uber Eat's – McDonald's second delivery partner – when they were actually collecting Stuart orders (Second interview with Dimitru, 08.06.22).

The extent of demoralisation that resulted from even a small number of couriers refusing to participate in strikes was notable. In multiple locations, even where boost strikes had succeeded in increasing bonus rates, disunity amongst the workforce emerged as a reason for former strikers to oppose any further strike action, decomposing the collective subject:

> "Fieldnotes 16.06.22, Newborough: [A courier] goes in to collect his order and continues the conversation on his return: he says that there were major issues following the last strike […] The problem, he says, is that drivers in the area are not 'united'."

> "Fieldnotes 02.05.22, Callbrough: I ask [Elena] about the self-organised strike that a driver mentioned to me in Fieldnotes 30.04.22 – specifically, whether that had happened before. She replies that it had happened twice. I ask why it does not happen whenever boosts are low, she says because of a lack of driver unity"

> "I said no more, no more! Because I was nervous, because like three four drivers was working and I was really angry for that drivers. […] I said no, I not going for any strike [again] because not everybody with me last time." (First interview with Dimitru, 17.05.22)

This can be understood by recognising strike-breaking as a contra the affective, communal bonds built within the workforce, and as a failure of earlier unifying efforts:

> Fieldnotes 04.04.22, at a Sheffield meeting Claude says: 'With drivers not respecting each other, it's like we're not a family – 'cos we are a family – if we lose, we lose, if we win, we win. Drivers are just being ignorant and selfish."

7.4.2 From the boost strike to the explicit strike: transforming political composition

Despite frequently resulting in demoralisation and in the decomposition of the antagonistic actor, boost strikes opened the potential for a shift in couriers' political composition – from aiming exclusively at increasing the bonus rate, to seeking more fundamental changes in the platform labour process.

The boost strike straddles the boundary of underground warfare and explicit, openly-declared confrontation with the firm, emerging from common sense practices of wage maximisation, but presenting only a temporary challenge to the firm. A brief increase in the bonus rate,

while supporting wage maximisation, did nothing to address the firm's ultimate control of wages, which it could exercise through such activities as cutting the base rate of pay and terminating couriers. However, in acting as a middle ground between latent and explicit resistance, the boost strike provided a bridge between the two: the idea of withdrawing labour in order to force change had already been introduced to the workforce and it was there to reach for in instances where the employer acted to maximise its profitability by pushing down labour costs, such as through Stuart's pay restructure.

Per De Smet: "Often a collapsed strike project hibernates within the workforce in the form of a collective historical memory that guards lessons drawn, practices learnt, tactics developed, and so on. These ideal forms of project are time and time again reappropriated when a new strike activity develops" (2015:79). This reappropriation was no easy task however, given the extent of demoralisation caused by strike-breaking. In Callbrough, a strike over Stuart's reduction of the base rate was attempted without union support:

> "Me and [a colleague], we tried to start it when they cut the payment here, 'cos they cut in here in April 2021. We tried to do something about that, but nobody was on [board]" (Interview with Nicolas, 29.04.22)

In instances of collective action studied in this thesis, union intervention acted as the key transformative element in such circumstances. Initially, socialist volunteers and IWGB staff arriving in new areas – as described in Section 5.4.2 of Chapter Five – would frequently be met with scepticism, stemming from the demoralisation of past boost strikes:

> "If you remember, that's why, when you coming first time, I was so angry. I was just: 'Okay, I not need anymore strike.' Because I doesn't know about the union, about anything, you know?" (Second interview with Dimitru, 08.06.22)

It would not take much, however, for that to shift. In introducing new artefacts to the local predicament, the union emerged as a potential means of sustaining action beyond what was achievable in a boost strike. These artefacts included: leaflets and posters for picket lines; new digital chats; the facilitation of meetings and introduction of explicit democratic procedures; the connection of the local struggle with a wider-reaching campaign; and new strategic proposals – each of which expanded the range of activity that was possible for the workers' project. Couriers who had led the emergence of boost strikes viewed union intervention as an opportunity:

> "Actually, to be honest, I was exactly thinking: 'Okay, it's a union, maybe they can help me.' Like, I was thinking: 'Maybe, the union, they can help me to keep going with the strike." You know?" (Second interview with Dimitru, 08.06.22)

> "I got in with the union very recently to be fair – I didn't know we had one […] I didn't know couriers had a union, it didn't look like somewhere where you'd have one. Um, but it wasn't until we started having issues with the pay and I was talking to [Claude] and he said, yeah, he said: 'yeah I'm part of the union man', he said: 'we're fighting it', and I was like, well – I had to get into the union then" (Aziz, Podcast #7)

As such, initial scepticism could give way to a very different atmosphere:

> "Fieldnotes 28.04.22, first IWGB carpark meeting in Farmbridge: The enthusiasm was incredible – a seemingly instinctive tendency towards strike action as a means of achieving resolution, demonstrated by not questioning whether any alternative was possible."

Image 07: Striking couriers pose for a photograph after a meeting facilitated by a paid IWGB organiser in Farmbridge, 12.05.22.

The most appropriate features of boost strikes were adapted and deployed in a struggle which went beyond the boost rate to focus on the base rate – and on the employer's ability to cut that when they wished. For example, long-serving couriers once again emphasised that higher pay was possible, and that things could become worse, this time referring to the base rate rather than the boost:

> "Fieldnotes 26.05.22, Farmridge meeting, Dimitru emphasises that we need to tell drivers: 'Look, Uber was good before – they dropped [the base rate], they are rubbish now. Deliveroo was good before – but now the pay is dropping, they are rubbish. JustEat, […] they are going to drop it as well, and we need to take action before, not after'."

Adaptions were also made based on perceived weaknesses in boosts strike tactics. In one instance of this – in order to circumvent the issue of multiapping couriers pretending to pick up Uber Eats orders while actually picking up Stuart orders, and in an effort to generate maximum participation in strike action – Farmbridge's couriers insisted that the IWGB support them in a strike targeting all platforms, rather than just Stuart:

> "Fieldnotes 28.04.22, first carpark meeting in Farmbridge: [Dimitru] immediately sought to bring up his plan: If the strike did not cover all apps, he did not think it would achieve anything. This was backed by an older man [Matouš] stood next to him saying 'yes' repeatedly. […] a vote on whether to strike on all apps was unanimous in favour."

This would ultimately serve to distinguish Farmbridge from the other towns and cities involved in the IWGB's Stuart campaign, contributing to the drift between the campaign's constitutive projects discussed in Chapter Five. At the same time however, this was an instance of workers enacting lessons learnt through their own previous experience of seeking to resolve their predicament, internalising those within their antagonistic project, even though the conclusion of this particular lesson clashed with the union's strategic preference.

Through intervention in a pre-existing wildcat project, the union – an external actor as described in Section 2.4.7 – had enacted a heteroproleptic expansion of possibility in the aggrieved, demoralised workforce. The revived subversive collective subject was now able to anticipate sustainable strike action, looking beyond the boost, shifting the actor's political composition from one focused on short-term gain to long-term struggle; from emergence to endurance. Were it not for the collapse of the IWGB's Stuart campaign described in Chapter Five, it is entirely possible that a long-lasting antagonistic actor – akin to IWGB Couriers Sheffield, for example – could emerge from this.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a detailed, empirical account of precisely how collective action can emerge in workplaces with no established union presence. Through conditions imposed upon workers, the logic of resistance – based on the wage relation and the indeterminacy of labour-power – emerged, to be articulated by individuals who were well-placed to do so given their previous experiences. From there, pre-existing networks of *compañerismo* facilitated the generalisation of this idea, with workers developing means of encouraging and enforcing their strategic visions. The resulting antagonistic collective subject struggled to sustain itself in this emergent state, but was more able to do so with assistance from a pre-existing, more developed external subject (Vygotsky, 1986:86). Compared to the literature reviewed in Chapter One, this account has focused on the micro-dynamic processes through which collective action emerges, and has demonstrated the significance of ideation and the material interacting in those processes.

Conclusion

8.1 Thesis overview and key contributions

Having undertaken a downward analytic movement to detail an empirical instance of emergent collective action amongst non-unionised couriers, this thesis' conclusion now returns to the level of theory, outlining its key theoretical and methodological contributions to sociological study. Chief amongst these is an explanatory framework for understanding the emergence of workers' collective action in non-unionised work, applied to an empirical case study in Britain's private sector.

The thesis began with a recognition that the contemporary absence of explicit, open collective action amongst workers in Britain is not least a question of subjectivity: of the challenge of accessing and developing ideas which subvert capitalist ideology, given its hegemonic nature. Literature of relevance to this was reviewed, and valuable features of workplace-focused and Social Movement Studies literature were identified. Most significantly, workplace-focused literature indicated the importance of workers' shared experience of the labour process as a basis for their combination into collective subjects, while Social Movement Studes literature pointed to the need to avoid assuming that such a subject was ontologically homogenous, instead demanding that its constitutive elements – and differences between them – be understood, so as to better understand how the subject functions. Despite such valuable insights, both literatures were found to lack sufficient conceptions of how ideation and material context interact with one another in the process of emergent action: of how workers' subversive ideas and practices emerge and develop in the contexts in which they find themselves.

In turn, a theoretical framework was developed which sought to synthesise the most useful features and address the gaps in the aforementioned literatures, aimed at analysing the foundational micro-dynamics which lead to instances of collective action; that is, the latent, interactive processes through which individuals come to act collectively against the wishes of their employer, which are often overlooked in favour of focus on structural contexts or moments of visible, explicit action. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) was identified as a particularly valuable source for this framework, specifically as applied by Brecht De Smet (2015) – via Antonio Gramsci – to the emergence of a subversive worker-subject in Egypt. This conceptual approach was explored through an outline of its most useful

and applicable features. CHAT, however, comes with a wide-ranging, malleable, and idiosyncratic conceptual vocabulary, and threefold Class Composition Analysis (CCA) – as developed by the editors of Notes from Below (2018) – was applied as a means of grounding CHAT in empirically applicable, Marxist analysis.

The resulting theoretic framework was developed and refined continuously through the empirical research which was described from Chapter Three onwards. This research accessed multiple levels of a dispute between workers and employers in the food delivery platform sector, collating "multiple readings of a single case" in order to produce an account of the "rich totality of many determinations and relations" which constituted the dispute (Burawoy, 2009:41). Chapters Four and Five used CHAT's conceptions of *prehistory* and *projects* to look beyond the ostensible unity of the IWGB's Stuart campaign, with Chapter Five in particular contributing an innovative methodological means of analysing strategising: identifying the relationships between nested projects within a campaign and their interaction as key to the campaign's longevity and strategic decision-making. This helps understand how the Stuart campaign constituted the longest instance of sustained collective action in a sector rife with brief outbursts of collective action. Chapters Six and Seven then moved to the level of the specific workplace, developing insights from participant observation in McDonald's carparks to understand precisely, in detail, how non-union forms of collective action so frequently emerge amongst this workforce.

The resulting theoretical contribution is a particularly *processual* conception of collective action, as opposed to one which conceives of action as a sudden or spontaneous event, able to be bracketed for analysis in its most visible, explicit form (Bunting, 2023:52). In this conception, the foundations for subversive ideas and activities emerge immanently from within the very conditions aimed at extracting labour-power from workers. Capital – in its efforts to produce compliant subjects – inadvertently opens the potential for the emergence of its own antagonists. This was made clear in Chapters Six and Seven, where food delivery platform workers' conditions – such as their self-employed status, managerial austerity, and piece-rate pay garnished by bonuses – were themselves conducive to latent practices which built towards the wildcat collective action that is so frequent in the sector (see: Umney et al., 2024).

This insight aligns with Maurizio Atzeni's insistence – contra John Kelly – that the labour process itself should be recognised as the source of workers' combination and subsequent

subversive potential (2010). For Atzeni, collective action cannot be said to emerge from ideation alone, justified by rational choice alone, nor mechanistically conjured from long-waves of economic upswing and downturn. Unlike Atzeni however, this thesis follows this argument with detailed consideration of the micro-dynamic processes by which ideas emerge from within – and without – the context of workers' labour processes, using CHAT and CCA in combination to analyse the mutual collaborative, pedagogic practices which see workers learning to cope with difficult circumstances and, in doing so, to resist (Gramsci 1971). The spark for a shift from grievance to action – the "click" of subversive potential – is always latent within the ever-present tension between workers' needs for wage maximisation and employers' need for profit maximisation, but needs to be fostered in a manner appropriate to the circumstances in which workers are located (Firth and Robinson, 2016:354; Heller, 2018:90). The theory developed through this thesis thus simultaneously provides and explanatory framework for understanding why and how action emerged, while also recognising the necessity of contingency and variation between cases of emergence, depending on their specific contexts.

8.2 Aftermath, limitations, possibilities

In late September 2022, less than one month after the IWGB's leadership ended the Stuart campaign and held a debrief for its participants, food delivery platform couriers undertook a cross-platform wildcat strike in two towns – one in the North West and the other in the South East of England. Within days, action began to emerge elsewhere, and by the end of October strikes had taken place in at least nine English towns and cities, none of which had seen action during the Stuart dispute. Another wildcat strike wave had exploded in this sector, focused on low pay in the context of an intensifying cost of living crisis in the summer months when the frequency food delivery orders was low. Despite its years of organising amongst platform couriers, as described in Chapter Four, the IWGB – following the collapse of the Stuart dispute – was in no state to intervene in this, given the extent of burnout and strategic disorientation which followed the dispute.

After the difficult end to the campaign described in Chapter Five, IWGB Couriers Sheffield gradually disintegrated. The rifts between couriers, socialist volunteers, and IWGB staff did not fully heal. Leading couriers in the campaign gradually left the sector. One-off boycotts of specific restaurants were undertaken to address issues of poor treatment and long waiting

times for couriers, but as of 2025 IWGB Couriers Sheffield appears defunct, for the time being.

Since 2022 the IWGB has continued to struggle to build and maintain a presence amongst platform couriers beyond London, while wildcat action continues to periodically erupt in the sector. This thesis has demonstrated that such periods of difficulty, where organising initiatives struggle to endure, are far from permanent. The potential for collective action exists innately within the very logic underlying platform labour, as in non-platformised labour. The challenge remains merging such action with sustainable efforts at unionisation.

Despite Stuart's ability to wait out the campaign, described at the end of Chapter Five, the dispute had a long-term impact on the firm. Gradually, in the months following the dispute, signs emerged of increasingly desperate efforts at attaining profitability – including through further cuts in couriers' base rates of pay, and the end of the "slots" shift system, which afforded a minimum wage to couriers, described in Section 4.2.2. In April 2023, Just Eat began to contact couriers on an area-by-area basis to inform them that their partnership with Stuart was ending. Stuart had lost what was likely its most lucrative partnership in Britain. We can only speculate that the extent of damage caused to the firm by the 2021-22 campaign – reputational, if not immediately or obviously financial – contributed to this.

As noted repeatedly in this thesis, the food delivery platform sector is anomalous in the extent of open collective action amongst its workforce. Nonetheless, the conditions within it which are conducive to collective action are not unique – bonus payments, for example, were present in the call centre introduced at the outset of the thesis (Elliott, 2018), and piece-rate pay is common in non-platformed sectors, not least in the Global South (Borino, 2018). As such, the opportunity exists to study similar cases of workers' collective action in different circumstances, to further test the applicability of the theoretical framework outlined above. During research for this thesis, current and former bar staff at the pub chain BrewDog undertook a campaign against mistreatment at work, initially with no union involvement. Apple retail store workers in Glasgow became the first in Britain to force union recognition through a statutory ballot. Such cases – not least including those beyond the British context – are rich potential sources of further insights, particularly if they expand on the range and diversity of participants involved, and aim to move beyond the methodological reliance on any union as a gatekeeper which limited research for this thesis, as described in Chapter Three. In line with Burawoy's Extended Case Method (2009), it is hoped that this single case

study may be the beginning of a long-term research agenda regarding resistance within and against capitalism's "antinomous society" (Heller, 2018:94).

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Appendix: Documentary sources cited

As outlined in Section 3.3.3 of Chapter Three, a large number of documents were collected and analysed to produce the insights presented above. The word-limit of this thesis does not allow for the inclusion of a full list of all documents collected and analysed, but most of those cited directly are referenced in full here. Exceptions are made, however, for minutes from meetings and leaflets, as these are not easily available publicly; emails which, while made public by couriers through social media posts, were not intended to be public; and documents which directly reveal the identities of individuals pseudonymised in this thesis – including letters and Tweets.

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